

# *NEXT TO THE CUSTARD*

Complete and Unabridged

An episodic story by Matthew Walton and Ross O'Brien  
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It was in the last days of that great age, when the Kingdom and Aisorbma faced each other across their forested border, that the great events which shaped the modern world took place. There were great heroes from each side, men and women whose names were written in the very stars, and whose actions touched every life on both sides of the conflict. One such man was the Marquis Endam ar Berrito, apprentice to one of the Kingdom's finest bladesmasters. A rash young man, one dark night he left the Kingdom on a dangerous mission deep into enemy territory, his only companion a fiery young Baroness, Erica del Erica.

Theirs was the incident which precipitated the Great War. Far beyond the borders of their homeland, they found and destroyed an Aisorbmian factory, before fleeing into the night. Contemporary accounts allow us to reconstruct the fate of that bold Marquis. Who was, in perfect honesty, a complete and total idiot.

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## Episode One: Raiding Party

Undergrowth snapped and rustled underfoot as the Marquis Endam ar Berrito plunged through it, fleeing the sounds of pursuit coming from close behind. Further back, almost a mile away by now, flames lit the night sky and a huge pillar of black smoke drifted into the cloudless heavens.

'We make too much noise,' Baroness Erica del Erica said from just behind him. 'If we continue as we have been moving, our enemies must surely find us well before the sun doth rise.'

'A little further,' Endam said. 'Once we have some more distance on our enemies, we can afford the leisure to become quiet and conceal ourselves in the undergrowth.'

'Then I suggest we run faster, for our pursuers are most persistent,' Erica replied, then put action to words and sprinted off. Endam put on a burst of speed to keep up with her, and gradually the sounds of pursuit grew more distant behind them. Eventually, as his legs were starting to become tired, Endam spotted an ideal place to divert their course without leaving much evidence for the trackers which no doubt numbered among those who sought them. They turned off, with the half moon glimmering at them through the tree branches overhead, and moved swiftly but silently, deeper into the forest.

At intervals Erica stopped, inscribed a hasty circle on the ground with the point of an arrow and cast a spell which concealed their tracks. With this protection they could move somewhat more swiftly than they could have done otherwise, and by the time the eastern sky began to light with the promise of dawn, they could hear no sign of pursuit at all.

'It seemeth me that we have evaded them,' Erica ventured after they'd stopped to listen intently for ten minutes or so.

'It seemeth that way to me, also,' Endam agreed. 'We have truly evaded the finest trackers of all Aisorbma.'

'It seemeth premature to congratulate ourselves on such grand an achievement. We are not truly safe until we have returned in triumph to the fair lands of the Kingdom.'

'But for now, we are safe, and may rest and eat for a brief while.'

'Indeed 'tis so.' And with that, Erica began to build a fire. They had a few supplies with them, and before too long there was a pot bubbling happily away, filled with milk and rice and sugar and a good grating of nutmeg.

'Thine rice pudding doth elevate thee to the highest position in our pantheon of chefs,' Endam said after tasting it once it was cooked. Erica dished him up a large bowlful and reached for another bowl for herself. A noise from the undergrowth made them both freeze, concentrating. Faintly, they heard another noise.

Endam started to reach for his sword, and the clearing exploded into movement. The sound of bows being released seemed very loud as arrows sped, their feathers hissing, into the clearing. Endam rolled away from on, grabbing the hilt of his sword and drawing it as he came to his feet. Almost at the same moment, an arrow hit the back of his leg, bouncing off the bone and falling to the ground. Immediately he could feel hot, sticky blood running down the back of his leg, and the pain narrowed his vision. He clenched his teeth and endured it, moving forward, testing the movement he had in the injured leg.

Figures were emerging from the shadows, wearing clothes that matched the undergrowth almost perfectly, weapons in hand. Endam moved to meet them, dimly aware of light flaring behind him and the sound of explosions, but focussed entirely on those before him. His sword flashed in the starlight, blocking a clumsy swing from one of the Aisorbmii soldiers and striking back, taking off sword hand and then head in quick succession. He danced among them, one with his sword, but his leg was weakening quickly, the strength draining out of him with every drop of blood that escaped from the wound.

He heard Erica scream briefly, a shrill, sharp cry, followed almost immediately by a wet-sounding detonation. She screamed again, and he spun to look, his concentration broken. Erica struggled in the grip of three burly men, the remains of several others lying on the ground around her, torn apart by her magic. Their eyes found each other, and she reached out a hand, magic burning at the ends of her fingers, gathering for release.

Then he stiffened as the sword went through his heart from behind, stared in astonishment at the foot of steel which emerged from his chest. All the strength went out of him, and he fell to his knees, then to his face as the sword was pulled out.

'Emban!' He heard a woman yell, and someone kicked him in the side.

'Yer all pay the price in th' end. Ev'ry last one o' yer.'

And he knew no more.

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And thus the Marquis died, and nobody missed him very much.

Next time, we shall see what happened to the Baroness Erica del Erica, held in Aisorbmian custody and bereft of the man she had started to love. Obviously nobody ever told her not to form romantic relationships with idiots. He really wasn't very clever. You'll come to understand that later on.

Written by Matthew Walton, edited by Ross O'Brien

As the sun of that great age was setting, the tensions between the Kingdom and Aisorbma rose. The spark, caused by the destruction of one factory, floated and then caught on, as the terrorists were hunted by the Aisorbmii. Marquis Endam ar Berrito was killed; Baroness Erica del Erica was captured.

The Aisorbmian pursuers took the Baroness to a local settlement, where her trial, judgement and probable execution would take place. But first came the interrogation. The following contemporary account was reconstructed from the records of an officer who oversaw her confinement and questioning.

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## Episode Two: Responses to Pain

Marshal Danovarilani watched them bring the prisoner in, with interest. She had been, so he'd been told, some kind of leader among the Kingdom Peoples, someone high up. No longer. She was a prisoner in his dungeon and he would enjoy her as such.

She looked around her surroundings, and he noted her apparent resignation to spending a long time in the dark cell, surrounded by bars. He knew her assumption to be incorrect; it would not be long at all.

One of the Marshals stumbled, perhaps slipping on the grime on the floor. The girl looked even less comfortable about the cleanliness of the cell; she was bare-footed. She said nothing, for she could not: they had gagged her. Her arms had been encased in the ribbed gloves reserved for users of magic, preventing her limbs or fingers from moving independently, and the gloves had been chained to the cell ceiling. There would be no spells cast here. She was defenceless, and Marshal Danovarilani stepped forward to make sure she knew it.

'Marshal Danovar!' called a commanding voice, and the Marshal turned. It was the Paladin, Torosanifeya. 'You are guardian of th' dungeon, nothin' more than that, and definitely not her interrogator. She's dangerous. Leave her be 'til told otherwise.'

Danovarilani nodded. 'Have yer decided who's gonna execute 'er?'

The Paladin looked at the prisoner for a moment. Danovarilani knew what he was considering: while her crimes demanded the death penalty, her knowledge could prove invaluable, and they might need to keep her alive for a time. The Paladin turned back to him. 'When th' time comes, I'll put yer name in th' hat,' he said. Danovarilani grunted; Paladins were chosen for their nobility, but they were also politically minded. He doubted his name would even be remembered.

Another Marshal entered the dungeon. He moved slowly, allowing the girl to look upon him, allowing fear to build, the fear of knowing what he was but not what he would do. Danovarilani had no doubt that this was the interrogator, or at least the first of them. The imposing newcomer approached the prisoner and reached a hand to her chin, tilting her head back.

'I am Marshal Rekowarilara,' he said. 'Remember that.' He circled around her, moving outside her field of vision. She jumped involuntarily when he touched the back of her neck, and began to whisper at her ear. 'I'm going to let yer speak. First thing I want yer to do is tell me yer name.'

The gag was removed. Instantly the girl began to chant, but the Marshal slapped her cheeks, jumbling the sounds. 'Yer name, yer stupid girl,' he repeated, pausing to hear her answer. There was none.

Danovarilani observed, mock pity in his eyes. She was rebellious and proud, qualities which would only encourage the Interrogator, who for the time being remained behind her.

Then she suddenly sagged forwards into her restraints, crying out, unprepared for the blow dealt to her. Even Danovarilani hadn't seen the blow, or even the weapon chosen. A second blow, and third, followed quickly, with equally painful screams; at the fourth he even managed to hear the preceding whisper of air sliced. At the eighth he saw the implement, a leather belt. At ten Rekowarilara stopped, and brought her back to her initial standing position. Then he repeated his request.

'Baroness Erica del Erica,' she said, haltingly.

'Yer will address me by me name,' said the Marshal. 'I 'ope you remember it.'

He allowed another pause, and eventually, haltingly, she stuttered, 'I am Baroness Erica del Erica, Marshal Rekowarilari.' She spat at the ground, angry at her self-betrayal.

'Almost right. My name is Rekowarilara,' he said. 'Remember that.'

The interrogation went on, taking different forms as Rekowarilara used different weapons on different areas of her flesh, and asked for different information. He asked her to describe how the factory had been destroyed, each time in more detail. He asked for the names of the people who sent her. And he asked for other information, information about her family, her friends, her life, forbidding her to keep her private life to herself. Eventually she learned his name, though it stressed her to say it. And every so often he would ask her again for her name, and she would struggle to say that, too. But he never used it.

To Danovarilani it was clear that the girl was unprepared to endure Marshal Rekowarilara's methods of information extraction, but nevertheless she told them little, in the main because she was unable to speak coherently. Early on, hope had rested with her regaining enough wit to attempt to spellcast. As her mouth failed her, hopes diminished for both parties. Unfortunately fear had become her defence instead.

At last Paladin Torosanifeya interceded. 'That'll do, Rek. Yer tired. She's tired. We'll let her get her tongue again before we restart.' Rekowarilara backed away, and Torosanifeya stepped forward beside another man, to stand in front of the prisoner. The deepest wish of her legs was to collapse, but the ribbed gloves, chained to the ceiling of the cell, kept her upright and her arms showed bruising signs of protest. The newcomer touched the chin of the girl and tilted her head back, and had to use a second hand to keep the girl's eyelids open. The Paladin spoke. 'Girl. Yer will tell us what we want to know. Otherwise... Fin, open your dinner hole.'

The girl had no reaction, until Fin warmed her cheeks with stinging slaps. Then she recoiled as much as her muscles allowed. Fin turned away, towards Danovarilani, who saw the reason why: Fin had no tongue.

The Paladin and his companion left the cell, and Danovarilani locked it behind them. 'Ranger Finogilisera,' the Paladin instructed, 'I want yer to go to th' Prime Minister. He'll want to know what we've found out so far. I'll make a fuller report when we know all she knows. Marshal Rekowarilara, you'll keep at her. Make an impression. Cut a hand off or something, then let her try and use magic. But for now, take a break. Marshal Danovarilani, you and yer fellows will keep watch. I might see if I can get some food for her, she might need it at this rate. If she regains her tongue, ring yer bell.'

They left, and the dungeon door was locked. Danovarilani sat on his stool by the door, and opened his small rucksack. He pulled out a sandwich and ate it slowly, watching the girl achingly trying to support her weight. She tried to stand to relieve her arms, but one foot slipped in the grime and she yelped. Danovarilani finished the sandwich, and decided to wait until she tried again before starting the next one.

An hour and three sandwiches passed. Only the unopened tin of rice pudding remained. Danovarilani stood up, circling the cell, staring at the prisoner. She was shaking, straining to find a more comfortable position, but there was none. When Danovarilani reached her front he knelt and looked to her eyes, trying to determine what she would do next.

She was young, he decided. Frightened, uncomfortable, defenceless; weary, and no longer proud - more than that, full of guilt that her defiance had cost her more than necessary. He knew they would not have been any more lenient had she told them everything, but did not tell her so. He knew the methods. They would apply force at first, to show how harsh they could be. From this next session on, her co-operation would determine her future; a positive response meant persuasion, a negative response more arduous tortures.

The food had still not arrived, but he decided not to wait. He took the tin, and a spoon and tin-opener, from the sack and opened the tin. He moved close to the cell and reached inside; too far, he would have to enter to approach her. Slowly he opened the cell door and entered, kneeling beside the girl. He took a spoonful of the pudding and offered it to her.

She sniffed, smelling the food, but evidently suspicious of it. He waited until her eyes were open, then gestured that it was safe. After a few moments he decided to demonstrate by eating it himself, then offering a second spoonful back to her.

She looked at it hungrily for a few moments. Then she began to cry.

He shrugged and gave up, exited the cell, locked it and returned to his stool. Then he ate the pudding himself.

And that was when he heard the rumbling. Swiftly he rang the bell. Then the far wall exploded, and dust filled the dungeon. From the coughing Danovarilani decided the girl and at least one of his sub-ordinate guards had survived the blast.

The dungeon door opened, and Marshal Rekowarilara returned, two swords drawn. He threw one to Danovarilani. Both swung their blades in a figure-8 to communicate their readiness to the other before advancing; they now advanced.

Danovarilani saw four enemy. Then the other Marshal leapt upon a foe and drove his head down into the muck, striving to drown him. Danovarilani leapt to defend him from others, and impaled the second with his sword. As he struggled to pull the blade free, the third foe turned his fingers towards both Marshals and uttered a command.

The guardsman's head exploded. Danovarilani, behind him, was not hit, but he could see the fingers charging again. He abandoned his sword and ran.

Rekowarilani saw his peril and quickly dispatched his enemy by a blow to the head, then threw his sword. The sorcerer was on the other side of the cell, so the blade had to get between the bars to succeed...

It did not. The prisoner got in the way, and the blade sliced through one wrist and clattered to rest in the ribbed glove.

There was only the sorcerer left, but the Marshals were unarmed now. Danovarilani ran for the torture-implement rack, but the sorcerer dismissed him and focused on the cell, directing energies to shatter the bars to pieces. He entered and gathered the girl into his arms, using more magic to destroy her restraints. Rekowarilara's sword, and the girl's hand, fell into the muck.

Then he made to leave. Danovarilani looked around for his fellow Marshal, but Rekowarilara had fallen aside at the bar-shattering spell. So the Marshal charged alone, into this powerful foe, hoping the sorcerer's magic had been sufficiently exhausted for him to make a killing blow.

The wizard gave him a look. For a moment Danovarilani felt something warm and wet inside his head.

Then his arms were a bit squishy, and his eyes became pulp. And he died soon after.

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And so Marshal Danovarilani died, and never did get to execute the Baroness...

Next time, we follow the Baroness and her rescuer back to the Kingdom. And soon we will discover exactly what the Baroness told the interrogator. If only these sources listened more carefully, the historical records would be far more complete. \*grumbles\* don't these people realise we have a job to do here? \*mutter mutter\*.

Written by Ross O'Brien, edited by Matthew Walton

So it was as that great age came to a close that the Baroness Erica del Erica was rescued by a Kingdom wizard, whose name has been lost in the annals of history. She was taken to the great Castle where the King ruled over all the Kingdom, and nursed back to health, although her hand would never regrow.

As she rested, word of her adventures in Aisorbma spread, as word about such things has a wont to do. Many young men and women from across the Kingdom - and most especially those who lurked around the Royal court hoping for favour from the King and Queen in the same way that seagulls follow fishing boats hoping to steal some of the catch for themselves - came to see such a great heroine and hear her words. She was in little mood to speak much of the time, but one enthusiast was present on a rare occasion when she actually spoke of what had come to pass, and being young and enthusiastic, he immediately began to sharpen his sword.

When will these people learn that violence is not the way? The following is reconstructed from contemporary records.

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### Episode Three: Royal Patronage

The rasping sound of honing stone on steel made an unusual complement to the oscillating whirr of the dynamo cycle as Lady Gillian del Freya pedalled to charge up the large array of batteries stacked under the table with the microwave on it. Reclining in a comfortable chair, her son sharpened his sword with a series of delicate strokes with the honing stone. Eventually, she slowed her pedalling and looked round at him.

'Wilt thou not help?' she demanded, gesturing at the second cycle connected to the batteries.

'I am already occupied,' Tarek ir Teriss complained, setting his sword down even as he did so. Experience had taught him not to argue with his mother, even though he'd reached the age of sixteen several months ago.

'If thou pedalst with thine great energy of youth, thou canst sharpen thine sword whilst the pudding doth cook,' Lady Gillian told him firmly, and that was that.

Once the batteries were fully charged, Tarek returned to the chair and started honing the other side of his sword blade while his mother poured rice, sugar, milk and nutmeg into a large bowl and placed it in the microwave.

'Why dost thou not employ thy servants to charge the batteries for thee?' Tarek asked as the microwave hummed into life. When he was little, he'd always liked to watch the bowl of what would soon be rice pudding rotating on the turntable inside. He still liked to see it, because it meant rice pudding would soon be on the table.

'Because it doth help to maintain our fitness when we pedal for ourselves,' Lady Gillian told him, busying herself looking for bowls in the cabinet reserved solely for that purpose. 'And I must also confess to a feeling of great satisfaction when I doth behold that my family eat only rice pudding which I hath prepared for them.'

'What of all the other food we doth eat?' Tarek asked, gesturing at several almost-empty plates, the remains of the sumptuous main course prepared in the castle kitchens for them.

'That food is but ordinary food,' Lady Gillian told him. 'It was my thought that we have had this discussion oftentimes before.'

The microwave chose that moment to interrupt with a pinging sound, and Lady Gillian quickly stirred the steaming almost-rice-pudding before setting it running again. 'It will not take long to cook now,' she assured her son. 'Goest thou and findest thine father'

Tarek found his father in the living area of their quarters, reading reports of the expenses incurred by a recent grand tournament.

'Is the rice pudding ready?' he asked when Tarek told him his mother wanted him in the dining room.

'Yes father,' Tarek replied.

'Excellent,' Lord Samfr de Samfr said, and rose from his seat. 'I hear that you hath been this very morning to see the Baroness Erica del Erica.'

'I have.'

'What hast thou learned from her?'

'She doth be a great heroine of the Kingdom,' Tarek said. 'All should strive to emulate her deeds.'

They sat at the table for rice pudding, served fresh and steaming hot from the microwave. Tarek preferred it from the oven, but that took a long time to cook and it wasn't always possible to have it. Today they had to make do with microwaved.

After they had eaten the pudding in the silence it deserved, Tarek washed, dressed in his smartest clothes and departed for the Royal Court. It was bustling as usual with people dressed in their finest clothes, all hoping for Royal favour. Tarek pushed his way through to the front of the room, near the marble dais upon which sat the enormous and highly ornate thrones of the King and Queen. The King's throne was made of gold with thick purple velvet padding, and decorated with fanciful carvings of plants, animals and people bowing down in reverence. The Queen's throne, smaller and designed for a woman to sit upon, was made of glass with decorations similar to those on the King's throne etched on its surface.

Just as Tarek got to the dais, a herald banged his staff on the floor five times and announced in a great voice, 'The King and Queen doth approach! Silence, for the King and Queen!'

Silence fell instantly, and moments later the King entered the throne room, closely followed by the Queen. A middle-aged man, King Arit fre Togr wore his crimson robes of state. Queen Srindra del Bou wore a figure-hugging dress of exactly the same shade of crimson, cut low enough to show considerable cleavage. Many of the older courtiers had expressed the opinion that such a dress was entirely unsuitable for a Queen who wished to wield any kind of authority, but Queen Srindra had sufficient presence that her clothing made little impact on her overall aura of command. Even more so than the King, she radiated the confident assurance that she was in total charge of all she surveyed.

The rulers of the Kingdom seated themselves, then the King cleared his throat and spoke.

'Noble Lords, Barons, Marquis and gentles all, thine excellent habit of spreading all news within the Castle means that thou must surely have heard of the exploits of the Baroness Erica del Erica. After much consultation with our advisers and many hours of patient thought, my Queen and I hath devised a strategy for following up her excellent move.'

There was an almost stunned silence as the realisation sank in. The King intended to mount further raids on Aisorbma. Tarek felt his heart beating faster - the two realms had never been friendly, but deliberate attacks had always been rare. Up until now. The Queen spoke.

'Noble Lords, I perceive by thine countenances that ye hath truly seen to the heart of our strategy. A raid against Aisorbma of such great success and advantage to our cause can truly not be left without wresting whatever advantage we can from it.'

'Thus, your noble King and myself call upon all of skill and bravery who wouldst venture across the border into the realm of Aisorbma to come to us for our blessing afore ye set forth to cause more wounds upon our most despis&eacute;d foe.'

Applause burst from the assembled courtiers, and the King and Queen basked in it, smiling down upon their subjects. Tarek clapped harder than anybody, and when the applause began to die down, he raised his voice and called out.

'Your Majesties! I myself plan to depart this very night to strike a crippling blow at the very heart of our enemy.'

The Queen turned to look at him, and the King smiled slightly.

'Then thou hast our blessing,' the King told him, 'and our hope of good fortune. Now, let us nobles all proceed into the adjoining chamber, where our most excellent chefs hath prepared a feast in honour of this new era.'

There was more applause, and everyone headed for the doors. The dining chamber was huge, set with several large tables and room to seat several hundred guests. Most of the chairs were filled, and Tarek found himself only a short way down the table from the King and Queen.

'A toast!' The Queen called out when everyone was seated. 'A toast to the brave adventurer Tarek ir Teriss!'

Everyone raised their goblets and drank deeply. Tarek basked in the glory of being toasted by the Queen, and drank deeply of his own wine. Replacing the goblet, he frowned, then looked inside it.

'What-'

Abruptly he stiffened and fell from his chair to lay convulsing on the floor.

'Send for a physician!' somebody called, but it was already too late.

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So Tarek never got to try his skills in Aisorbma. He never even made it out of the castle. Further research reveals that he wasn't that gifted a swordsman anyway - the kind of fighter best suited to working as part of an army, preferably a long way from anything important.

This account raises several interesting questions, not least among them who poisoned Tarek's wine. Further research, as always, is the only way to find the answers.

Written by Matthew Walton, edited by Ross O'Brien

It was the dusk of the last age, the time before the War. The Kingdom rejoiced in its successes, revelled in its apparent superiority and prepared further attacks upon its ancient enemy. Young men and women like the Baroness Erica del Erica and Tarek ir Teriss inspired hundreds of others of the noble classes, and all prepared to go forth to visit death and destruction on the people of Aisorbma, unswayed by any more rational arguments.

And across the border, the Aisorbmii rallied together to recover from their great loss.

A time of choices. A time of preparation. A time to be counted.

The following is reconstructed from contemporary accounts.

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#### Episode Four: Reports and Portents

Paladin Tekowariaura stood before the fountain. To his right, the groom, Kadocasitari. To his left, the fair-haired bride, Cafialerasun. Between them, completing the circle, their child. Their families and friends were seated in larger concentric circles around them.

Tekowariaura spoke. 'Kad, son of the man Cas, son of the woman Tari, you have declared yer love and begun the path of love. Take my right hand.' The bearded farmer did so.

'Cafi, daughter of the woman Lera, daughter of the man Sun, you have declared yer love and begun the path of love. Take my left hand.' She did so.

'Yer child is born. Bring 'im inter the circle.' The parents used their free hands to pick up the child together, and they placed him carefully in the bowl at the centre of the fountain. They then held the other's free hand.

'What will be his name?' asked Tekowariaura.

'Fer,' said Kadocasitari and Cafialerasun together.

'Child, before all these witnesses, I name you Ferokadicafi. Man, woman, before all these witnesses, I declare yer truly wed, husband and wife.'

Tekowariaura moved his hands together, and placed the couple's hands together. The witnesses applauded. The innermost circle of guests began to throw rice over the fountain and the circle. Tekowariaura turned and backed away from the rejoicing families, and moved to another Paladin at the outskirts of the festival. By his feet was a long backpack, from which the hilt of a sword protruded. He wore a long red cloak and darkened chain-mail. His shield and crest bore the mark of the Ministry, but as a Paladin he wore no further symbol of office. Only those intimate with the Ministerial ranks would know him to be the Prime Minister, leader of the Aisorbmii.

'Paladin Tekowariaura, I greet you,' said he, extending his hands. Tekowariaura bowed, and clasped both hands in the warrior's grip.

'S good to see yer again, Teacher', said Tekowariaura. 'In fact, it's good to see anyone again. It's been quite lonely the last few months. Didn't think I frightened people that much.'

'Then today will be a pleasant change. There's a great meeting this afternoon, a few miles from here. The Rangers are coming with reports, Paladins are coming to decide their worth and Marshals are coming to offer their aid.'

'Aid? What's happened?'

'What've you heard?'

'Nothing. The only reason I'm here is I had a dream last night. I'll meet my brother today.'

'Well, I've not heard the full story meself yet, but I'll tell you what I know. Ranger Finogiliserá tells me there's been an attack. The processing factory at Anilomes was destroyed by Kingdom raiders. I'm also told one raider was captured and interrogated. We will hear more when it all gets going. Come on, old friend, we will go and sit together at table.'

They walked west, and talked of old times. It did not take them long to reach the meeting place, but the magnitude of the event struck Tekowariaura far earlier, as paths converged and entire troupes of Paladins and Marshals walked the same paths they did. Their shields and crests all bore different colours. Tekowariaura was astonished; there were warriors here from all across the country!

'Relax, old friend,' said the Prime Minister. 'This is not an army, merely a gathering.'

The field of meeting was immense, and already filled with tents, but the centre of the field was clear. A great circle of tables had been laid out, and the Paladins found themselves seats around its exterior. Some Marshals acquired seats along its interior, others at tables in the centre. The Prime Minister found two seats to the west of the circle, and sat Tekowariaura beside him.

'Tek?' asked a nearby Marshal.

'Rek!' exclaimed Tekowariaura. 'Rek, my brother, I knew you'd been called here. It's been ages, what've yer been upto?'

'Long time indeed, but still the dreams bind us. What've I been up to? Plenty, plenty. What have you heard?'

'Precious little. But Teacher tells me I'll hear it all here.'

'I'll be telling you some things myself. I have a report,' Rek said proudly. 'These are interesting times, Tek, interesting times.'

'May they also be good times.'

'Amen to that. I'll have a drink with yer later, if we get time.'

The Prime Minister called all to order, then motioned to a nearby mage, who rose his hands into the air. Around the circle, other men raised their arms. They chanted. As they progressed Tekowariaura began to hear their voices: 'Theeay jovdahoo star dwell star t' now!' He did not know the words but he knew what they signified. Whatever was said would be heard aloud by all; there could be no idle gossip now.

'We're gathered here to learn. Whatever yer've heard, however yer've heard it, ferget about it; here and now we'll hear together the first-hand reports, and make our minds up properly.'

A Marshal stepped forward. 'I am Marshal Senodenilapa. I worked at Factory Anilomes, forty miles south-west of here. Seven days ago that factory was destroyed.' There was a burst of exclamations and mumbles, which everyone heard clearly but simultaneously. Then there was a burst of shushing, and equal confusion, and eventually silence once more. 'I was inside the factory, observing the rites. Then there was a light... a blinding light. It lasted only a few seconds, but we knew something bad was happening, and I sounded the alarum, got everyone I could out. Some, really close to the light, died quickly, there was nothing left of them; there were others, blinded by the light, struck as they run. Terrible to watch. And then... there was an explosion.'

'By my account, sirs, two hundred dead. A score or so with serious burns. But the machinery is destroyed, and the building barely intact. The fire took much out of it, and only the rains since have put it out.'

'Anilomes is destroyed. That's all I have to say.'

A burly Ranger was second. 'I am Ranger Tesorilivesa. When Anilomes was destroyed all nearby Rangers were alerted, to find the villains. I saw two individuals fleeing to the west, and relayed the message, and soon there were nine of us in the hunt. I saw them heating their rice pudding at a campfire, and casting spells to hide their tracks, and we knew we'd found them. So we attacked.'

'We didn't know one was a very skilled swordsman, or that the other was a sorceress. Six of us fell, but we killed the swordsman and captured the witch. She was restrained and brought back for interrogation.' The Ranger finished abruptly, unused to long speeches. Rek stepped forward to give his report.

'I am Marshal Rekowarilara. I interrogated the sorceress. Her name is Baroness Erica del Erica, of the Kingdom. She told us many things.

'Her companion's name was Marquis Endam ar Berrita. He was training to become a blademaster, and the Baroness thought she loved 'im. He was the one who suggested the raid to her. As I understood it, she wasn't an official agent of the Kingdom, and her actions were not sanctioned by their King. She did it for the Marquis.

'We interrogated her for several hours, until she couldn't speak any more, so we let her rest a bit. Only, a short while later, her dungeon was broken into. There were at least four of them, including another sorcerer; we fought. We killed all but the sorcerer, and they killed everyone except me and the girl. He carried her off and away. I was injured, I couldn't follow.'

Tekowariaura saw the hurt in his brother's eyes, but made no comment. The Prime Minister stood.

'We have agents in the Kingdom. The raid has been acclaimed as a pre-emptive strike. Already the Kingdom prepares to take advantage of our surprise.'

'We need time,' said Tekowariaura. 'Time to prepare. I suggest we use our agents to disrupt them, to buy us time.'

'Agreed,' said a Paladin somewhere at the south of the circle. 'I am Paladin Torosanifeya. They have managed two raids on us in one week. On both occasions they have used sorcerers and we have suffered heavy casualties. Their grasp of magic on the battlefield leaves us at a disadvantage. We must prepare.'

'Time,' said the Prime Minister. 'We do not have enough of it, and we must not waste what we have. But before we get too far ahead of ourselves: they are not declaring war, they are increasing hostilities. They have the resources to do this, they have the resources to declare war if they choose. We do not have that luxury. And for us to declare war ourselves would be fatal.'

'I think it is time to think,' he said, sitting down. 'We will observe the rites of our forefathers. The last production line of the destroyed factory has been brought here for us to remember it. Eat and be thankful, for the lives that it costs us.' The Prime Minister motioned to the mages, who allowed the spell to fall. He held his bowl high. 'Remember Anilomes.'

Before every Paladin and Marshal at the table was a bowl of cold rice pudding. All the Rangers were eating from the tin. All lifted their bowls, and the great chant was heard, 'Remember Anilomes!'

The rest of the meal was full of jollity, for long into the night the Paladins and Marshals chatted, ate and drank, and told each other stories of the events in their parts of the country by the firelight. One Paladin drank too much wine and became boisterous, challenging another to a duel, who promptly won; however it drew such attention that soon others had started a small competition. None of these were from Anilomes: those Paladins who felt the raid and its consequences were of great gravity discussed plans and strategies late into the night.

The Prime Minister talked with Tekowariaura as they made their way to sleeping-tents. 'I tell you, old friend, I want peace. My years of battle are long behind me, and I no longer lust for it. Instead I wish to meet with the King, and talk. We have managed to maintain peace for many decades. I do not want two children, however skilled they may be, disrupting the entire world on a dare, or some such prank.'

'Yer cannot go alone,' said Tekowariaura. 'They would kill yer instantly.'

'I cannot go guarded,' countered the Prime Minister. 'I'd be seen as an invader.'

'Then send a messenger. A Ranger: someone who can survive. See what response this brings.'

'That is a good idea. I will select someone on the morrow.' They paused outside the Prime Minister's tent, and said their goodnights. Tekowariaura walked to his own tent, and prepared to rest.

Then the vision hit him.

A pride of lions, dozens strong, all marching together, a silver lion at their head. A convocation of eagles, in their hundreds, descending to attack. Another lion becomes a snake and silently attacks the silver lion. Lion and snake fall to the ground, swallowed by shadows. The lion's silver teeth remain, shining in moonlight. The grass grows around lions and eagles, smothering them all.

Cafialerasun holds a sword in her right hand. She wears black. The sword is stained.

The snake again, striking without sound. A voice.

'Your blood has seen this too.'

Tek, son of Aura and son of War, unsheathed his sword and ran back to the Prime Minister's tent. The old Paladin was on his back, another Paladin kneeling above him, dagger already unsheathed.

Tekowariaura yelled and charged. The traitor Paladin did not speak, but turned about and aimed the dagger low. Tekowariaura's blade missed but he careened into the dagger, and it plunged deep into his thigh. He swung, tearing a hole in the tent with his sword, but the traitor backed away. Suddenly he looked up, and they all heard it: the alarum had been sounded. The traitor ran away into the moonless night.

Tekowariaura collapsed, his leg wet, his head dizzying. There was no pain.

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Tekowariaura died the following day, in the company of his brother. He lived long enough to be honoured by the Prime Minister for saving his life, and for his other deeds, and he is usually remembered as the first great casualty of the War.

Of course, this great meeting is usually remembered as the place where war was declared. I hope that our research will clarify that this was not so. One only wonders what else one can discover, when one researches deeply enough.

Written by Ross O'Brien, Edited by Matthew Walton

Following the death of Tekowariaura, the Prime Minister did not have much time to act. It would only be a matter of days before the Kingdom would begin to attack. So he made his way to a settlement at the border, at the westernmost point, to make preparations.

By now it was deep into the dusk of the last age, not long before the Great War began.

The following is taken from historical records.

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#### Episode Five: Running near the Precipice

Lidh lay still as her father held his hand over her chest, looking for the infection. It was late, he was tired, but he knew how quickly these things could attack, and he was afraid for her. Lidh was also afraid. She was six and one half, and she might not have long left.

She heard something, clop-clop, clop-clop, in the distance, and tried to lift her head, but her father gently held it down. 'Keep still, Lidh,' he said.

'I can hear horses, Father,' she said.

Her father's head lifted, and he looked out into the village square. There were two dozen Paladins on horses, led by a Paladin wearing an oddly bulky backpack. There was a sword handle sticking out of it. This Paladin got off the horse and, with two others, helped another Paladin take a passenger off his horse. The passenger was a Marshal, and the men carried this man to Lidh's house.

There was a knock at the door and Father left the room. 'Stay there, Lidh,' he said. Lidh heard the front door open.

'Greetings, Doctor,' said a voice. 'I am the Prime Minister. One of my men is hurt and I hoped you could look at 'im.'

'My name is Medofesipanu, and I'm retired, sir,' said Father. 'My daughter's ill, I have to look after her full-time.'

'How old is she?'

'Almost seven, sir. She needs plenty of rest, and I'm finding it hard to get her to sleep as it is.'

'Then I'll try to help you. Let me look after her, I'll get her to sleep. Then you can look after my man.'

Father sighed. 'What's the injury, sir?'

'I don't pretend to understand it, Doctor, it's not my thing. His name is Rekowarilara. He had a brother, a Paladin; they both claimed to see things in dreams, things which happened.'

'Two nights ago his brother saved my life, but he was wounded. Tek told me the following day, as he was dying, that he'd had a dream, told 'im I was in danger. He found it hard to say more, but Rekowar said he'd seen it too. I wanted to ask more, but that's when Tek died.'

'The brothers were joined, one died, and the other is linked to death,' interrupted Father. 'I see. I see. Well. I have some skill, but not much, and that limits my options, sir. I may be able to sever the link, but it's like cutting a diseased hand off. He won't be able to see as much as he did, and it'll itch for a long time. He'll still feel like he's connected.'

'It'll have to do. Do yer best, Medofes,' said the Prime Minister, his voice getting slightly louder as he approached the bedroom door. 'And I'll do mine.'

A friendly old face appeared at the doorway. The man wearing it was tall, almost as tall as the door, and his grey eyes twinkled. He was almost bald, and he had round cheeks. He was wearing a red cloak and blackened armour, and he had strong boots. He took his backpack off and sat beside the bed.

'What's yer name, littl'un?' he asked.

'Lidhatikamed,' Lidh replied. 'What's yours?'

The man laughed, then leaned in and spoke softly. 'I'm not supposed to tell people. I'm supposed to be important, and they're supposed to call me 'sir', and 'Teacher'. It wouldn't be fair to tell you, and not tell them. What would they say when they found out?'

'I won't tell,' promised Lidh.

'No,' the man said, smiling. Lidh saw the smile was a little more forced. 'No, I don't think yer will. Well, all right. My name is Galomanisula. Yer can call me Galoman if yer like. Sssh, don't tell anyone. You promised.'

'I won't tell anyone, sir', she said.

'Good girl,' Galoman said. He took a tin of rice pudding and a tin opener and spoon out of his pack and opened the tin. 'I've been ridin' for hours, I'm famished,' he said. 'Do yer mind if I eat this?'

Lidh shook her head carefully, and Galoman started to eat. 'Are you really the Prime Minister?'

'So suspicious! Perhaps we have a little spy here, trying to find out all about me?' She giggled, then moved her hands up to her chest when it hurt. 'Calm down, littl'un,' said Galoman. 'I'll try not to make yer laugh so much. Yes, I'm really the Prime Minister. Look at this.'

Galoman put the tin aside and opened the backpack. The sword handle was still there, but the rest of the sword was buried in a large rock.

'This is the Sword in the Stone, and only the Prime Minister has that. Can yer pull it out?'

'I can't sit up, Galoman,' said Lidh. 'It hurts.'

'Then I'll move it a bit closer,' he said. He leaned back, took hold of the rock and angled the sword handle towards her hand. It did not seem like it was taking him a lot of effort. 'Try now.'

She pulled, but it did not move. 'Stuck,' she said.

'It won't move for me either. It'll only come out for the one who'll save the Aisorbmii. But to be honest, I'm glad. Yer see, it'll only come out in the most dangerous time when it is most needed. So if the Sword doesn't come out, it must be safe. That tells me there's still hope for peace yet.'

'Why do you carry the sword around with you?'

'So the Kingdom won't find it. They're looking for it, yer know. Ever since the last war.' Galoman sat up, his shoulders slumped and he sighed heavily. He picked up his tin and spoon again and began to eat slowly, thoughtfully. 'It was a long time ago, Lidh. Thirty years or more. Long before yer were born.'

'I don't think it'll make a very good bedtime story, but it's all I can think about right now. There was a time, Lidh, when the Aisorbmii and the Kingdom fought relentlessly. Two entire cultures bred to fight each other. We would raise hundreds of men and train them into Marshals and Rangers and Paladins and send them into battle, and they would train their nobles and send them against us. We attack and they stand by their fortresses. They attack and we run to our factories and defend. We try to enlighten them into eating the holy puddin' nicely chilled, and they try to corrupt us into burning it like incense and devouring it aflame.'

'But so long as both of us stayed in balance neither would win, war would continue. But nothing lasts forever. One side had to give eventually. And sadly, it was ours.'

'You're using big words, Galoman, sir,' Lidh said.

Galoman finished the tin and put it aside. 'I'm very sorry, Lidh. Well, we had a lot of bad luck. Just a few too many fights lost at the same time. Men started to be afraid, they thought the Kingdom had finally become too strong. And they started to run away more quickly.

'They ran for a long time, littl'un. But at Rene Ponit, they stopped running, because that's where the Sword was. It was a very bad time, so the Aisorbmian generals told all the men to try and pull it out. They knew that whoever pulled the Sword out would be able to turn the battle, start beating the Kingdom back. And all the Aisorbmii stepped forward to try an' pull it out. But yer know what?' Galoman asked, leaning forward. Lidh shook her head, and tried to keep her eyes open. It was a long story and although she liked Galoman she didn't know if she liked the story.

'Well, all the Aisorbmii wanted to make sure the Sword was pulled out, so they could win. And the Kingdom didn't want 'em to pull it out, so they attacked to try and stop them. And all the Aisorbmii were fighting the Kingdom nobles, fighting very hard so all their friends could get a chance to pull it out.

'Lots of people died, but the Sword didn't come out of the Stone. Then at last the King said he didn't want to lose any more men. He said he wanted to go home and ignore all of us instead. He didn't have enough men with him to keep all the land he'd been taking, so they went all the way back home, and they started to rebuild. And we started to rebuild. We brought the Sword with us to all the places we'd lost, and the Kingdom just backed away. We just didn't have the people to keep fighting, so we stopped. The Long Fight was over, and the Years of Peace began.'

'Galoman,' Lidh said softly, 'I heard one of the boys say there would be more fighting soon. The Kingdom attacked one of our factories.'

'This peace hasn't been easy, Lidh. Some families still wanted to fight, and sometimes they did, but it never lasted long. Not enough wanted to do it at once, and none of 'em really did any damage when they tried so the rest of them didn't see the point. But now... now someone did it. Someone destroyed Anilomes. And all the Kingdom wants to fight, and all the Paladins want to fight back. We're all runnin' round near the precipice again.

'I want peace, Lidh. I want all the families to grow up, and 'ave children, and watch them grow up. And I think that's what the King wants too. So I sent a Ranger to him yesterday. 'Opefully we can talk before someone pushes us all over the edge, back into that abyss.'

Galoman looked back down at Lidh, who had pulled the blankets up to her face. 'I'm sorry, littl'un. Not a good story for bedtime, I think.'

Lidh looked into the twinkling old eyes. 'I liked it, Galoman. They all stopped fighting.'

'Yes, we did. But we haven't all lived happily ever after yet. And I hope we've got a long time before we ride into sunsets or whatnot.' He stood. 'You're a good listener, Lidh. I like you. Wish more of the Ministry was like you.'

'I like you too, Galoman. I'll try to sleep now,' she said.

'Good girl, Lidh,' he said, and he picked up the Sword in the Stone, and started to carry it into the next room.

Suddenly there was a great whoosh, and the rafters and thatch started to rustle and creak, and then there was a great roar and the roof tore itself off the walls, and the walls started to fall, and Lidh screamed. She could see the stars, and the walls were ruined so she could see out and everyone could see in. Father came running into the room. 'Calm yourself, Lidh, it's all right, it's all right, calm down.'

'The eagles are descending!' screamed the man on Father's table.

'Quiet, Rekowar,' Galoman said. His arms were moving, and the Paladins were quickly moving to where he pointed. Then they saw a few lone figures running towards them from the grassland to the west, and some of the Paladins ran at them, and the others told their horses to run at them.

Lidh felt the wind move strongly and the Paladins and the horses were pushed aside quickly, all except Galoman who kept one hand on the Sword handle. There were two of them running towards him, one wearily waving his arms to push people aside, one with a sword in his hand. They looked very dangerous, but Galoman just lifted the Sword in the Stone, and swung it like a club.

There was a crack, and both fell to the ground, and Lidh's chest really started to hurt. The Paladins got to their feet and started to look at the bodies, but they weren't moving. Galoman walked back towards the house.

'The eagles have landed,' he told Rekowar. Then he saw Lidh and ran to her, as Father held her hand and begged her to calm down. He was crying. 'Breathe, Lidh, breathe!' Galoman said.

The stars were pretty, she thought.

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The second attack by nobles from the Kingdom had three casualties: The two nobles themselves, and Lidh, who finally died of heart infection. The Prime Minister was not happy about the attack, but the Paladins were pleased and all the Aisorbmii who heard of the attack were lifted by the victory.

And the King, when he heard, wasn't pleased either. But that is another episode, and we will learn more of this when we review the record of when the Ranger arrived in the Palace.

It's a long and twisted story, but with further research, we will find the answers.

Written by Ross O'Brien, Edited by Matthew Walton

And so it was that while Aisorbma planned and prepared to defend themselves, the Kingdom readied for attack. The death of Tarek prompted an investigation, and many speeches were made denouncing the Aisorbmii; they had surely sent the assassin who had killed such a brave young man.

What none of them dared consider was where that assassin was, who they were, and who they were planning to kill next.

The following is reconstructed from historical records.

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## Episode Six: Risks to Plans

The castle was buzzing with gossip. Baroness Erica del Erica had missed some of it while she'd been recovering from her torture and rescue, and the loss of her right hand. Once she was mobile again, however, she'd quickly discovered what had happened. Tarek ir Teriss had been assassinated, and the finger of blame lay heavily on Aisorbma. As well it might, given what Erica herself had done to that country.

It seemed they had become quite worked up about the destruction of that factory. Endam had lost his life for that, but it had been worth it. She wouldn't be doing any more of that, however. Without a right hand, she was almost crippled when it came to magic, able to cast only simple or vocal spells. And she'd never been very good at vocal magic.

'Thine inflection ist faulty,' Queen Srinkra del Bou told her gently. 'Elongate thine oh sounds, and thou shalt perceive greater success.'

Erica sighed, bowed her head in acquiescence, and chanted the spell again, elongating the significant oh sounds as instructed. There was a tremor in the air before her, and the small pile of kindling on the floor burst into flame with a roar, sending a cloud of smoke rolling across the ceiling. The Queen coughed a few times, but nodded in approval.

'Much improved, my Lady,' she said. 'Truly, thou dost make fast progress.'

'I fear I must work much harder if I am to match mine former prowess in the field, your Majesty,' Erica said, 'but thine help hast been invaluable.'

'Thou, as a trained witch, art of great value to the Kingdom,' the Queen explained. 'After thine victory within Aisorbman borders, it seemeth me prudent to ensure thine skills remain in our service for as long as is possible.'

'Thine wisdom ist exquisite as always, your Majesty.'

'My husband the King doth desire to meet you, my Lady. He hath requested that thou dinest with us this evening.'

Erica smiled and curtsied graciously. 'I would be delighted to accept, your Majesty.' And this was true - although who would dare turn down an invitation to the King's dinner table?

'It doth please me to hear you accept so,' the Queen was saying. 'Truly, the meal promises a true feast, both of the finest foods and the most exquisite conversation.'

'I shall endeavour to ensure that mine conversation doth not disappoint thee, your Majesty,' Erica assured the Queen.

'I am certain that it will not,' the Queen assured her. 'Now, there is yet time for us to consider another spell...'

Some hours later, weary from the endless spellcasting demanded by the Queen but also pleased with her progress, Erica returned to her apartment high in the south tower to change for dinner. She selected an elaborate gown in a rich blue, patterned around the neck and down the sleeves with tiny seed pearls, and called a maid to help her put it on. They'd been working on a spell to help her dress without the aid of her right hand, but so far hadn't had much success.

When the sun dipped below the horizon, Erica left her apartment and headed for the royal suite, halfway up the east tower of the castle. A butler bowed her into the hallway, took the scarf she had worn to protect her shoulders from the cold

draughts in the castle corridors, and showed her into the enormous dining room, where steaming plates of fish and chips had been set out on the table. There were four chairs around it.

'Come, sit thineself here,' the Queen said, indicating the vacant chair at her end of the table. 'We can enjoy more pleasant conversation than is possible while practising thine magic.'

'Truly, your Majesties honour me,' Erica said as she sat, addressing both the Queen and the King, who was sitting at the opposite end of the table. He stabbed a chip with his fork, waved it at her in acknowledgement and then dipped it in some ketchup before popping it in his mouth.

'Enjoy thine food,' the Queen urged. 'My husband the King hath prepared us fresh rice pudding for dessert.'

'I shall anticipate it greatly, for I am sure it will be rice pudding such as hath never passed my taste buds before,' Erica said, picking up a fork with her left hand and attacking the crispy batter surrounding the fish. She had grown quite adept at eating with one hand since her rescue.

'It will most certainly be that,' the Queen said, smiling slightly before returning her attention to her mushy peas.

'Pray tell us, Baroness,' the King said from the end of the table, 'Didst thou observe anything of Aisorbman magecraft whilst thou wert within their borders?'

'Very little, your Majesty,' Erica replied after swallowing the mouthful of fish she'd just started chewing. She paused to wash it down with a sip of wine. 'But what I did observe was most subtle. The Aisorbmii excel in quiet spells which doth influence the world to their advantage, and appear quite proficient in the manipulation of perception. The Aisorbmii wert able to approach Endam and myself all undetected despite our wariness and observation.'

'Then it wouldst appear they have changed very little since last they were met upon a battlefield,' the King said.

'Whilst thou speakest of the late Marquis, perhaps thou canst enlighten us,' the Queen said. 'Why didst thou go with him into Aisorbma?'

Erica swallowed nervously. The expression on the Queen's face was suddenly similar to that which Erica's nurse had assumed before telling her off when she was a girl. 'Many times have I explained this since my rescue, your Majesties,' she said. 'Endam hadst discovered evidence which showed the Aisorbmii wished to spread their foul and uncouth habits of preparing rice pudding to all the world, and he hadst decided that immediate and unexpected action shouldst be taken upon that very moment. Mine skills were required, so I didst accompany him.'

'Didst Endam show thee his evidence?' the Queen asked.

'No, your Majesties, but his conviction wert enough to convince me also.'

The King and Queen exchanged glances. 'It is as we hath suspected then,' the King said, and the Queen nodded. Both of them looked unhappy.

'I do not understand, your Majesties,' Erica said, popping the last piece of fish into her mouth.

'Be not concerned by it, Baroness,' the King said. 'Thou art here to enjoy dinner, not to discuss matters of state.'

He gestured to a servant standing unobtrusively in a corner, and moments later their plates were cleared and replaced by steaming bowls of fresh rice pudding. Erica licked her lips - its aroma and consistency clearly indicated it had been baked slowly in the oven and then drizzled with honey to create her favourite kind of rice pudding. She picked up her spoon and took a large mouthful.

'Doth it meet thine expectations?' the Queen asked curiously. Erica looked up at her.

'Truly, it is the best rice pudding I have ever experienced, your Majesty,' she said, then frowned. 'Unfortunately, it appears I have over-indulged on thine excellent main course. I-'

She choked, then inhaled wheezily. The King and Queen remained motionless, watching her.

'I'

She fell forwards, rice pudding splashing out of her bowl as her head landed in it. The Queen sighed as Erica's last few breaths rattled in her throat.

'A promising young woman. A shame she doth pose such a risk to our plans.'

'Then... she is dead?' enquired the King.

'Not yet. The poison doth most subtly paralyse the muscles; death doth come slowly and painlessly, but ist entirely unavoidable,' the Queen reported.

'Then send in the Ranger,' commanded the King, of a nearby servant. 'Mayhap we can grant the Baroness the gift of understanding before she passes.'

The doors opened and a bearded Aisorbmian entered the room, his mannerisms respectful but unpracticed. He wore a black cloak, the inside of which was green and textured. He stepped to the table and bowed to both the King and the Queen. When he raised his head he cast a quizzical gaze at Erica, who stared back. Warm rice pudding dripped off her nose, onto the edge of the bowl. Then he returned his attentions to the King.

'Your Majesties, I am Tesorilivesa, a Ranger. I come with a message from the Prime Minister of Aisorbma,' he said. 'He wishes to meet with you to discuss the events of recent weeks, of the deaths that have been caused, and the threat of war. He wishes that these things will not continue.'

'Indeed. It hath come to my attention that his life has already been imperilled,' the King stated.

The Ranger nodded, showing no surprise of the King's knowledge. 'This is true. There have been more attacks since the incident at Anilomes. We have taken some losses. I am told some of your countrymen have also been killed.'

'These occurrences doth cause me great annoyance, but with effort and good fortune it is our wish that this mayest be resolved most quickly and fortuitously for both sides. Sadly, I do not believe there is wisdom in meeting thine Prime Minister here, or immediately. Danger doth lurk in many places, and a misunderstanding in our current peril wouldst condemn us all. But you seemeth tired, noble Ranger. Please, seat thinesself and eat. Thine journey was surely fatiguing.'

The Ranger was ushered into the vacant seat beside the King, and a bowl of rice pudding was placed in front of him. He took a second nervous glance at Erica, whose vision was dimming. Another spatter of rice was running down her cheek. The Ranger looked at the King uncertainly.

'Eat and enjoy!' said the Queen. 'The pudding ist fresh, and hath honey upon it. Observe if you will, how much the noble Baroness hath enjoyed hers.'

'Eat,' said the King. 'For I will be most offended if thou dost not. I crafted the pudding with mine own hands, and value highly the opinions of diverse others in judging the quality of that which comes from my efforts in the kitchen.'

Erica's hearing finally failed her. Finally it was quiet.

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So Erica died, poisoned by her own King and Queen in pursuit of peace - but there are no guarantees. Peace is not assured, and even such sacrifices as the King has been forced to make may not prove sufficient to stave off the oncoming conflict.

At least Erica's last meal was the best rice pudding she had ever tasted.

Written by Matthew Walton, edited by Ross O'Brien

Historical records tell us that in the dusk of the last age, the Ranger Tesorilivesa was sent as an emissary of peace from Prime Minister of Aisorbma into the heart of the Kingdom.

To the Prime Minister, he was their best hope for peace. But to others, he was the most dangerous enemy to righteous war.

The following is a reconstruction from historical accounts. The account begins immediately after the death of Baroness Erica del Erica.

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### Episode Seven: A Ranger's Plight

Ranger Tesorilivesa sat very still. The bowl of warm, honey-drizzled rice pudding sat in front of him, a royal spoon beside it. At the ends of the table, the King and Queen of the Kingdom watched him intently, daring him to refuse their hospitality and generosity.

And of course, there was the girl, with her head in a similar bowl of rice pudding at the Queen's end of the table.

Tesorilivesa supposed she must be dead, because the warm pudding splatters would be causing her considerable stress were she to be alive.

'I think we have found the cause of the problem,' he said slowly. 'You said it yourself. A misunderstanding between us could condemn us all.'

'Verily, there are many sides to this argument, Ranger,' said the King. 'I wouldst much prefer peace to war, but I must also support the defining principles of mine heritage. The rice pudding must be eaten hot, and fresh, for so it hath been with us for as long as memory serves us. Even reheating that which we hath prepared most carefully doth sit uneasily with us.'

'On such a point, we must agree to disagree.'

'Until thine heathen ways are renounced, such tolerance must needs be the only way to peace. It is not, however, an answer which satisfies the majority, nor is it an answer which will long postpone cruel war,' the King replied. 'On the last occasion that one of thine countrymen hath been received within these walls, he too hath refused the hot rice pudding. His tongue was cut out for speaking such blasphemy.'

'If I mayest ask,' asked the Queen, 'of what age art thou, Ranger? Art thou of the age that remembereth mine husband's father's battle at Rene Ponit?'

'I am twenty-nine years of age, your Majesty, and was not born at the time of the battle. My sister was three at the time; her first memory is of the Ranger who brought the message of my father's passing at that battle.'

'Then thou wouldst not cherish a return to such times,' said the Queen. 'Sadly, it seemeth that the number who wouldst agree with you is smaller than that which would disagree merely because they do not understand. Agreeing to disagree doth not suffice for people such as those.'

'We see that the Prime Minister of Aisorbma hath at least sent an emissary who shares his and our perspective,' said the King. 'What we now require is to see if he hath chosen a man of wit, skill and cunning, for we fear that if thine journey to this place hath fatigued you, thine journey home shalt prove far more perilous. A message must be sent from us directly to thine Ministry. Wilt thou convey it?'

'I can, and I shall, your Majesties,' promised Tesorilivesa. The King rose from his seat, and Tesorilivesa did likewise, following the custom he'd been hastily taught. There was a silver tray on a small table near the edge of the room, and there were three envelopes, wax-sealed, on the tray. The King took one of these and brought it to Tesorilivesa. The burly, bearded Ranger knelt to accept it, and the King gave it to him, an approving acknowledgement of Tesorilivesa's deferment of authority showing in his eyes.

'I do not desire war,' stated the King. 'The message doth offer some small hope of peace, shouldst thine Prime Minister act upon it quickly enough. Speed ist of the utmost importance, as those who wish war do seek its delay or destruction. I am fortunate, however, to be able to offer thee some protection. Mine Queen, if thou wouldst?'

The Queen was standing at the other end of the table, fingers outstretched and pointed at Tesorilivesa. Some kind of glow was building around her fingers. Tesorilivesa relaxed his legs, preparing to leap out of the way, but the King touched his hand. 'The Queen hath informed me recently that her most excellent spell should cause thee very little discomfort,' he said. 'Though to our knowledge it hath not been performed on a living being in many long decades.'

The Queen cast her spell, which struck his cloak. It began to shimmer, and then the rest of him began to shimmer too. 'I have empowered thee with a spell of invisibility,' said the Queen. 'None shall be able to see thee except the intended recipient of the message. Beware, Ranger, for the spell ist not perfect. None of hostile intent shall espy thee, but their arrows shalt surely hurt you if thou shouldst be in their path, and blades shalt surely cut thee when thou art too close. Take comfort, however, that no user of magic shalt be able to undo the spell, and that its effect shalt also conceal thine tracks.'

'Thou hast little time, Ranger Tesorilivesa. One week, perhaps two, before war will start heedless of our efforts to prevent it. I have no desire to exert myself with thine welfare, nor to grant thee unusual strength against us, shouldst thou fail and yet survive. So mine spell shalt last seven days, and no more. I wish thee sufficient luck, Ranger, no more than that.' Tesorilivesa realised she was still staring at him, fingers outstretched, because the King could not see him.

'Go then,' said the King. And Tesorilivesa bowed - futilely, since the King could not see him, then moved from the room, taking care to make a little noise so the King would know he had gone. Then he ran, silently, to the stairs and down the East Tower of the Palace.

Hearing voices near the bottom of the stairwell, he was careful to move more slowly. There were men at the bottom, dressed in grandiose and impractical military uniforms, resting their hands on their glittering sword hilts. It didn't matter to him that they might be nobles, simply gathered around and talking, or that they might be guards on duty, protecting the King in his meeting.

They were now the enemy, and they were in his way.

He loaded his crossbow, considering briefly how impolite he would be if he killed a servant of his host, someone he was technically working to protect. So he lowered the weapon and fired. The shaft - suddenly visible - impaled one man's thigh, and the man screamed and fell, clutching his leg. One man knelt to tend him, the others began to draw their swords. 'A crossbow bolt!' said the kneeling guard. One man exclaimed: 'An Aisorbmian attack, cloaked most stealthily in magic!'; another said: 'Indeed, our liege the King must be protected from all forces thereof!'

While these words successfully rallied the morale of the group, Tesorilivesa could not help but observe their naivety. A trained swordsman would wear his sword on the opposite side from his better hand, to facilitate combat readiness; these guards had not. He chose this moment of awkward manoeuvring to move forward, pushing the men aside whilst avoiding their blades. One man swung his sword, hoping to catch the intruder, and accidentally stabbed his neighbour.

There was a great amount of shouting and shrieking as Tesorilivesa left the Tower and exited the castle. He moved quickly across the drawbridge, then moved into the undergrowth, reversing his cloak so the grass-green side was outside. Best not to get used to this power, he thought. He'd never do this again.

Moments later a rather reduced force of guards exited the castle over the drawbridge and fanned out. Above them Tesorilivesa could see archers moving into position behind arrowslits in the walls of the palace. Above them he saw pigeons released into the air, and these flew east. Tesorilivesa did not know whether they belonged to the King, or to warmongering nobles, or to Aisorbmii agents among the palace staff, and he did not know whether they contained warnings of his mission and movements or were nothing to do with him. But he assumed the worst, and decided to move, believing some form of obstacles would be set up ahead to intercept an invisible messenger.

He set off, heading north-east, towards a small settlement he'd visited just before arriving at the palace. Behind him the guards moved around, hoping to stumble across him. He avoided them easily. Then he heard the arrows loose, and he ran, hoping the arrows would avoid him.

They landed in scattered patches, several yards in front of him, but he kept running, hoping he would escape their range before they could reload. He was several yards beyond the landed arrows when he heard the next release. These whistled past his head and landed around his feet. Suddenly he stopped, a great stabbing pain having flared unexpectedly in his arm. There was a shaft in his wrist, and blood was pouring out around the hole.

He kept his mouth shut, incredibly, but he fell over. He crawled forward, intent on moving out of range before the archers saw the successful arrow creeping away from them. The third loose landed dottily nearby him, but he seemed to be just beyond their range. He got up slowly and ran for the village, the Queen's spell hiding his tracks and his blood.

He swung his cloak forward over the arrow, to hide it from view, as he moved between the thatched houses, stopping outside one and knocking in a pre-arranged pattern at the door. An old man opened it, and Tesorilivesa entered, waiting until the man closed it, confused, before speaking.

'Remolorirati, it's Tesorilivesa,' he said, using the Aisorbmian form of Remolor ir Ati's name. He pulled back his cloak, revealing the arrow. 'I've been made invisible. It was a spell.'

'And yer've been shot, too,' said Remolor, brightly, slipping into the old accent. 'Sunder, go and fetch my medical kit.' A man in his younger twenties entered from one of the two adjoining bedrooms, saw the arrow, but read his father's expression and quickly moved to fetch the kit from his father's bedroom.

'Which bit 'as the arrow through it?' asked Remolor.

'Me left wrist,' said Tesorilivesa. 'I'm goin' to 'old my arm outstretched, pointing towards the door.' He moved his hand, shakily, fist clenched with effort, and Remolor's eyes watched the arrow turn to point downwards and then sit motionless around four feet above the floor.

'Yer still know nothing about medicine,' Remolor mocked. 'Yer can't stay stood like that while I tend to it. Sit down, boy. Ah, Sunder.' Sunder entered, and placed the kit near his father's feet. 'Sunder, listen carefully: Make some rice pudding. Let it cool.' Sunder didn't move. 'Now, Sunder.'

'Yer an unusual man,' Tesorilivesa said. 'Askin' a Kingdom man to let rice pudding cool down so an Aisorbmian can eat it.'

'I was Aisorbmian myself once, don't forget. Just found I couldn't eat the stuff cold, so naturally I was kicked out as a heretic. Never stopped supporting the side, though,' Remolor chirped. 'Now sit down in that chair, and put yer arm on that table, and we'll see what we can do.'

Sunder entered the room. 'Men doth gather outside, father.'

'They might be after me,' said Tesorilivesa. 'I have a message from the King to the Prime Minister, it's an offer of peace.'

'I see,' said Remolor. 'The force which can track an invisible Ranger must be impressive indeed. We don't have much time.'

'Leave,' said Tesorilivesa, pulling the message from his shirt pocket, and handing it to Remolor. 'Return to Aisorbma, give this to the Prime Minister. I'll create sufficient distraction to cover yer escape.' Sunder tried to give him an unconvinced look, but had misjudged the size of the burly Ranger and was staring at his neck. 'I'm bleeding to death, boy. And they're tracking me, probably with magic.'

'We go immediately, Sunder,' said Remolor, accepting the envelope and the responsibility of the mission. 'before we art killed, and war doth become certain.'

Tesorilivesa moved slowly to take the pot of rice pudding off the stone stove in the kitchen, while they packed various belongings. He gave them some items from his own belt: his Ranger brooch, his dagger, some rations, and his cloak, which was visible when Sunder wore it. Remolor had a dark cloak of his own. As night was approaching the darker colours would provide better camouflage, Tesorilivesa thought.

They left through a back window, and moved east. Ranger Tesorilivesa moved to the front of the house, loaded his crossbow, and aimed through a crack in the glass of one window. He pinpointed a target, and fired, smiling with grim satisfaction when he heard a groan in the night.

He tasted the rice pudding, which was cooler now, and began to pray.

Just let him have enough bolts to take them all.

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And so Remolor ir Ati and Sunder set off to continue the quest. They were the last, best hope for peace. Later we will see how they fared after escaping the house.

Tesorilivesa had six crossbow bolts remaining, but one of the four men outside was a wizard, and the Ranger succumbed quickly to smoke once the wizard had set the house on fire, killing only two of those who pursued him. The wizard was one of those who did not survive the encounter.

They never found Tesorilivesa's body.

Written by Ross O'Brien, edited by Matthew Walton

The sun was slipping, slowly, slowly, over the horizon of that last great age, the time before the War. While the leaders of the peoples of Aisorbmii and of the Kingdom made preparations for peace, others in high circles took the initiative, preparing forces for the defences of their respective countries.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in a large town north-east of the King's Castle, where a thriving sporting atmosphere was torn apart by the hostilities...

The following account is reconstructed from historical records.

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### Episode Eight: Rough Play

At half-time the score was four-all, a fact which was barely pacifying the watching crowds in the stadium. It hadn't helped, coach Dutozabitiya considered, that both teams had changed colours for this match, although he could understand the reasons why.

His own Aisorbmian team, the Iron Jamtins, wore jerseys of pale blue, forest green and peach yellow. Statistically they ought to win, since they hadn't lost a home game in at least four years, and had won or drawn almost all of their away matches. Striker Milosarituva's record as a goal-scorer was approaching a position in the top ten of all time, although since neither country wished to compare their best players to those of the other country and come out inferior, accurate statistics were hard to come by. Defender Legodatiperi led their stalwart defences, which also had a growing reputation about becoming impenetrable.

Not today, it seemed. The Kingdom team, the Fireballs, clad in jerseys of bright red, had managed to break through four times. Dutozabitiya had been professionally impressed at this ability, but like any Aisorbmian, angered whenever they fouled his players. Winger Darolinisuta had already been carted off with a hurt leg, and his substitute Belopenicora had spent his first fifteen minutes on the field shaking.

For over a week, while the Jamtins had played against Aisorbmian teams, Dutozabitiya had heard about the various attacks. Goalkeeper Sazorenigita had lost a sister in the Anilomes raid. The team had sent well-wishing messages to the Prime Minister after hearing of the assassination attempt against his life, and of the attack he'd faced only a few days travel north of this stadium. There had also been news of attacks in the south.

So it was natural that both sides wanted to see a victory in this stadium, now more than ever before. For the first time ever Dutozabitiya had wished his team was a little less prestigious, that they weren't facing the best team Lord Samfr de Samfr owned. The death of his son, Tarek ir Teriss, had also reached Dutozabitiya's ears, and although there had been no proof of Aisorbmian involvement, the Fireballs were playing to avenge.

The half started, and Jamtin Captain Genokefirica won the first strike, scooping the ball up into his stick and tossing it forwards to Milosarituva. A Fireball winger intercepted and crossed it to defenders on the other side of the pitch. The Fireballs moved as a group down Belopenicora's wing, and Dutozabitiya was pleased to see the young player stand up to them. He tricked the ball from one and flicked it over towards his Captain, but didn't escape the barrage of two red-shirted shoulders slamming into him.

Dutozabitiya's servant, Sandresk, approached the coach and whispered to him. 'There's a Paladin downstairs, sir, wishing to speak to you.'

'Now?' grumbled Dutozabitiya. Sandresk nodded. The coach heaved himself from the chair and followed the thin servant to a staircase behind the seating, which they both descended. At the bottom was a Paladin, although Dutozabitiya could see he was more than that.

He was clad in the full outfit of a Paladin: a chain-mail thigh-length jerkin, with elbow-length sleeves; leather boots, gloves and belt, polished, with steel gauntlets covering the gloves and steel toecaps fronting the boots; a leather scabbard by his left side, the clean sword hilt protruding; a shield on his left arm, and a shining steel helmet under his right. And a dark red cloak worn round his back. Dutozabitiya recognised the points on the helmet, the shade of the cloak and some of the symbols on the shield: this was a Minister.

'I am Minister Setovarinesa,' he said. 'Where's yer team?'

'On't field, sir,' said Dutozabitiya. 'Playin' fer their country.'

'I see. I think we're a bit too close t'the field, at the minute. I've gotta tell you summat, and we'll need a bit o' privacy.' Intrigued but reverent, Dutozabitiya nodded his head. 'There's a quiet supply room not far from 'ere,' he said. 'This way. Sandresk, get the Minister a glass of orange juice.'

The coach led the way, and opened the door for the Minister, who stepped in close to the coach in order to enter. His sword hilt glowed. 'Magic sword?' asked Dutozabitiya.

'Blessed at Rene Ponit, by the priests,' said Setovarinesa. 'How'd yer know?'

'Little gift I've got,' said Dutozabitiya. 'I can sense any spell cast on any object that's within a few feet of me.' The Minister nodded, impressed.

The servant returned with two beverages shortly afterwards, then left the room. Dutozabitiya moved a rope aside, and sat down on a sticks crate; the Minister remained standing.

'I have bad news, Dutozab,' said Setovarinesa. 'I must recruit six men from your team, today. It is likely they will not return for the rest of this season, and possible that some will not return at all.'

'Six?' spluttered the coach. 'We only have fifteen players, and we need ten to make a team! Besides which we've got four more matches against Kingdom sides in the next month, and if they're 'owt like Samfr's Fireballs we'll need substitutes too! What game d'yer think yer playin' at?'

'I'm sorry, Dutozab, I really am, but the Minister Cadre 'ave made their orders crystal clear, no defyin' them. Every Paladin is being recalled into armour, to defend their country, and you have the honour of 'avin' six on yer team.'

Dutozabitiya's heart sank, and he gaped. He was thirty-seven, he'd been old enough to know the responsibilities of the Paladins in wartime. In peacetime lacrosse had grown on the borders as a competitive sport, and when Aisorbmian players had played very well, in the presence of the Ministry, he'd been proud when the title of Paladin had been bestowed. It was a new tradition, maybe a dozen years old. He hadn't thought anyone would've believed such players were skilled enough with the sword or lance to fight in battle.

Setovarinesa drank from his cup, and looked at Dutozabitiya's eyes. 'I'm sorry, Dutozab, I really am. I support yer team, and I know what it means to 'ave all them names on yer side. But that is what the orders say,' he said. He put his shield down and pulled a chair nearer to the coach. 'It's not just your men, neither. Everyone who's been given Paladin status, who's still young enough to fight, is being recalled. I even know a few Rangers who have to get armoured up.'

'Ow soon must they go?' asked Dutozabitiya, sipping his orange juice. He heard a loud cheering. It irked him a little not knowing which side had scored.

'I wouldn't pull them out in't middle of a match, 'specially not this'un. Too much chance of riot. But soon. A few days, maybe.'

'I see.'

The Minister stood to leave, opening the door. 'Come, Dutozab. Game's not over yet. Let's go watch the Jamtins win, and we'll drink to the success of yer men.'

'Aye,' said the coach, and he downed the rest of the orange juice. Then he spat it out. 'Sandresk can't make orange juice very well, I think you noticed that. It has juice, pips, peel and all other kinds of gunk in it.'

'Coach Dutozabitiya?' asked a voice, and the Minister and the coach turned around. There were two men just outside the room, one old, one young.

'Who are yer?' asked Dutozabitiya.

'Me name's Remolorirati,' said the old man. 'This is me son, Sunoremidera. We were just passing through, havin' places to be, and we hoped we could get an autograph from yer, sir, while we had time.'

The son held out a parchment and a quill. A sword-shaped scar glowed on the young man's arm, just above the elbow, but there was no hidden magic in the parchment or quill, so Dutozabitiya signed his name.

'Thank yer kindly, sir,' said Remolorirati. 'Say thank yer, Sun,' he said, and the youth sullenly repeated his father's words. Dutozabitiya nodded uncertainly. 'Yer welcome,' he said. The two men departed, the older man obviously more excited than his son about the signing. He turned back to the Minister. 'Let's go,' he said.

Sandresk met them at the staircase. 'A word, sir?' he asked Dutozabitiya. The coach nodded, and waved to the Minister to ascend the stairs and watch the game. Setovarinesa nodded, and clambered.

'What now?' asked Dutozabitiya.

'I must leave you, sir. I have just received a message from my brother, in the west. He needs my assistance.'

'Yer my servant, Sandresk,' said Dutozabitiya. 'Yer've got a weekend off coming soon. Can it not wait?'

Sandresk's face darkened. 'No, sir,' he said. Then he struck Dutozabitiya.

Dutozabitiya fell to the ground, and found himself unable to climb back to his feet. Sandresk moved to the coach's shoulders and pulled him back to the quiet room. 'What have yer done to me?' asked Dutozabitiya.

'Paralysis potion in the orange juice, sir,' said Sandresk. 'It's an old favourite of the Kingdom nobility. Incapacitates very quickly, but makes death long and slow. The maker of the potion can even choose whether the victim can speak or not after ingestion.' Sandresk took the large rope from the floor and moved to a rafter, tying the rope around it. He then formed a noose from the rope which remained.

'You see, sir, Winger Darolinisuta died from his injuries a few minutes ago. His back was broken.'

The news stunned Dutozabitiya, though it didn't sound right... 'His leg was hurt...' Sandresk gave him a cold look, and Dutozabitiya knew his servant was the killer.

Sandresk hauled the coach's body onto a pile of high crates, and continued his speech. 'You, of course, are heartbroken by the news, especially as six others from your team are about to leave forever. Your team will never play another game.'

The servant struggled to pull Dutozabitiya higher. Then he placed the noose around the coach's neck. 'Some will believe you hanged yourself in despair, particularly those of Kingdom patronage. Others, particularly the Aisorbmii, will believe you were murdered.'

Sandresk clambered down again, reaching into his pockets and placing an opened, empty tin of rice pudding on the sticks crate Dutozabitiya had sat on earlier. He placed a dirty spoon and a note beside it.

'No-one will know what to believe, and the Aisorbmii may be convinced, eventually, that it was simply a tragic affair. But the Kingdom will have considered it an insult, especially after the Aisorbmian victory today.'

'The game's not finished yet,' said Dutozabitiya.

'Oh, you are very slow, Dutozabitiya. Some of your team have promise, others are appalling. But you shall win because I have made it so. Your team relies on magic to be victorious.'

'Why?'

'At last some proper thought. I have worked so very hard to get your team into this position, coach Dutozabitiya, where the two countries can feel so justified in abandoning the peace they have enjoyed these last decades. But it was a respite, no more than that.' Sandresk climbed back up to the rafters, and began to push Dutozabitiya's body off.

'Goodbye, coach Dutozabitiya. I grant you the mercy of dying before it all starts.'

Dutozabitiya felt himself moving swiftly for a moment, but did not hear the crack.

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The Iron Jamtins won 8-4 in the end. Only after the match did they hear of their two dead friends. News spread quickly through the crowds, and it was only through the efforts of the Minister and the six recalled Paladins that the Aisorbmian crowds were prevented from rioting. But all hopes of co-operation, in trade or sport, were dashed in this town.

The surviving Iron Jamtins insisted on staying together, and the six Paladins recruited their team-mates as Squires. With Setovarinesa, they travelled north.

And what of Sandresk? Only further research can find the answers.

Written by Ross O'Brien, edited by Matthew Walton

Truly the sunset of that great age as both King and Prime Minister awaited news of their efforts of peace, and others on both sides prepared for war, ignorant of the price their fathers had narrowly avoided paying, and which they would surely have to pay if open warfare resumed.

But not all was quiet, for previously unseen forces were taking an open hand, pursuing their own ends. Direct action had been taken - the Aisorbmian lacrosse coach lay dead and buried, and the effects of that had yet to be seen, but in a forest a day's ride from the Castle which lay at the heart of the Kingdom, further action would be taken on a dark and moonless night.

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## Episode Nine: The Risk of Practice

It was pitch black in the forest - clouds covered the sky, and the new moon wouldn't have cast any light even if they had not. Shaat'ka stumbled through the undergrowth, wet leaves brushing against his already-sodden trousers, following the dim, flickering lantern which his brother Ar'mais carried. Roots threatened to trip him with every step it seemed, but there could be no delay, for the midnight hour was fast approaching.

Ahead of them the trees suddenly opened up into a clearing. A circle of standing stones, about twenty feet in diameter, stood in the centre of the clearing, and a rough, waist-high block of stone in the centre of that. Ar'mais stopped, looking at the circle and breathing hard. Midnight surely had to be very close now.

'The time approaches,' Shaat'ka said. Ar'mais flinched, as if the words were his death knell.

'The time has arrived,' he said finally, and put the lamp down. It cast just enough light for Shaat'ka to see him take off his clothes and boots until he stood naked in the darkness. Shaat'ka followed suit, and walked closer, taking Ar'mais' head in his hands.

'Your thoughts... your mind... your thoughts... your mind...' he chanted under his breath as he reached forth into Ar'mais' mind, seeing the other man's thoughts spread out like the world seen from a high mountain. He could read them all. That would be essential as they proceeded.

'Good luck,' he said. The telepathic link worked only one way - Ar'mais knew nothing of Shaat'ka's thoughts. That was essential as well.

'I doubt I'll get it.'

His thoughts were a maelstrom of emotion and fear, but at the core of it lay determination. He knew what they did this night was necessary.

The stones stood, waiting. Ar'mais walked forward, passed between two of them. As he reached the central stone, he began to chant in a low voice, sounds which were both more and less than mere words. Sounds of power. The air seethed with them.

The stones felt them, and answered in kind. Each began to glow with a faint red light. None of the stones cast a shadow. Ar'mais stood before the central stone, and raised his arms above it, holding the palms down. His chant changed. The surge of his magic roared through Shaat'ka's mind as he observed the other's thoughts, a whirling storm of fear and apprehension, and exultation in the power he was drawing. Pain, too, as invisible energies pierced his fingertips. Blood dripped onto the stone.

The chant changed again. The central stone began to bleed, blood oozing from the pores in the hard rock, until it glistened in the red light from the standing stones. Ar'mais ran a finger through the blood and used it to mark a symbol on his chest, seven radial lines meeting at a central point. As the last line was completed, the blood on the stone and the blood on his chest ignited, burning a fierce purple flame. His scream echoed through the night, then his voice, strained with pain. Shaat'ka flinched involuntarily, a reaction to the pain he felt pouring through Ar'mais' mind.

'I call upon thee, Erica del Erica most untimely slain! By treachery wert thou slain, before thy time and in manner unfitting. I call upon thee, Erica del Erica, return across the barrier of death. As my voice calls unto thee, thou shalt hear and follow it to me. I stand open and ready in this place of power. I offer my body to thee.'

It started as a feeling, a prickling on the back of the neck. Shaat'ka looked around, although he knew where the feeling came from. His feeling from Ar'mais' was tense, waiting. Nervous. Frightened. Terrified.

The night was split by a scream. A woman's scream, a scream of rage and anger. Light descended from the sky, hitting the ground with a tangible shock that made the trees sway as if in a wind. A bright, fierce red light exactly the colour of fresh blood. Ar'mais screamed again then, his voice melding with the woman's scream, until one was the same as the other. Shaat'ka fell to his knees, holding his head. The torrent of thought from Ar'mais was more than he could comprehend. Scattered and confused and filled with pain. It seemed to last for hours, although it was only a matter of minutes - the screaming, sustained far longer than mortal lungs could manage. The pain, the confusion.

Then the light went out, and the stones went dark, and the blood was gone. Ar'mais lay sprawled on the ground. Shaat'ka moved cautiously into the circle and knelt by his side. His thoughts were dim, but calm. Dormant, almost. Shaat'ka frowned. That wasn't right.

He reached out to shake his brother, and felt a hand grasp his throat. His brother's eyes opened, but it was not his brother who looked out of them.

'Why hast thou done this?'

The voice was not his brother's. It was a woman's voice. Cultured, speaking with the accent of the Kingdom nobility. He felt the fingers tighten on his throat.

'Answer me! Or I shall send thee to the place from which thou hast brought me.'

'I did not bring you back! It was my brother, who's body you now inhabit!' Shaat'ka said.

'Thine brother's mind ist weak,' Erica said from Ar'mais' mouth. 'It doth rest after our struggle. He was unable to control me as he hath intended. But thou art linked to him, thou must know why he did this thing which stands forbidden.'

'You were killed too soon. We need you! You were the only one-'

'Fool! In this as in many other things, thou art surely a fool. To think that I would help thee after thou hast caused me such pain.' The hand around Shaat'ka's throat opened, and he was pushed backwards by something, coming to a halt hard against one of the standing stones. Stars flashed across his vision from the impact. Dimly, he saw his brother's body stand up. 'Thou hast gained nothing by this. Nothing! I shall have my own revenge. Thy purpose and that of thy brother means nothing to me.'

There was a stirring, a change in Ar'mais' awareness. Shaat'ka felt it. Erica clearly felt it as well, for she froze there in the darkness.

'And now thy brother seeks to escape my control,' she said. 'He seeks thy help.'

Help me... help me... distract her...

Shaat'ka's hand closed on a rock. He picked it up and threw it. Erica turned, flicked a hand. The rock exploded in mid-air, showering the ground with fragments. She raised a hand again. Fire burned in its palm. It looked like Ar'mais stood over him with murder in his eyes, but he knew it wasn't. That was some comfort at least.

'Die now, and understand what thou and thy brother hath done to me,' Erica said, and the fire blazed forth. Through Shaat'ka's screams came Erica's shrill laugh, and in the back of Shaat'ka's mind, Ar'mais screamed as well.

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And if Shaat'ka ever understood we will not know, for none of the living can know of the world of the dead.

And so at the end of that night, a plan lay in ruins, for Erica del Erica lived again in the body of the necromancer Ar'mais, and far from being a willing occupant of Ar'mais' body, she had taken over completely and subjugated Ar'mais' mind almost to the point of obliterating it. A random factor in a world of random factors - but a random factor which had not been intended.

Further research may reveal more about the effects of this night.

Written by Matthew Walton, edited by Ross O'Brien

Previously, on Next to the Custard...

For thirty difficult years the lands of Aisorbma and the Kingdom co-existed in uneasy peace, following centuries of unchecked hostility. In that time many raids were executed, hoping to provoke the powers which rule into renewing the war. These raids were largely unsuccessful, until approximately three weeks before the time in which this episode takes place.

Recently, two young nobles from the Kingdom had destroyed a rice pudding factory in Anilomes, on Aisorbmian soil. Hundreds were killed, including Marquis Endam ar Berrito, the noble who planned the raid. His companion, Baroness Erica del Erica, was assassinated soon after her return to the Kingdom by his Majesty the King, who feared that she was a security risk.

The Prime Minister of Aisorbma responded to the destruction of Anilomes by sending a Ranger to the King, to gain his cooperation in maintaining the peace they had worked for three decades to maintain. The King sent the Ranger back with a message, but the Ranger was killed. Two men, Remolorirati and his son Sunoremidera, who have lived in the lands of the Kingdom for many years, bear this message at this time. They are the last hope of peace. Hostilities have already begun.

It is now the twilight of the last great age. The Great War is about to begin.

The following account is taken from historical records.

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### Episode Ten: Receiving the Parchment

Tunoginimisi sat on his rooftop, drinking, and blissfully ignoring the crowd of people trying alternately to encourage or coax or shout him down.

Gunorelitora heard them from atop his steed, at the border of the village. It didn't seem to have occurred to any of them to fetch a ladder. Were he permitted, he would have approached them to suggest it.

But he was not permitted. He was a Paladin of the Prime Minister's personal guard, and he was on duty watching the south-west pass. There was a forest to the south, which would obscure all the roads more than a league or so from his position; to the west there were plains. And to the north, someone had just thrown an empty bottle from a great height, and it had smashed on the ground. Gunorelitora stifled a smile.

The air was warm, the sky paling. It was the seventh day of the troop's stay in the village, and the drunkard's antics were only a hint of the troubles going on. The villagers knew why the Prime Minister was here, in the border-most settlement, and largely they valued the protection they were receiving and the importance they had been awarded by his presence. But basic realities were becoming paramount; the village supported less than a hundred people, and the twenty-four Paladins and their steeds were eating into the winter supplies. A barn which might be used to keep livestock warm for next spring had been occupied by the Paladins as a barracks and stable, and at any time eight men would be sleeping there while others made sure the horses were well rested and fed.

Gunorelitora heard a drunken yell of 'Goway!' from behind, then a chorus of 'ooh!'ing and he turned. Tunoginimisi was trying to slide down the roof and had slipped, regaining a grip just before reaching the edge. The other villagers were crowding a little nearer, with some of the taller ones trying to reach up and support Tunoginimisi's descent.

When he turned back Finogilisera was there, which startled Gunorelitora's horse. Finogilisera raised a hand to calm the animal, and then looked at Gunorelitora and made movements with his fingers.

'I should... sorry, Fin, I don't understand. Slow down,' said Gunorelitora. Fin repeated the motions more slowly, occasionally stuttering with words which his armoured arms could no longer manoeuvre into. Moments later Gunorelitora understood. 'I should be more careful,' he confirmed. 'Yeah, or anyone could walk in. Where've yer been?'

South and east, Fin signalled. Nearby villages are warned of the danger, and are watching for Kingdom troops.

'How far've yer ridden?' Fin held up three fingers, outstretched, then flicked them into five, and five again. Thirteen leagues. Gunorelitora dismounted his horse, and Fin did likewise. 'Take yer steed to the barn,' Gunorelitora said, 'and he'll be looked after. Then yer can come back and talk.'

The drunkard finally fell from the roof, onto several of the people, and Gunorelitora turned to watch as Medofesipanu came out to see what was going on. The doctor made a quick assessment and then returned to his house, assured that no-one was hurt. In this brief interval Fin returned from the barn on foot.

'How is the armour?' Gunorelitora asked. It fits, Fin answered. I've always made sure it would be ready if I needed it, he commented. Gunorelitora nodded grimly. He had been hoping for a different answer, although he wasn't sure of what kind. It had been years since Fin had served as a Paladin, and although Gunorelitora knew that Fin had been rendered a mute by cruel citizens of the Kingdom, and therefore unable to follow many of the duties of a Paladin without assistance, he did not fully understand why Fin had become a Ranger instead.

His small-talk was cut short as Fin gestured ahead. Two men approach, he signalled. Gunorelitora nodded, and mounted his steed. 'Tell Bemosolinata we'll 'ave guests soon, and that I've nearly finished me shift,' he said. 'He's the tall Paladin at the door to the barn.'

Fin went with his horse, and returned with Bemosolinata, who carried with him an opened tin of rice pudding. He offered some to Gunorelitora, who accepted, and Fin, who refused, saying he'd just eaten. Patiently they waited.

'Hello the camp!' shouted the shorter of the two approaching men, an old man dressed warmly for all weathers. The other was also well-dressed and wore a scarf around much of his head. The three Paladins continued to wait until they arrived.

'Hello,' repeated the old man. 'I have a message for the Prime Minister from the King.'

Gunorelitora drew his sword. 'What's yer message?'

'I'm sorry, friend, but it's fer his eyes only, orders of the King.'

'The King has no authority here!' exclaimed Bemosolinata patriotically. Gunorelitora shushed him.

'I'll say what I can,' said the old man. 'My name is Remolorirati. I am continuing the mission of a Ranger named Tesorilivesa, who we last saw three days ago. He gave me this.' The man held out a small triangular badge, which Fin accepted, inspected, and nodded.

'All right then,' said Gunorelitora. 'I'll take yer to him. If yer have any weapons remove them here. And you sir,' he said, referring to the second man, 'take off yer scarf. The Prime Minister had a scare with a masked assassin about nine days or so past. Won't let anyone near 'im if he can't see their face.'

'It seemeth me then that he would have had a frolicsome time with thine invisible Ranger friend,' murmured the second man.

'Silence, Sunder, and remove thine scarf!' snapped the old man. 'I apologise for my son. He's lived in the Kingdom almost all of his life.' Then Fin caught Gunorelitora's attention and gestured quickly. 'What did he say?' asked Remolorirati.

Gunorelitora grimaced. 'He said that he doesn't think it's a good idea for yer boy to be here, and hopes that yer message is worth his presence.'

'How rude,' said Remolorirati. 'Such thoughts should be kept to oneself.'

Gunorelitora diplomatically avoided assigning blame and instead led the way into the village. Fin stayed with him, while Bemosolinata took over the sentry duty.

They led the two messengers to the northernmost house, which the Prime Minister now used as a base of operations. The family which had lived here eight days ago had fled east, despite assurances that there was not likely to be an attack here.

There were guards posted around the outside, and none of them wore helmets. Gunorelitora spoke quickly to one of the guards, who entered the house while his companion stayed at the door diligently.

The Prime Minister of Aisorbma himself came out to meet them. 'What are yer names?' he asked.

'This is Remolorirati and ... I believe the young man is named Sunder, lord.' introduced Gunorelitora.

'Not an Aisorbmian name,' the Prime Minister observed.

'My name is Sunder pi Yeonan,' said the young man. The four Paladins drew their swords instantly. Remolorirati stepped forward, carefully.

'My birth name was Remolorirati, but I not no longer Aisorbmian. I am an exile who was forced to take the name Remolor ir Ati. This is my son, who has been raised as a citizen of the Kingdom. He has assumed the name Sunoremidera for three days while in the service of you and the King. While I still have loyalties to the home which cast me out, he has no allegiance to you. But spare him your tempers, for without him I might not have made it here, and the task of my old friend Tesorilivesa might never have been finished. I bring the message entrusted to him, and here it is. But before I deliver it I will have a promise from all of you that he will not be harmed while he is here.'

The Prime Minister grimaced. 'Tesorilivesa is dead,' he said. 'My friend Rekowarilara can see these things. I've come to trust his opinion recently, he's been damned useful this week, no mistake, so I know yer speak the truth. Thank you, Remolor ir Ati, for completing his task.' He turned to Sunder, and extended his right hand to the young man's right shoulder, and spoke words in the formal speech. 'In honour of my friend, I promise you that neither I, nor anyone here in my service will harm you while you stay in Aisorbma.'

Gunorelitora sheathed his sword and gripped Sunder's shoulder as the Prime Minister had. 'In honour of my lord, I promise you will not be harmed during your stay, if I can make it so.'

The two guards sheathed weapons and swore similarly. Fin lowered his sword, touched the young man's shoulder, then spoke in sign. Gunorelitora confirmed that the vow was said.

'Then here is your message, sir.' So saying, Remolor ir Ati handed the Prime Minister the envelope from the King. The Prime Minister broke the seal, and tore the end from the envelope, and took the parchment from within.

He read:

'To his Honoured Grace the Prime Minister of Aisorbma,

It is my most sincere hope that this message doth find thee in the utmost of good health, and that no untoward incidents hath delayed the Ranger to whom this message wert entrusted, for the times doth alter with each passing day and I fear that war doth loom almost unstoppable upon the horizon.

My beloved Queen and I hath between us spent many hours in contemplation of the various ways and means by which that thing which we all dread, war, might be avoided. Many of the options-

Avoided? interrupted Fin's fingers.

'The King wants peace?' asked Gunorelitora. 'There've been 'alf a dozen attacks since the destruction of Anilomes, and only a week ago he made a speech about pressing forward an advantage. He's got a bloody funny way of wanting peace.'

There was a yell from inside the house, and the Prime Minister retreated inside. After a moment he called out, 'It's fine, it's just Rek. I think you startled him, Gunorel.' There was a pause. 'You can come in if you like,' said the Prime Minister. 'The doorway's no place for letters anyway.'

They entered the house, Remolor first, then Sunder and Fin, then Gunorelitora. As they did so the man on the bed screamed and pointed, his finger jabbing somewhere near Sunder. 'Snake!' he said.

The Prime Minister paled. The two guards came in quickly and immediately moved to Sunder. The Prime Minister halted them before they could touch him.

'A week ago,' the Prime Minister said, 'I heard a prophecy that a snake would kill a silver lion. Rek is in tune with that prophecy, for reasons that I do not understand. It has been his belief that the silver lion is me.'

'The man is a raving lunatic!' exclaimed Remolor. 'And you just promised no harm would come to my son.'

'And no harm will. But for the time being I must place him under guard, so that he does not approach me, or any other member of the Ministry.' The Prime Minister looked at Sunder directly. 'Rek may be wrong, but at the moment I have no choice. If I am wrong, I am in your debt, Sunder pi Yeonan. I hope I am wrong.'

The guards stepped closer to escort the young man away. And then they heard the bugle call from the south-west.

'An attack!' said Gunorelitara. He ran outside and expertly vaulted into his saddle, then drew his sword and with his heels kicked his steed into a charge. 'Paladins to me!' he shouted. Ten other Paladins quickly mounted their steeds and followed, all racing past the sentry point where Bemosolinata blew his bugle. Those who remained would be quickly preparing the rest of the defences. The distance of the far-off riders would give them perhaps eight minutes. Gunorelitara was earning them more time.

Three minutes later, with less than a mile until the clash, were a dozen or so Aisorbmian Paladins racing towards him. Pursuing them was a company of fifty riders in gaudier colours, lances levelling for the charge.

Gunorelitara pointed his sword forward, manoeuvring between the fleeing Aisorbmii cavalry. The more attentive of them wheeled around. The southbound Paladins made a wedge formation, twenty strong, Gunorelitara taking the point. They were scant metres distant. He yelled a battle-cry—

– 'Aisorbmii!' –

–and was impaled by a lance moments later.

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The name of the village has sadly been lost to this history, but the battle was named the Battle of the Precipice shortly afterwards, and much later known as the First Fall.

Gunorelitara, sadly, made no kills for his name that day, but he did earn the defenders precious time. His decisive actions were crucial in shaping the future that followed, as further research will explain.

Next episode, we will explore the Battle of the Precipice in more detail. The more melodramatic viewers may wish to interpret this as a 'To Be Continued'; feel free. The beginning of the War is a gruesome tale, but only with further analysis will the truth be made known.

Written by Ross O'Brien, edited by Matthew Walton

"...And all the Kingdom wants to fight, and all the Paladins want to fight back. We're all runnin' around near the precipice again." So said Galomanisula, Prime Minister of Aisorbma, a wise man who knew from his years how valuable peace was.

He also knew that the worst part of falling was realising how difficult it would be to climb back to the place fallen from. But in the years of uneasy peace following the undecidable stalemate, the people forgot the relief of the peak, and through their ancient grudges they sought once more the pit.

On the day of the Battle of the Precipice, they fell.

The following account is taken from historical records, on the day of the First Fall.

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### Episode Eleven: Riding over the Precipice

Duchess Caira iwl Srinkra felt a pain in her right arm. It was what woke her up.

Not that it was unusual for her to feel pains in the night. She had broken her left leg in a riding accident long ago, and although the wizards had healed it she always felt a pain in it when rain was coming, or when she approached home. Just two of the funny feelings one might acquire if, as she was, one was born with a low level of magic. She was good at making fires too, and she had a gift with cats, such that they would always do what she told them to.

But this pain was different. The Duke Tenil gu Srandar had rolled over in his sleep again, and her right arm was under him. She pulled it clear, and massaged around her elbow to break the cramp. For a moment she considered setting his beard on fire, just to make sure he didn't do it again, but that would be foolish. He was the general, and however amusing it would be to have Tenil tear off into the night and throw his face into the nearest water-bucket, it would also damage his authority, and hers. And the authority was so new that she could not afford to lose it so quickly.

Two days ago they had journeyed to the lacrosse match at the large stadium in no-man's-land, at the invitation of Lord Samfr de Samfr, who owned the Fireball team. Caira had enjoyed a brief debate with Tenil on the loyalties of the referee, as both sides had scored four goals by half-time and none of the Aisorbmian goals had been disallowed, but Tenil had pointed out that one of the Aisorbmian wingers had been crippled without cost to the Kingdom side, and that the Fireballs were used to giving their opponents an easy time in the first half.

He'd then dared a wager with Samfr that the final score would be 7-5. No true noble would ever dispute the inevitability of the Fireballs' victory, but some of the nearby spectators had raised eyebrows at the suggestion that the Iron Jantins would score again.

Fifty minutes later the Aisorbmii had won 8-4. Tenil had paid his debts and they'd gone for a drink and a warm bowl of rice pudding with chocolate flakes. Among the rest of the Kingdom crowd, it was quickly agreed that the Aisorbmii had bribed the referee, that their players were little more than thugs and that they had probably been using magic on the pitch, against all the rules of the No-Man's-Land Lacrosse League. There had been immediate heated discussion in the streets and bars, and then a lot of fighting with the nearest heretics. Tenil had immediately cut off all his sponsorship of the local businesses and gone to the hotel to prepare to go home, while the first riot was quelled. By then they had left town. By happy coincidence Lord Samfr de Samfr's own retinue met theirs on the road.

"It seemeth me that there is much need of respect amongst the Aisorbmii," Samfr had commented.

"Indeed my Lord, that thought had occurred to my mind also, but when I am reminded of recent incidents in Aisorbma I think of how excitable they must become," Tenil had said.

"I am minded by the death of my own son that the Aisorbmii are more than merely excitable, and that action must be taken, lest they choose to be more aggressive with their excitement."

"My sympathies to thou and thine," Tenil and Caira had said swiftly. Then Caira had spoken alone: "It seemeth me that the King has made known that he has strategies to curb their heathen mannerisms."

"Verily, 'tis so," said Lord Samfr, "but strategies require time to implement in proper fashion, and I have spoken to many who believe the interval is too long. We have pre-empted our King's instruction to raise regiments in the old fashion."

The discussion had progressed to the discussion of colours, and Lord Samfr had described the uniform of his regiment in detail, and Duke Tenil and Duchess Caira had praised the modern style: a burgundy tunic with velvet belt and sash, burgundy leggings and doeskin boots, and finally a velvet-coloured beret (which Samfr insisted wasn't quite the right shade) with bright-blue feather.

Recruitment of foot soldiers had not yet begun, since it would be difficult to keep secret, as the large number of unattended farms would be obvious. However, under the guise of preparations for a jousting tournament, Lord Samfr had gathered several dozen riders all trained with the lance to wear his colours. He admitted to them there that he regretted that the King had not observed the deep histories between their families, and hastened his request for battle, for he would have enjoyed the chance to openly ride them against the Aisorbmii who had beat them today.

Tenil had offered a plan, and Caira had been proud of his decisiveness. His lands were far to the north, and were those lands to be... attacked... he would not have time to consult the King about sending riders to pursue.

Tournament arrangements were "adjusted", and within twenty-four hours half the company – forty riders - was making camp under Tenil's command within half a day's ride of the stadium, where a second riot had begun following the revelation that one of the Aisorbmian players – the crippled winger – and the coach were dead. The Aisorbmii seemed to believe they had been murdered by vengeful men of the Kingdom. Tenil hoped they had been, though he resented the manner in which the Kingdom had been judged so swiftly. Caira had had to use much of her influence to calm him down for the night: justice would come soon enough, and the horses were tired. Then she undressed, and he was persuaded.

And so today had come. Today Caira iwl Srintra was not merely the lady of the house; with her fire-making capabilities, she wielded the only ranged weaponry of the unit. She would need to be stable upon the horse to wield this magic, however, and she had no desire to be made an easy target by enemy bows either, so she clad herself in the same uniform as the riders. The nobles were proud; many laid praises before her, and one shyly gave her flowers.

Tenil, when he saw her, said she was beautiful. She kissed him there.

He did suggest, however that she should tie her long brown hair into a bun and keep it beneath the beret, to maintain the semblance of one of the troop; for her part, she merely thought that the beret was the wrong colour.

The sky was grey, an ancient omen of a good day to fight. Samfr's company tracker, Munit de Munit, reported the Jamtins were riding – riding! – north, towards them. Swiftly the riders cleared their camp and saddled up. They rode in a fragmented double-file formation to the east, Tenil at the lead, Caira beside him, to intercept the Jamtins.

The Aisorbmii, fifteen of them, were sighted only a few miles from a westerly Aisorbmii village, presumably their destination. The bugler of the unit, an accomplished rider named Bisift zar Amilan who had no ability for combat at all, signalled the charge, and they formed a wedge. Caira had warmed her hands and spoken words of beginning. Then she had fired.

One of the riders was incinerated. Another fell off his horse, to be trampled by the unit a minute later. Munit fired his bow and caught a third. A distant bugle call was heard from ahead: the village came into view, and Paladins descended the slope towards them.

They rode harder, intending to catch the dozen before meeting in battle. Caira wished at that moment her gift with cats was as effective on horses, but the horse was at least keeping up with Tenil and she would be satisfied with that. She closed her eyes, repeated the words of beginning, and cast her arm forward and fired. This time she missed.

There was no time for a third shot. The village Paladins, perhaps ten of them, had weaved through the fleeing riders and were charging, lances and swords ready. Three Jamtins, at the sides of their rapid formation, wheeled and joined the wings of the Aisorbmii wedge.

She was useless in the charge, being unarmed for close combat, so she rode off to the sides, avoiding the clash. She heard one shrill sound before the clatter of metal and the screams of men and horses – the name of the country of the enemy.

Heathens to the end, she thought. She watched as her husband emerged from the clash, resplendent despite crimson blood splatters in his naval blue attire. More than a dozen burgundy-suited riders followed through the combat, while ten of Samfr's company on each wing of the formation rode entirely around the clash. Caira sent a third fireball into the mêlée which remained, killing a horse beneath its rider. She would pity the horse later, she decided. She rejoined the company, pursuing the riders at the village.

More Paladins, this time on foot, blocked their path. Caira spoke a variation of the words, this time casting fire as a wave across the ground before the unit. Munit fired his bow a few times, and some of the unit drew swords, having broken their lances before. They continued the charge.

This clash was bloodier, but not for Samfr's unit. The foot-Paladins lacked the momentum and steadiness of being atop a steed. Still, in the narrow path several horses stumbled over falling Aisorbmii and Munit fell from his horse.

It occurred to Caira iwl Srinkra at this time that she was enjoying herself. Most of the villagers were fleeing, guided by a couple of Paladins on horses. A number of Paladins were struggling to join combat at the door to the barn, so she swiftly sent a fireball towards it. One wall exploded. Beside her thirty riders of the Kingdom tore through the village, slicing, skewering, slaying.

Tenil motioned his horse beside hers and they moved to the outskirts of the village, watching the riders destroy. "It seemeth our triumph might eclipse that of the Marquis Endam ar Berrito, my sweet," she said, "for where they have merely destroyed, we have conquered." At this, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

A burgundy-garbed smear flew over the nearest house, and, concerned, the general steered his horse north. Caira followed, and her jaw dropped at the sight of the solitary man defeating noble after noble. In his hands was a sword hilt attached to a large rock. Ridiculously it defied gravity, orbiting the old man who wielded it, sending riders sprawling to the ground.

Tenil summoned Bisift to him, and bade him blow a particular combination of notes through the bugle. This Bisift did, and the Kingdom riders turned and answered the summons. Some charged, as others had, and were swept aside... others paused, wary of the unlikely old man.

It was then that Caira iwl Srinkra cast her last, deliberate spell. Without originality, it was another fireball, and she cast it after the last rider challenged the old Paladin and fell. It flew true for the head of the man with the Sword in the Stone.

But it could not succeed. For the Sword in the Stone had a power against magic which no witch or wizard of the Kingdom could know. And so it was that the old man was able to swing the rock faster, and deflect the fireball.

Which flew back, equally true, and impacted through Caira iwl Srinkra's velvet sash and burgundy tunic, incinerating through her, and allowed her life's blood to spill.

She fell back into the arms of her husband, Tenil gu Srandar, whose life was shattered at that moment. Her beret fell off, and the long brown hair fell from its bun. The Paladin lowered the rock-covered blade and watched the cap fall to the ground, apparently stunned himself by the sight of the dying woman.

A mounted Paladin entered the area, leading another horse by the reins. The Paladin with the Sword in the Stone swung it behind him into the long pack on his back, and mounted the free horse. Then he rode away.

Duchess Caira iwl Srinkra died there, on the back of her horse, in the arms of her husband. When Duke Tenil gu Srandar regained the powers of speech, he reached out for Bisift's bugle. Upon it he blew his own combination of notes, a tune taught only to a few among the Kingdom.

He spoke softly, so that only Caira could have heard him. "I hast made the most terrible presumption, my love, in blowing this tune into the wind, but I cannot see an alternative. The wielder of the weapon which slew thee is the Prime Minister of Aisorbma, and I can only think that the traitor among his countrymen can come close enough to deliver a killing blow.

"I have summoned that traitor now, my love. Thy killer shouldst not survive thee more than a handful of days."

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As with the previous episode, the melodramatic viewers of these episodes may wish to mentally add the words “To Be Continued” at this juncture. The immediate fate of Tenil gu Srandar cannot be revealed yet, as he still has an important part to play in the commencement of the War.

We cannot reveal, as yet, the name of the person who heard and responded to the tune of vengeance which now carries across the lands of Aisorbma, although the viewer can be assured that the person will be known to them. Nor can we reveal the fate of the Prime Minister, but the answers to these questions must wait until the next episode.

In the meantime we invite you to speculate on the traitor’s identity, in order to create some form of suspense. Have a pleasant week.

Written by Ross O’Brien

Men are often drawn to tales of violence. Wars, conspiracies, duels. Peace fails to excite the blood in the same way. Poets and bards, to keep their trade alive, will often return to the stories of bloodshed and retell them, often exaggerating numbers or sizes of the opposing forces in order to make them more terrifying.

The irony is that it becomes terrifying that one man can cause so much damage on his own. The acorn is more powerful than the oak. It fits far more easily through the holes in the defences.

The following is one such non-exaggeration, taken from historical records.

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## Episode Twelve: Rise of the Python

Eight brassy notes sounded across the sky, through the borders of the forest. Two miles east of the village where the Aisorbmii had lost their first battle in thirty years fifteen Paladins escorted forty villagers, together with scant belongings and provisions, to a more defensible spot deeper in Aisorbmian territory. The bugle blew, and they all heard it.

And Sunder recognised the melody.

Finogilsera, the Paladin once-Ranger, could see it in his eyes. Most of the villagers had looked about, wondering where the tune was coming from. But the boy's face had hardened when the fifth note sounded. It meant something to him.

It meant something to Finogilsera too. He'd heard the tune before, on the day he lost his tongue.

He was currently thirty-four. His father had been a veteran of the last battle at Rene Ponit, but he had died of a bloodline malady three years after the battle leaving a widow who had to slave to raise their two sons. On the border-lands near the forest, he grew with the grudges which replaced the eager ability to maim and murder that people of both nations suddenly lacked following the Long Fight.

He was small, and a natural target of Kingdom boys from the next village, boys who liked to throw stones and play dangerous pranks. So he'd learned to hide. He had a gift for geography and he soon knew all the good hidey-holes and tricks to misdirect pursuit in the woods. Sadly, accidents happen.

It was a branch, weakened by a fierce storm in his seventh year. He'd leant on it and it had snapped, and he'd fallen into the midst of several large boys who would happily have gutted him there. Then his brother had leapt at them from the undergrowth, and whipped at them with a long branch until they ran from the stinging leaves.

Trapped in hero worship Finogilsera had never fled again. He'd stood up to the Kingdom boys. He'd stood tall for twenty years. He became a Paladin, continuing the dream of his brother who had died of the same bloodline malady as their father. Their mother had been able to retire comfortably, only to pass away in her sleep. In his grief he was comforted by a younger Paladin named Gunorelitara, to whom he became quite close.

In his twenty-seventh year a group of twenty Paladins had been attacked in the south-west near the forests. Eighteen bodies had been found next to the corpses of their horses. All thirty-six heads had been severed. While it was known that outlaws occasionally took root in forests, Finogilsera knew that there were no outlaws in those woods and he had investigated.

No-one had known all twenty Paladins and no-one had been able to identify the two who were missing. Finogilsera found that the murders had been brutal and methodical, their implications terrifying: poison in their drinks, and one or two traitors in their midst. So he'd pursued into Kingdom lands.

He'd been caught, this time far from home and without his brother to save him. He'd been taken before the King and forced to kneel. And there they had told him to eat the hot rice pudding. Naturally he had refused.

The King had ordered his tongue removed, but on his way to the dungeons others had taken responsibility for what was done to him. Then he learned how a traitor was created.

Brutally the Kingdom sorcerers would impose instructions onto the Aisorbmian mind. Only a select few – all of them outside the Royal inner circle – knew of it. Instructions were simple, but necessarily emotion-driven. 'Kill the Prime Minister' would be too complex; instead they had to latch onto the feelings of respect, loyalty and patriotism the subject held for the leader of their country.

They'd built-in a trigger, to allay any suspicions while they waited for the appropriate political time. They'd chosen a few select notes which only appeared in a few traditional anthems of the Kingdom – mostly archaic funeral fanfares, and one childhood song now out of use. Of course, it was possible for the assassin to hear the notes sooner than planned, but an untimely death was perfectly acceptable.

In Finogiliseria they had instilled a different instruction – to lose all head for music. The Paladin would never be able to enjoy a tune, or dance in time at a festival. He managed, against all odds, to remember the eight notes of the trigger, but only by whistling them continuously in his dungeon. Only then had they followed the King's orders.

His tongue was removed, his vocal cords slit. Finogiliseria would not be able to communicate his knowledge to anyone, but he could be set free. Thus the conspirators were able to keep their secret without drawing any more investigators.

Finogiliseria never discovered the name of the traitor. Unable to communicate he could not function as a Paladin, and had to be relieved of his duties. Possessed by shame, and a need to serve the cause of his nation he had learned sign language from the Rangers. Gunorelitar, always at his side, had supported his efforts and had asked permission from the Ministry to also learn the codes. But Gun learned faster, and he was recalled to service.

It would be another two years before Finogiliseria could communicate fluently with his fingers. But among the Rangers he had relearned his talents of stealth from his youth. He swore a new oath, and had trained gradually with the other languages of the Rangers.

But the trigger-tune, barely remembered, would never be communicated. And for a time it was forgotten.

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They reached the next village within a few hours, and Minister Setovarinesa set about organising rooms for them all. Doctor Medofesipanu tended to the injured. Paladin Bemosolinata took charge over Remolor and Sunder, while the four surviving Jamtin Paladins set up a perimeter. To their surprise, Marshal Rekowarilara stepped forward to join the sentries. The Marshal seemed far more stable today, and several others chose to see this as a good omen, and volunteered to stand beside him.

Two more Paladins riders rode in an hour later - the Prime Minister and another Paladin, Eidocesidana. They reported no further survivors of the attack, bringing the final tally to thirty-one. But the Prime Minister's presence lifted hearts. The wielder of the Sword in the Stone had a magic in men's minds which couldn't be reproduced by spells or psychics. He was in his late fifties and was still the greatest warrior in the country.

Today they had been beaten. But alongside him they would fight back. That was why the Sword was moved from Rene Ponit, after all.

The rallying speech they all expected turned out to be rather short. The Prime Minister stated that he had received a message from the Kingdom before the attack. He said the attack had not been sanctioned by the King, and was therefore likely to have been a rogue company. He emphasised that they would not be going to war over this. That would merely get more people killed. Then he had a meeting with Setovarinesa and Mayoratilini, the leader of the village. They were guarded by Eidoces and the Iron Jamtins.

For the second time in the day, Finogiliseria was confused about this avoidance of war. The borders had been attacked, scores of Aisorbmii killed, in the past month. Every Paladin had been recalled into service, even him. It did not matter whether the King had sanctioned the attack or not, because the attacks were happening. What could the Aisorbmii hope to gain by sitting back and letting them continue?

Knowing that answers would not be coming forth immediately, he set himself the task of watching the Prime Minister carefully. He trusted Eidoces, who had brought him home safely. Otherwise he trusted no-one, for any one of them could be secretly disloyal now.

After a short time the exile, Remolor, was summoned to the meeting. Bemosolinata escorted him, and Finogiliserá joined them. His presence wasn't questioned.

'Remolor, yer've been livin' in the Kingdom for many years now. Yer know more than anyone what's been 'appenin' there. We'd appreciate yer insight,' said the Prime Minister.

The old man took a seat at the table. 'What can I tell you, sir? It's the old grudge. Someone's finally managing to lift the stalemate and prove once and for all they're right. It's so futile, so foolish... so naturally, the nobles are all for it. I have no doubt that the houses have been recruiting already, and trying to hide it from the King. But before too long, they'll be fighting anyway, carried away with jingoism, wine and funny costumes. If you want to stop it, you have to stop it now.'

Finogiliserá knocked on the table, indicating his wish to offer his opinion. The Prime Minister translated his gestures for the others. 'We must stop being targets. Every victory encourages them. We have to face them down, discourage them.'

'Whether it be the thrill of the chase, or the charge of the vengeful, they will want to keep on coming. At Rene Ponit they were given an impossible target and became bored. That is all that will stop them,' said Remolor.

We will not retreat!

'No-one said anythin' about retreat, Finogil,' Setovarinesa assured him. 'We're just tryin' ter understand the Kingdom brain. We know they have a lot of family politics; maybe we can muck that up a bit.'

'No,' said the Prime Minister. 'They will fight among themselves anyway. But we unite them. All these years, all the trade efforts, the sports, the festivals... they have failed to unite the two countries.'

'Do something unexpected, sir,' offered Remolor. 'Return to the village. Offer a feast. Request that you may bury the dead. Take the Sword, if it will keep them off-balance. Just be other than a threat or a target, and keep them confused.'

'It confused me,' said Bemosolinata. 'Might work.'

Then they will attack what they don't understand, in case it is a trick. We must face them, head to head.

'We tried that for centuries, Finogil,' said the Prime Minister, 'and it's time the nobles grew up. We will summon a few mages, I think, and start playing with their heads. They've 'ad time to be victors. We'll make 'em look like idiots. Bemosolinata, gather the local psychics. Medofes and Rekowar have some psychic talent; we can use them, too. Bemosol?'

From the moment his name had been mentioned, the Paladin had stood rigid. His eyes had narrowed. He drew his sword swiftly, howled and attacked.

Finogiliserá saw the signs of that second trigger, drew his own blade and parried Bemosolinata's, but the Paladin was younger and had more recent experience with the blade. Finogiliserá was pushed back quickly. The Minister, Setovarinesa, was pushed back in turn, then Bemosolinata pushed forward for the kill.

Remolor hurled himself into the side of the Paladin, who swung around and slammed his sword hilt against the old man's head. He then kicked out again at Setovarinesa, and the Minister fell back. Mayoritilini leapt at the Paladin from behind, but the sword twirled below the arm and stabbed backwards, slaying the village leader immediately.

The guards entered the room, swords drawn, but at the sight of their leader, they held back.

The Prime Minister flourished the Sword in the Stone in a small circle which pointed around Bemosolinata's nose. 'Stand down, assassin.' Bemosolinata swung his blade and advanced, but the Prime Minister parried and riposted. Seventy pounds of swiftly swung rock impacted with the Paladin's head. A few moments later, his head impacted against the next wall.

The Prime Minister knelt beside the body, and put down the Sword in the Stone. 'If you are all the treachery the Kingdom can muster, then the Aisorbmii will survive. There will be peace,' he said. 'There must be peace.'

Eidocesidana, satisfied that calm had been restored, sheathed his sword and stepped forward to tend to the fallen Ministers and the old man. Behind the Prime Minister, Finogiliserá stood silently, thinking about peace.

It was so futile, he thought.

While war was not inevitable, perhaps, peace was the futility. All the efforts made towards it had failed. Despite the losses they had suffered, the Kingdom hadn't changed, hadn't learned, hadn't grown. In thirty years it had merely been able to recover, and prepare in dark places to fight again.

For thirty years there had been stalemate, not peace. A lapse in the traditions that kept men strong. A weakness.

Finogiliserá twirled his sword, glanced briefly at the Ranger-insignia, the snake, depicted on the hilt. Then he stabbed, silently.

Now there would be war, he thought.

The Prime Minister yelled, Eidoces twirled and struck with his sword. Swift, merciless, signs that the Aisorbmii could still be strong enough to win.

The stalemate was over, he smiled.

---

Finogiliserá was posthumously disgraced both from the Paladins and the Rangers, and thereafter believed to be a traitor to the Aisorbmii. In his own mind he was a patriot.

Our research concludes that one lone man killed the Prime Minister of Aisorbma. No doubt the conspiracy theories will continue to be told regardless of our findings. But rest assured the conspiracies are still there, in the threads of this tale. The Great War had many other villains.

But only further research will reveal the truth.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The moment comes. It is now inevitable. In a small, unnamed yet historic village in the westernmost reaches of Aisorbma, on the borders of No Man's Land, Duke Tenil gu Srande waits for the other boot to drop.

He wanted war to start. Now it will.

The following account is taken from historical records.

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### Episode Thirteen: the Road to Perdition

Duke Tenil gu Srande held a vigil over his dead wife that night. One of Samfr's colour-men offered his flag – and through it, his regiment's honour – as a burial sheet. Come the morning they would take her body home. For all that they had taken this place, there was a stench of bodies and they had no desire to stay any longer than necessary.

There was a second colour-man, and his flag had been hung on a makeshift flagpole on one of the houses. The wind was still tonight and it did not flutter.

Every so often one of the sentries would pass by, at the beginning or end of a shift, and offer some form of comfort. They had encamped to the north of the village, where the damage was least. Mostly they wanted to avoid the stench of the burned barn at the south-east, where several Paladins had been killed while they tried to wrench the gates open. It appeared that they had been locked shut and barred. Tenil suspected his traitor had been at work long before he gave the call.

Tenil himself occupied the house at the north where the Prime Minister had stayed. The body of the Duchess Cairia iwl Srindra was on the large bed, and he sat on a chair beside it.

At one point during the evening, Tenil paused in his vigil to stretch his legs. It was then that he discovered the parchment.

It was on the floor, presumably dropped when the bugle-call was heard. An envelope was beside it. The envelope had a broken wax seal on it, in bright red.

Tenil knew that shade. He picked them both up and folded the envelope, to piece the seal back together. Two halves of the Royal Crown joined almost seamlessly.

He looked at his hands. They were shaking. He slowly unfolded the parchment and began to read.

To his Honoured Grace the Prime Minister of Aisorbma,

It is my most sincere hope that this message doth find thee in the utmost of good health, and that no untoward incidents hath delayed the Ranger to whom this message wert entrusted, for the times doth alter with each passing day and I fear that war doth loom almost unstoppable upon the horizon.

My beloved Queen and I hath between us spent many hours in contemplation of the various ways and means by which that thing which we all dread, war, might be avoided. Many of the options with which we are presented doth not sit well in our minds, for they contain means and measures unpleasant and unacceptable to both our peoples. Despite this, through great fortune my Queen hath determined two options which may, should luck be on our side, prove acceptable to thee and thine people in our hope of averting war.

Tenil paused in his reading. He was a dabbler in politics; all nobles of the Kingdom were. This was a Royal Document, and its intent had been to stop attacks such as his.

But peace? That made no sense at all! Except...

The concept that the success of this document might have prevented the death of his wife began to slowly tap on the shoulder of his mind.

He steadied himself against a wall, and read on.

The first of these options doth possess a quality of purity which I must applaud heartily, for despite its stark simplicity it will bring to a close all hostilities between our peoples. My Queen believes, and I am in agreement, that the sole requirement would be the cessation of this irrational habit of storing rice pudding for later consumption at lower temperatures.

If this grand gesture on thine part wouldst prove difficult to commence quickly, then a display of non-aggression may prove adequate to the nobility of these fair lands. Many of them have expressed to us their displeasure at being unable to travel freely through the countryside of Aisorbma. There are some tales told to the Royal Court that there is excellent game to be hunted in the southern reaches of thine territories.

It is our feeling that were the nobles more free to explore the land and culture of Aisorbma they might develop a greater respect for its people. In time the people of Aisorbmii could explore further into the Kingdom to learn more of their ancient origin.

Sadly it is also our belief that thou hast little time to consider your options, for I fear the nobility are already conspiring to provoke a response from your people.

Finally, my Queen hath cast a spell to quicken our communication during these times. Should thou utter the word 'Alfonso' a pigeon will speed to you, and will convey thine messages to us.

Tarry well, and good health,

HRH his Majesty the King Arit fre Togr of the Kingdom.

The metaphorical tap on the shoulder struck a metaphorical gold brick against the side of his head.

The parchment fell to the floor. Tenil sat, knees against chest, rocking slightly.

There were words for this; he'd been taught them by one of his tutors. It was called 'What If?'. What if... he'd charged the Prime Minister himself, or forced his wife to stay home, or never conspired with Lord Samfr de Samfr, or never attended that lacrosse match in No Man's Land?

What if the Prime Minister had had chance to respond to this letter?

His tutor said they were the two most devastating words known to mankind.

He was agreeing. He was toppling. He continued to rock.

At some point his hearing began to slowly tap on his shoulder that there was a commotion outside.

Some notion of self defence against metaphorical bricks urged his arms to help him stand, and his feet to carry him out of the house, where the stench of the dead hit him anew.

On the ground in the courtyard was a large Aisorbmian man on his back with blood-crusting hoof-prints on his front, several empty bottles at his side.

Within feet of the body were many others in far gorier condition. The blood was still spilling from some.

His glazed stare glanced east, where a number of sentries were gathered. There was a Paladin on horseback there too. His legs took him to the commotion.

'Duke Tenil,' one of the sentries said, 'this Aisorbmian says his name is Seto... what was it?'

'I am Setovarinesa, of the Minister Cadre of Aisorbma,' announced the Paladin on the horse. 'I bring a message to you.'

'Hmm?' murmured Tenil.

'The Prime Minister of Aisorbma is dead. All his hopes for peace are over. Tell the King... there will be no conversion to his heresy. There will be no quiet invasion. The country of Aisorbma hereby declares war upon the Kingdom, and we will fight you all the way.'

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History records that Duke Tenil gu Srandar ordered a party of five lancers back to the Kingdom with this message. The rest of the riders were to be escort for the deceased.

There were many dead, but none so revered as Duchess Cairra iwl Srandra, and none so tragic as Duke Tenil gu Srandar, who impaled himself upon his own sword at the end of his vigil.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The War was begun. The last great age was over. Night fell on the times. But some things cannot wait.

The following account is taken from historical records.

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#### Episode Fourteen: Rest in Peace

In a clearing in the central west of Aisorbma, several hundred countrymen have gathered around a huge pyre.

Atop it is a dead man, his hands around a sword he never wielded. And he would be proud of that. For thirty years, as a Paladin, a Minister, and finally the Prime Minister, there has been peace.

It is said that a single man can make all the difference. What a shame he might have felt, then, to know that within hours of his death war was declared.

Paladin Bemosolinata, the first traitor, had heard the initial argument about the actions the Ministry should take following his death. Minister Setovarinesa had delivered the victorious argument that war was the most appropriate response to what now totalled two successful raids, several unsuccessful raids, three assassinations and numerous petty attacks in the riots. The Aisorbmii simply had to show they meant business.

Rekowarilara had led the opposing argument, that war was the very thing the Prime Minister sought to avoid and it would be an insult to his memory to take this course of action. He was supported by the Doctor, Medofesipanu, but others did not yet understand Rewowarilara's sudden return to stable mental health, and uncertainty overshadowed all the merits of his perspective.

Both Rewowarilara and Medofesipanu spoke on the Prime Minister's behalf at the funeral, but Bemosolinata did not hear them. He was denied all such privileges. But he could hear the whistle of the arrow which sailed through the air, its point wrapped in oil-soaked cloth and lit. And he heard the great whoomph as the pyre took light.

Bemosolinata spent the day in a cell, his hands chained to the ceiling, awaiting interrogation and then sentencing.

Time passed. Finally, the door opened, and several Aisorbmii entered the cell. Several took guarding positions, and Paladin took a chair at the door. A final Marshal closed the cell behind them, and faced the imprisoned Paladin.

'Yer time has come,' he said, approaching Bemosolinata from the front. Then the Marshal turned and circled Bemosolinata in a clockwise fashion. The prisoner watched him disappear behind his right, then reappear by his left.

Then he stepped in close. 'My name is Marshal Rewowarilara,' he said. 'Remember that.'

Realisation struck Bemosolinata first. The Marshal struck him second, in the waist, winding the prisoner, who tried to double over, but couldn't, because his arms were still attached to the ceiling.

A Marshal... Rewowarilara was a Marshal. Of course he was. He'd been a marshal for years. He'd only been relieved of duty during his madness, unleashed by the sudden severing of the psychic link he'd shared with his now murdered brother.

'You remember me,' said Rewowarilara. 'Good.'

Bemosolinata coughed and nodded, then curled his fingers around the chains and drew himself to his feet. Rewowarilara kicked him in the belly.

'Let's get all the unpleasant explanations out of the way for the court's sake,' he said. 'My name is Rewowarilara. I am a Marshal, and I am twenty-eight years old. I am the half-brother of Paladin Tekowariaura, who was killed protecting the Prime Minister of Aisorbma three weeks ago today.'

'My father possessed a psychic gift, which he passed onto both his sons. We two would have dreams occasionally, which allowed us to see what the other was doing. But we had different mothers, and we also had a different secondary talent. Tek would see visions, such as the one he transmitted to me at the time of his death.

'I can only guess what his vision meant. Only half of it has been revealed. There is a silver lion, leading a pride of lions? – the Prime Minister, leading his forces west. Eagles descending? The nobles. A lion who becomes a silent snake? Finogiliserá. But the rest – the teeth which remain, the grass which grows, and the woman with a sword – of these we have no clue. And outside of my delirium I can no longer see the signs.

'This prophecy and its revelations are – and are becoming – historical record. I inform you of them only to convince you of my brother's talent. Now I seek to convince you of my own. I am a partial telepath. I can glean thoughts. In many interrogations, including the interrogation of Baroness Erica del Erica, I used this talent to read her mind. It is the reason I have been so effective in the past.'

Rekowarilara paused at this, which anti-climaxed his speech. His lips moved, as though he was talking to someone very quietly. He stood, palms crossed in front of his lower torso, moving his mouth.

'Marshal Rewowarilara, are you all right?' asked the Paladin on the chair. The Marshal gave no response.

'Marshal?' asked one of the guards. Bemolinata smiled. The interrogator was going mad... it had humour to it. The guard spoke again: 'Perhaps this wasn't a good idea, sir.'

Rekowarilara held up a hand, fingers spread, to indicate that the guard stayed still. The rest of him hadn't moved, and he was still silently babbling. Bemolinata stood up and grinned. The Paladin looked worried.

The Marshal's lips stopped moving. He tilted his head to one side. 'My apologies,' he said. 'Something just occurred to me. I'll come back to it later.'

'Traitor Bemolinata. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that you attempted to assassinate the Prime Minister. The intent of this interrogation is to discover the exact motives for your actions.'

The Paladin spoke. 'Bemol. Were you present at the Council of Paladins three weeks ago yesterday?'

'I was,' said Bemolinata.

'Were you the man who attempted to assassinate the Prime Minister on that day?'

'No.'

'He was there, but he didn't do it,' said Rewowarilara. 'This much is true.'

'Are we expecting him to lie, Rewowar?' asked the Paladin.

'We're expecting him to tell us whatever will get him in least trouble, Paladin Volonitisegi,' said Rewowarilara. 'And in case he is wondering, yes, I am reading his surface thoughts. When a question is asked his memory will provide the answer before the rest of him can lie.'

'I see,' said Volonitisegi. 'Bemol. You are in allegiance with the Kingdom?'

Several thoughts moved through Bemolinata's mind before he answered, 'No.' He was sweating.

'There's doubt,' said Rewowarilara. 'Are you in allegiance with the King? No, you're not – don't bother answering if you don't want to – a noble house, then? More than one... show me.'

Bemolinata recalled the various nobles' faces even before he tried not to... and he was surprised at the level of detail he could remember.

Rekowarilara seemed to be babbling again, but this time not for long. 'Several of these men have led raids on us. Two of those raids were against the village at the border. That's unusual.

'Your assassination attempt came at a time when you were surrounded by several Paladins. This seems very stupid...'  
Rekowarilara paused again... '...given that you could have betrayed us during the raids... oh.'

The Marshal stepped back. 'Paladin Volonitisegi, please record that Paladin Bemosolinata padlocked the barn before the second raid. Eight Paladins and their horses struggled to escape when the barn was set on fire. None survived, confirmed by their absence at this camp.'

'Duly recorded,' said the Paladin.

'You're just going to trust his word?' shouted Bemosolinata. 'He's mad, he could be accusing me of anything!'

'Your guilt of one crime is already a matter of record, Bemosol, and Marshal Rewowarilara is still the best interrogator we have. Rest assured, he is so attuned to you now that he cannot lie about your thoughts.'

'The betrayal was his idea,' said Rewowarilara. 'Covert, simple, effective. The assassination attempt was not his idea. That came by instruction, afterwards.'

'The bugle?'

'That may have been one trigger. It wasn't immediate, so I suspect there was a second. I would have to delve deeper to find it though...'

'You imply a hypnotic suggestion? Could it explain all Bemosolinata's actions?'

'No, the padlock was betrayal. He knows that. He's shining that like a sun. But the murders... murder, he wasn't the first assassin, that was someone else... that's not him.'

'Is there any other matter we should bring up?'

'Why did you betray the Aisorbmii?' asked Rewowarilara. There was a moment, and the Marshal punched himself in the side of the head. 'He's a closet heathen,' Rewowarilara announced. 'He likes both kinds of rice pudding.'

'The worst kind of heathen,' said Volonitisegi. 'One who pretends to be one of us.'

'Bemosolinata was an informer, sir,' concluded Rewowarilara. 'He was hypnotised into an assassination behaviour, nothing more.'

'He killed eight Paladins, Marshal Rewowar. And he was an informer. I shall therefore sentence him to immediate death. He will be executed by-'

Bemosolinata's hearing disappeared.

Then his vision.

He lost all sense of his body. All he could feel was the voice.

Hello, Bemosolinata, it said. Do not worry. I'm communicating with you from my sanctuary with Rewowarilara. I merely wish to comfort you... as a fellow tool of the Conspirators. They're working behind the scenes, behind everything. All the conspiracies you knew are tools of theirs. They're coming to rule.

Who are you? thought Bemosolinata. What do you mean?

I'm a fellow tool of the Conspirators. I've already served my purpose, and they've already killed me. But I'm back, and they won't expect that. I'm back and I can fight them before it's too late.

And what about me? asked Bemosolinata. If what you say is right, they organised the conspiracy which did this to me. I would never kill the Prime Minister, I wouldn't! Can I fight with you?

No, said the voice, You can't fight. You're going to die for your betrayal. But I want you to know you'll be avenged. I'm going to live again, and I'm going to fight for my country against the Conspirators.

Your country?

The Kingdom.

The Kingdom? Who are you?

Now there's an immodest thought. Your last memory being my name! Well, when you go wherever it is you're going to, tell them what I'm doing. Tell them I'm going to avenge them all. I'm the Marquis Endam ar Berrito, and I'm back from the dead to save all the living!

---

They chopped his head off with a very sharp axe, in case you were curious.

That record is unusual among the records for its impressive explanations of key events, although it raises more questions than it answers. How was the Marquis resurrected? Who were the Conspirators? And if both the Marquis Endam ar Berrito, and the Baroness Erica del Erica, were both resurrected, was she ever reunited with him, her love?

What funny questions we are called upon to research. But the answers will come, let us not fear of that...

Written by Ross O'Brien

Events moved quickly during the Great War. While the Aisorbmii paid their respects to their fallen leader, the lords of the Kingdom sought the leadership of their Royal Sovereign.

The following account is taken from historical records.

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### Episode Fifteen: the Rewards of Patriotism

Within a day of the Declaration of War, the lords assembled at the Royal Palace and awaited the summons of their King. He kept them waiting a while, but granted them an honour of eating rice pudding made by his own hand. Some of them began to worry, saying they should not have forced the King into war. Others stubbornly held to their view that it was their duty to purge the lands of the Aisorbmii, a task passed down through generations. But after several hours unsummoned, they too began to be curious of the King's intentions.

A small servant was finally presented to them, and the Lord Samfr de Samfr summoned from among the Lords to represent them all before the King. Duly Samfr stood and followed the servant, his own aides in tow, leaving the others mystified.

He noticed upon reaching the ballroom that neither throne was occupied. The Queen was absent; the King was stood at a stained-glass window, facing away from Samfr. That was odd, for the King would not be able to see through the coloured pattern, but Lord Samfr de Samfr did not comment on this. He knew etiquette; he would wait for the servant to announce him or otherwise inform his Majesty of his presence. But the servant bowed and left, leaving the Lord and his retinue silently waiting for some prompt or direction.

'Lord Samfr de Samfr,' said the King. It was not an acknowledgement, more the tone one would use to read a report. Samfr remained standing where he was, facing the King. He heard the motion of one his servants misunderstanding the King's tone and stepping forward only to be slapped back by another servant who had understood the tone all too well. 'Aged fifty-one. Husband to Lady Gillian del Freya, father to the ill-fated brave adventurer Tarek ir Teriss.'

There was a pause, perhaps one of respect for the deceased. Samfr noted it as such and cast his eyes around the room. This is the room where Tarek died, wasn't it?

'An organiser of tournaments and gambling arenas. Financier of two champion jousting teams, sponsor for a high-profile archery squad and the lacrosse team known as the Fireballs... also a rather high-profile team at the moment... some interest in moat-jumping, water polo, catwalk showdowns...'

'Your Majesty, if I mightest be permitted to speak,' interrupted Lord Samfr de Samfr. The King did not speak, he merely paused long enough for Samfr's sentence to fit into his own statement. 'Your information is partially incorrect, for mine wife, the Lady Gillian del Freya, is the organiser of catwalk showdowns you speak of.'

'...but not cricket,' resumed the King, reciting in continued monotone and unflavoured speech many details of Samfr's life, 'because it was outlawed fourteen years ago, following the incident where a ball smashed a four-hundred-year-old window and landed in this King's predecessor's pea soup... it is mine understanding that you were the financier of the team which bowled on this noted occasion, Samfr?'

No formal greeting. That worried Lord Samfr de Samfr. That would worry him for a while. 'Yes, Majesty, I was indeed the finance-'

'Wert thou victorious in this final cricket match?'

'No, your Majesty. It is mine recollection that we were defeated.'

'Truly it wast a memorable hit,' said the King. He was still facing away but his voice now carried the impression that he was smiling nostalgically. 'Mine brother and predecessor was speaking unto his guests some bawdy tale he had heard from an informant amongst the librarians, when there is a crashing noise and a splotching noise and suddenly his beard is a most lumpy shade of green.'

'It is mine recollection that the assembled guests did not speak, for the incident could have been considered an insult both upon his sovereignty and the country, and it was he who must dictate the response.

'I recollect that I wanted very much to laugh out loud at the incident, and I would have been the only individual at table with the freedom to do so. But such behaviour on my part would have permitted laughter from the assembled guests and weakened my brother's position, besides which, it was funnier to prolong their discomfort.

'I must admit my fondness for the game of cricket, and my sadness that the game was outlawed immediately afterwards. To my misfortune the laws of the Kingdom do not permit me to resurrect the sport now that my brother is dead, for unless the rule of the law restricts the liberties of the people, no King may countermand that rule if it was made by his immediate predecessor. Such is a tradition of respect for predecessors, and satisfaction of our successors' continued care.

'Do you miss cricket, Samfr?' asked the King.

'Yes, sire, I do.'

'It is a thought of mine that one day, before I meet my end, I should like to step down and watch a cricket match authorised by my successor. What are your thoughts, Samfr?'

Lord Samfr de Samfr wasn't sure what to think. What was the King saying, behind his words? Was he dying? 'It is my immediate thought, sire,' he started, 'that I should be honoured to organise a match for your entertainment, when the unhappy occasion draws near.'

'Green fields, Samfr. Linseed oil. Peace and quiet, and no rain. Is it your thought that you could manage all of these things to the satisfaction of your King?'

'I could, sire.'

'What a shame.'

Lord Samfr de Samfr looked up sharply, unsure of what this comment meant. Then the King turned around. He was not smiling. His expression was grim. Slowly he stepped towards Lord Samfr and his retinue.

'It is such a shame to know that such a man is within my service now, and has been for many years, but had not brought his talents to productive use in recent times.

'Where were you, Lord Samfr de Samfr, three days ago, when war was declared upon our country? Where were you, oh organiser of sporting events, a week ago, when riots threatened to kill hundreds of our people outside the stadium? Where were you, oh manager of peace and quiet, when your son was assassinated for supporting attacks against the Aisorbmii clans?'

'Stand tall, Lord Samfr de Samfr,' ordered the King, his face inches from Samfr's. 'The information of your precise whereabouts and activities during these times is well known to me. In summary, you have conspired to terminate the peace, and now there is war. Do you realise the full enormity of this? All the men you have so skilfully trained to be athletes must now join regiments and fight and die at our commands. All the moneys you have earned through your wagering and house-wins rules must be spent on uniforms and weapons and the wages of men, and through them that money must now feed the wives and children of heroes and cripples and corpses, paying for grain which must soar in value now that there are so few farmers reaping the harvest.'

Lord Samfr de Samfr stepped back, disobeying the direct order of his King to stand tall. But the King turned aside and clapped his hands twice, deliberately. A second door in the throne room opened and three men marched in. They were clad in distastefully functional uniforms, smart but without flourish. The first two wore badges of rank which no noble would fail to recognise.

The King addressed these two men. 'Lord General Manus iw Elbirt, Commander Reglan ar Crestis, may I introduce Lord Samfr de Samfr, one of the several who have provided you with new occupations... for the duration.' They saluted, crisply. Lord Samfr de Samfr, nodded twice in acknowledgement. The the King introduced the third man, reversing the introduction in deference to their ranks. 'Lord Samfr de Samfr, I present to you Halfglint.'

Halfglint nodded. 'The honour is mine,' he said, his voice... peculiar, but not Lord Samfr de Samfr's main concern. He merely stared at Halfglint's weapon - a pole-axe.

'Is it your intention to have me executed, sire?' he asked. 'For I am of noble birth, and there are laws. You cannot-'

'I can,' said the King, 'and I shall. That would be one of those laws my predecessor didn't make, and therefore one I can countermand. But first, I wish you to see something.' The King walked back to the window. Lord Samfr looked at his retinue, who were looking very pale. He did not blame them for being scared, or showing it, now. He was, himself, petrified.

'Come, Samfr.' The King gestured for Samfr to follow, and Samfr did. The Lord General Manus iw Elbirt followed, as did the third man. Commander Reglan ar Crestis busied himself with ushering all other people from the throne room.

The King spoke. 'The court has heard, and it shall be recorded, that the conspirator Lord Samfr de Samfr will be executed by a young man named Halfglint, who has been in my service for a long time as a wood-feller in the Palace grounds. But this is not the whole truth.' He addressed Halfglint. 'Please, tell us again what your name is.'

'My name is Baroness Erica del Erica,' he said, in the voice of the woman deceased.

Lord Samfr barked a laugh. 'This is an absurdity!'

'Such did we think at first, Samfr. But it is true, she has been tested and has satisfied our curiosity. The Baroness is resurrected a male, which would disgust her suitors were they to discover this fact. Suffice to say I trust her, and there are events and prophecies set in motion which will require her presence and assistance.

'Such, however, cannot be said for you.' The King opened the stained-glass window, allowing Lord Samfr to look beyond, out into the territory to the rear of the Palace.

Soldiers.

Cavalrymen.

Dozens of them.

Organised in companies of a hundred.

Dozens of companies.

And among them, among the front lines... a uniform of burgundy. More than that he could not pick out at this height, but he knew... those were his men.

'The Kingdom goeth to war, Lord Samfr de Samfr, and I am ready to fight, as much as I wished for peace. My army is prepared, and I must give some thanks to you for participating in its organisation and assembly, for it is a good skill and thou hast performed admirably. It will really be such a great regret of mine that you shall not be organising a cricket match for me with this great talent you once possessed.'

The King moved away from the window, and addressed the Lord General and the Commander. 'I am informed that two others among the assembled nobles are of sufficient rank to know their crime and face sentencing before me. We will repeat this performance again, for them both. The other conspirators... merely have them killed. I didst grant them a last meal of the holy food, prepared by my own hand... that is all the forgiveness I could grant them, for I will have none but loyal men in my army.'

'I shall not kneel,' protested Lord Samfr de Samfr. 'I shall not kneel before this common tree-feller, regardless of how high ranking a woman he is, and wait for him to chop off my head!'

'I understand,' said the King, who turned away, as did the two leaders.

Baroness Erica del Erica looked at Lord Samfr de Samfr. There was a wicked half-glint in his eyes, and Samfr understood how the tree-feller might have acquired his name. Halfglint reversed the poleaxe, swung the haft around, struck Samfr in the chin with it, and pushed him out through the fifth-storey window.

There was a whistling of air, and a very conclusive collision with the ground.

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And so the conspiracy of the Kingdom was ended, and the armies of the Kingdom were prepared to stand against the Aisorbmii in mortal combat, to fight for their culture, and their rituals, and their people, and their King, as had many generations before them.

But theirs was not to question why, theirs was just to do and die. What more can a soldier give, but his life for his country?

Further research will yield the answers.

Written by Ross O'Brien

In dark times the superstitions return, and people see omens in the stars, in the wind, in the morning brew.

In mere days the Aisorbmian armies would clash with the well-prepared thousands under the Kingdom banner. Two cultures trained almost entirely on war stories would soon discover what stories often hide. That death is terribly final. That the stupid and unlucky die very quickly. And that some mistakes can't be corrected the next time the story is told.

But even in the darkest moments, there are things to make you smile. If you look hard enough...

The following account is taken from contemporary records.

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### Episode Sixteen: Rituals of Preparation

Remolor ir Ati, once named an exile by the Aisorbmii, now named a guest for his recent defection from the Kingdom, stood at the edge of the circle as the ceremony began.

Poloyesirena, the candidate, stood in the centre of the circle, the assembled masses sitting cross-legged around him. Three grey-robed figures wearing hoods over their faces walked silently from the perimeter towards him, surrounding him on three sides.

The first presented him with a tin. The second offered a tin-opener. The candidate took the can-opener and reverently placed it to the tin. The silence was such that the puncturing noise was heard by all. The drawing rattle of metal on metal sounded past the circle, to the satisfaction of the witnesses. Finally the lid was severed and removed, and the tin-opener returned to the profferer. The third of the hooded figures presented the candidate with an elegantly shaped silver spoon.

The candidate accepted this and inserted it into the tin, then levered a dollop of cold rice pudding from it and moved it to his mouth. More than a hundred eyes watched him savour the mouthful before swallowing. The candidate reinserted the spoon into the tin, and repeated the procedure, gradually taking less time per spoonful until the tin was emptied.

The spoon was handed back to the third hooded figure. The tin-holder turned, and the other two did likewise. In unison they walked silently towards the perimeter and beyond. The candidate raised his right hand. 'It is with regret that I accept the position of Prime Minister of Aisorbma. My predecessor was a fine man, and will be dearly missed. I cannot replace him. I can only succeed him. It is my unhappy task, therefore, to-

The candidate keeled over. Most of the witnesses leaned back in shock. One of the nearest and bravest moved to him and tested for a pulse, then for a sign of breathing. But the candidate was dead.

One of the hooded figures had already mounted a fast horse, and had galloped away.

Minister Setovarinesa cursed. A junior Minister, Salomeritova, piped up with, 'Does that mean we 'ave to do all this all over again?' and was met with stern looks.

---

There was a hasty meeting of the Ministry that afternoon in the Town Hall, to choose the next Prime Minister. Galomanisula's Chosen had been Tekowariaura, killed an age ago; Poloyesirena had been his replacement Chosen. It was a rare circumstance, and a bad omen, that the Sword in the Stone should be without a Chosen Wielder, and some said the following night would be a very dark time.

Sunder, more used to the Aisorbmii talking honestly rather than figuratively, laughed out of place and returned to the room he and Remolor shared. Remolor waited until they selected the eldest Minister, Terovaniceti, to be the Prime Minister. Terovaniceti was seventy, and had been an old veteran even when the Long Fight ended. Tonight he would sit vigil over the flame.

Dusk drew on. There were still families travelling to see the new Prime Minister, and young men and women raised on stories of how the war should have ended by proud and regretful fathers gathered to become Marshals or Rangers in the armies. All were recruited: the Aisorbmii needed every soldier they could find.

Paladin Genokefirica led the recruits on an hour run over the hills, and surprisingly most kept pace with the Jantin Captain. Only those armed with the weapons of their fathers would yet carry weapons, however; the armourers were still forging the thousands of swords desperately needed by the forces. The flames of the forges, now operating all day every day, lit up the roads at night, serving a double purpose as a beacon to all wanderers.

Terovaniceti sat vigil over the flame, praying for his armour. Remolor watched him begin, and watched various groups of others enter the Hall to observe also. Tonight would be a sleepless night for many, Remolor knew. Even the mages patrolling the streets was doing very little for the morale of the clans. Well, that wasn't too surprising. Aisorbmii magic was subtler than Kingdom magic, less brutal, less visibly devastating. It also tended to require a harmony of several mages to be used properly. Its effectiveness would therefore depend far more on the strategies of the Aisorbmian armies, and less on the whims of individuals.

He coughed, hastily catching his mouth with his hand to try and lessen the outburst, and walked from the Hall, leaving Terovaniceti to his vigil. He returned to his room, and slowly, shaking, he sat on his bed and leaned onto his side. He rolled onto his back and tried to pull the blanket over himself. Tonight, for the first time since his arrival, he succeeded.

He didn't remember falling asleep, nor did he remember his dreams. When he woke it was sudden, and he saw a bright light. Fire!, he thought.

'Calm yerself, Remolor,' said the soothing voice of Medofesipanu. The Doctor was sat on a stool beside the bed, a lantern at the foot. Sunder was sat up on his own bed, watching apprehensively. Remolor's shirt had been unbuttoned and the Doctor had his hand over Remolor's heart.

'Father, calm thyself down. I hast summoned the physician most hastily for I wast woken several times since the beginnings of my slumber by thine coughing in the night. It seemeth me you still suffer from the night of treachery.'

'Cursed be both their souls!' Remolor spluttered.

'Yer boy was right to call me, Remolor. Yer not well. I think, among other things, that yer long walk to Aisorbma exhausted yer, and yer've not had a chance to recover from it. Not,' Medofesipanu added, 'that I'm not glad yer made it. Last hope of peace, an' all that.'

'Maybe, maybe not, Doctor. I doubt the parchment would have been so generous to the Aisorbmii. But it was worth it, yer right.' Remolor saw Sunder flinch at the slight Aisorbmian accent in the Neutral tongue, and coughed again. 'How long do I have, Doctor?'

'Thou shalt not die!' exclaimed Sunder.

Medofesipanu spoke up. 'I don't want to disappoint yer, son, I really don't. Believe me, I know how hard it is to lose someone close. I lost my daughter only a few weeks ago...' The Doctor's voice faded very suddenly.

'What's wrong, Medo... Medofe...'

'Call me Med, Remolor. I think you've earned a friend in your homeland, and I'd be proud to be that friend.'

'Med?' asked Remolor.

'You have an infection. I think it's the same one my daughter caught. Wouldn't affect most men, but in your state... I don't know how long you have left. Days, maybe hours. Maybe less.'

Remolor closed his eyes for a moment. 'I see.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be, friend Med. I lived my... my life. I married a good woman. I raised a good son. I'm happy.'

'No!' exclaimed Sunder, throwing himself to his father's side.

Remolor spoke again to the Doctor. 'Med... let me speak to my son. It's imp... im...'

'Important. Certainly,' said Med. He left the room, and Remolor didn't see him again.

Remolor spoke in low tones, deliberately so. 'Sunder... Sun. Your arm.' Sunder heard, and held his father's hands with his. 'Your right arm,' said Remolor. Sunder, not understanding, held his right arm out.

'Reveal the blade, Yeonan,' said Remolor. Sunder twisted, as though something had clutched at his arm and was holding it still, but could not move. Nor should he be able to, Remolor thought. Someone was holding it still. This was a precise operation.

Sunder opened his mouth to shout, but could not make a sound. His elbow was reddening rapidly, and dark grey smoke was billowing around it. It cleared quickly, and the red faded, but Sunder did not try to look until his arm was free.

There was a scar above the elbow. It was roughly sword-shaped.

'Find yer name, Sunder pi Yeonan,' said Remolor, his old dialect surfacing again. 'Follow yer destiny. It's imp... im...'

'Important,' finished Sunder, his face red in the lantern-light. Twenty years of scar-pain hidden by the secret spell was being felt in twenty seconds. It would probably hurt for a long while, Remolor thought sadly. Like his chest was hurting. 'Why, Father?'

'Find yer name, son,' said Remolor, who knew more than he could say, but knew more than anything his time was rapidly fading. It would not be hours, he thought. 'Find yer sword.'

His chest ached, and he coughed. He stared at the roof for a moment, sad that he couldn't see the stars tonight. Even more sad he couldn't say any more, and saddest still he wouldn't be there when his son did meet his destiny.

Memory still bright stayed in his mind. He remembered Sunder's birth, and the day the witch had named him 'pi Yeonan', which meant 'the prophesied of Yeonan'. He remembered reading about Yeonan, and the days when the dead would be seen again. He remembered the chill he felt in his bones when at the age of two young Sunder received the scars, criss-crossed, the wild cat scratch just days before the knife falling from the table.

The witch had hidden the scar for him, and taught him how to reveal it. And she'd warned him that such signs came in threes.

He heard the voice of Med, his friend, trying to help him, and his despair. And Sunder's despair. My boy, thought Remolor.

My boy will pull a sword from a stone.

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Very deep... the first real sign of destiny in our tale.

But ours is not to argue the validity of these prophecies. Our research merely leads us to understanding the actions of those who do believe them, and understanding how those actions affect us today.

Much of the mystery of the Great War still remains to be revealed, but rest assured that all questions will be answered in time...

Written by Ross O'Brien

In the east, the Aisorbmii prepare for war. In the west the Kingdom were already marching. Among them, Baroness Erica del Erica, the Resurrected, possessing the body of Halfglint. Since her death and rebirth we have discovered she was angry, and sought the answers behind that which had been done to her. There are many answers, and not all of them are pleasing...

The following account is taken from historical records.

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### Episode Seventeen: Revelations Profound

Lady Mirella zrey Tabitha raised her right hand into the air, signalling the first rest in today's ride. Her second-in-command, Marquis Timit fre Dasain, gently brought his steed to rest beside her. The rest of her Quarter, clad spectacularly in crimson, timed their halt perfectly to remain in formation, for it wouldn't do to look unorganised on the march.

'My Ladyship, I have studied most carefully the inclination of the sun, and it seemeth me we have been riding a mere half hour. Commander Reglan wast most specific that we thoroughly scout the area,' said Timit.

'It seemeth me there is little point in doing so. If thou shalt cast thine gaze at the copse to the north-east, thou shalt see a wonderfully picturesque area which seemeth perfect for a picnic. What sayeth thou, Marquis?'

'Our distance from the Aisorbmii borders ist very small, my Ladyship. Our warriors must remain vigilant while the great armies of our Kingdom descends upon the town of No Man's Land and cleanses it of the heretics.'

Mirella smiled. 'Then our warriors must be vigilant, and must observe our own rights as surety of our triumph. Make a proclamation, dear Marquis, that we shalt make camp for our noon-time meal and give thanks by preparing fresh hot rice pudding in the copse yonder.'

'If thy command is followed thou shalt all die,' said Halfglint, surprising Lady Mirella by appearing suddenly from behind.

'Thou shalt explain thy uncourteous behaviour now or face the most direst of consequences, uncouth labourer,' demanded Mirella.

'The fortress factory of Anilomes is close by, Lady Mirella. It wast ruined barely a month ago by the noble efforts of the Marquis Endam ar Berrito and the Baroness Erica del Erica. It is visible on the eastern horizon, and it seemeth me that it is intact where it shouldst not be so.'

'Aisorbmii!' hissed Timit.

'We must be certain,' confirmed Halfglint, carefully watching Mirella.

Mirella cast a sour gaze on the peasant, then turned to Timit. 'What is the hour, Marquis?'

'In mine estimations the sun shall traverse to its peak within the hour, my Ladyship,' answered Timit.

'Then we shalt ride,' said Mirella. She motioned her heels, moving the horse into a trot. Her Quarter urged their steeds to follow suit. Timit held back for a moment, to take the rear, and indicated to Halfglint that he should follow suit.

'Master Halfglint, I shouldst like to converse with you regarding your purposes in the Quarter of mine Ladyship. Your manner has been naught but rude, and disrupts our efficiency. It wouldst be most helpful to our combined cause for you to comply.'

'Marquis Timit fre Dasain, I shouldst like to pummel this Quarter into the ground with mine bare hands. Thine Ladyship ist a fool and shouldst never have been placed in so high a position of authority within the forces of the Kingdom.'

Timit reached for his sword. 'Hold thine tongue!'

Halfglint gestured. Timit's sword-belt tore apart and fell to the ground. He had to halt to reclaim it.

'Mine tongue shalt speak as it wishes. Thy tongue is as foolish as hers. It ist mine belief that I have not returned merely to play at the whim of other powers, but to be a great power in mine own right. Anilomes wast destroyed. The sacrifice of Endam ar Berrito shalt not be in vain.'

Timit's horse had moved away while he picked up his sword. He ran to catch it, then mounted smoothly. Behind him something growled. 'His sacrifice must be dedicated towards the one kingdom which will rule the land.'

The horse skittered and moved forwards, towards the others in the Quarter, entirely out of Timit's control. He calmed his steed and turned around. Halfglint nudged his horse forwards and began to gallop.

The twenty-five men of Lady Mirella's Quarter pursued. The day grew greyer, clouds casting over the sun. An hour later Halfglint halted. There was a body on the ground. Its head was missing.

Lady Mirella gave the corpse a disdainful expression before addressing the lead rider. 'Thine apparent destination lies a way yonder, Master Halfglint, and mine picnic spot lies all the gloomier for the sun ist hidden and will not be shining gloriously upon the copse I had scouted for mineself. Hast thou an adequate explanation for this sudden interruption of the journey thou wert so insistent we persist in traversing?'

'Endam...' said Halfglint. 'Marquis Endam ar Berrito.'

Twenty-seven pairs of eyes reverently looked at the body in a kinder light. Timit spoke. 'It wast mine belief that the body of this hero was returned to the Kingdom and buried most ceremoniously.'

'Pah!' said Halfglint. 'The body of the Baroness Erica del Erica was buried in a shallow grave north of the Castle, before it was unearthed, its bones stolen, its skull hollowed. The body of Lord Teril gu Srandar was plundered mere days ago from its own grave. The heroes of the Kingdom have been grave-robbed, Timit fre Dasain. There ist a darkness orchestrating dark deeds in this world, and it careth not for the great lives it abuses. Mine task is to find this darkness.'

'Aisorbmii,' said Timit, less certainly than before.

'It shall be seen,' said Halfglint, and he began his journey again. Lady Mirella ordered four of her Quarter to take the body home; any less wouldst leave a unit which could not fit easily in equal-numbered ranks. The remainder followed Halfglint again over the rise, into what had once been woodland, difficult terrain for two heroes on foot, now easy terrain for twenty-three on horseback. The plant life was dead.

In its stead Anilomes was alive. Timit watched, more carefully than before, the expression of Halfglint. His face was paling, if it was possible. Timit suspected some struggle was going on within his mind, though of what nature he could not be sure. Perhaps magical; the growling voice he heard before was Halfglint's voice and yet not... it had lost all the, well, light attractive qualities it had before.

Timit wished he had been born with magical talent, such as telepathy. He felt it might have been useful for advancement.

Anilomes was alive. By now they could hear the machinery working within, machinery which Timit felt certain he recalled hearing was destroyed in the vast explosion. There was definitely something amiss here...

The factory doors opened, and several warriors in full blackened armour stepped out to form two rows. A larger figure followed them and stood at the door, gesturing that they should approach.

'Ar'mais, you are overdue,' he cooed. 'Who have you brought to us?'

Who was Armay, Timit thought. No-one answered the question.

'Mine name ist Lady Mirella zrey Tabitha,' said her Ladyship. Timit could read her fairly well; she was primly presenting herself as a superior, and was annoyed that one of her men had not sounded a bugle and announced her himself.

'Zrey,' said the large figure. "Illegitimate child of? Not a name I would be proud of.'

'Might I have the privilege of your name?' asked Mirella, haughtily.

'My name is Fyendodas, Lady Mirella zrey Tabitha. I shall call some men to tend to yours for the night. N'teuss?' One of the numberless warriors stepped forward, and Fyendodas indicated he should cater for her ladyship.

'Ar'mais, greet me like a brother,' said Fyendodas. This time it was clear to Timit that Halfglint was being addressed, but his ladyship's welfare was his prime concern at this time of- night?

It was suddenly very dark, he noticed.

'Ar'mais is not at home,' said Halfglint. 'On the other hand I have seen enough.'

'Baroness,' said the host. 'Peach! Ar'mais succeeded in bringing you to us. May I speak to him?'

'He's not here,' said the horseman. Timit stared at the peasant lumberjack, not understanding. 'Stay back, fre Dasain,' ordered Halfglint. 'I am leaving.'

'Yes, you are,' said Fyendodas. 'Ar'mais, come forth.'

'Ar'mais, come forth,' chorused the numberless other warriors, including T'neuss, much to Mirella's distress.

'I am here,' growled Halfglint, his voice changed once more. Timit stared at the man, bewildered.

'Don't just stand there, oh fre Dasain,' said Fyendodas. 'You are the servant of your ladyship. Tend to her.'

'Yes,' said Lady Mirella. 'It seemeth me a storm is coming, and quickly. We shouldst make use of this man's hospitality. Thou shalt cook me some of your most excellent rice pudding, Timit.'

'Rice pudding?' said T'Neuss. He drew a knife and threw it at Timit, catching him in the heart. The red uniform's colour deepened considerably in the wet.

'Do not fret,' said Fyendodas, upon seeing the Ladyship's troubled face. 'We shall serve you another meal instead, one you will never have tasted before. I promise you will love it.'

'It seemeth I have no alternatives. Wilt thou allowest mine other men to live?'

'Certainly, if it pleases you. Come in, come in, it will be getting wet.'

'Thou shalt have to tell me of this previously undiscovered nutrition before I will allow any of mine people to taste of it.'

'We shall.' As they entered the factory, Timit fre Dasain collapsed.

'What name does this sustenance come by?'

'Custard,' said Fyendodas.

The invasion of the city of No Man's Land was the first major engagement of the war.

Many hundreds died.

The following accounts are taken from historical records.

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### Episode Eighteen: Regular Passings

Business had been poor in No Man's Land since the riots. Property had been damaged, visiting numbers went down, many surviving residents had fled, and Kingdom nobles had already been in to collect their final incomes and terminate contracts. Even the blind could see the city was doomed.

Silomeniteda had been owner of a tavern near the stadium. Bemoaning his misfortunes he had chosen this day to go for a walk in the plains to the west of the city. He was the first to see the army.

Twenty arrows sailed the air from the leading rank of cavalry. Four hit him in the back and legs. He stumbled and fell. He heard the rumbling of hooves, and then a voice.

'Yer all pay the price in th' end. Ev'ry last one o' yer.'

---

After riding for three days, Arbus iw Canica was eager to fight. It was this trait, rather more than his actual skill, which had lead him to be hand-picked for the lead cavalry unit.

When the first peasant was sighted and killed, Arbus had spat and urged his steed forward, ahead of the others. Arrows cost money. He would kill cleanly and cheaply, with his family sabre.

He was first to enter the high street. Expertly he guided his horse between carts and passers-by. Several blocks in, several guards saw him and shouted orders to stop. Arbus relished the look on their faces as they saw the dozens of riders who followed, swords drawn, arrows flying. Then he arced his sword down and spilled their intestines.

Ahead he saw more guardsmen, looking up at the commotion, and were stunned. A little way past them a fat man in leather leggings and a vest exited an inn and looked up at him. This one did not hesitate. He raised his crossbow and fired.

Arbus pitched from his horse. He reached to his head and felt the feathers on the end of the bolt which was stuck in his skull. Then he blacked out mercifully.

---

Guardsmen Ricataca gu Hildar recovered first, and approached the crossbowman. 'Verily, Rudomal, thou hast saved our lives from the first assailant, but it seemeth me thou dost lack bolts to slay all of them.'

'Yer talkin' too much, Ricataca, get off th' road!' said the fat man, pulling him back into the inn. Ricataca's companion guard followed, and they barred the door. Moments later horses began to stream past the doorway. 'I think the fightin's finally started,' he observed.

'Mine observations of the cavalry forces concur with thy opinions. I wouldst presume to estimate several Companies of Kingdom riders.'

"Ow many?" asked Rudomaliteri.

'At least four,' said the second guardsman, the plainer speaker of the two. 'If mine eyesight and arithmetic are in working order I can count twenty flags from this position. Each company carries five, one per Quarter and one for the whole.'

'I 'ope that's all, but I doubt it,' muttered Rudomaliteri. 'I'm guessin' you two are s'posed to be defendin' the council buildin's?'

'Your statement is indeed true, our procedures are most clear upon this point,' said Ricataca. 'I had however held hopes that No Man's Land wouldst not be a target for attack, since it is populated by many of either country.'

'S'a bit pointless debatin' it all now. Yer'd best be off. Keep speakin' with yer Kingdom speech, they'll hopefully keep yer alive longer. I'll be stayin' put here, defendin' me hoard. Yer knows how low the levels of rice puddin' are about here, since Anilomes blew. Not got much left. I'll cook some fer yer, if we live, and yer can come by again.'

'Thine offer is most gratefully appreciated, Rudomal,' said Ricataca. 'It is mine sincere hope that I might share a meal with you soon. But duty dost call, and its call is most urgent. Until later, mine friend,' he said, as he and his companion left the inn in a lull in the stream of cavalry.

They heard the door barred behind them and were then killed by the Kingdom infantry, who were naturally in pursuit of their lords.

---

Councillor Rech ar Nemidir watched the incoming army in fear. They were being totally indiscriminating as they invaded and killed.

The other councillor, elected by the Aisorbmii of this experimental city, entered the high office. Helofumibola was dressed in his armour, and wearing his sword, just as Rech was, and looked just as rushed in his dressing as Rech suspected he did.

'It seemeth me our employments wilt soon be concluding,' said Rech.

'Mine, certainly. There's no escapin' here. I don' know about yer employment though. They might let yer live.'

'Thine friendship hast been most valuable to me, Helofum.'

'Much appreciated, old friend. I've enjoyed me time here too. But all good things must come to an end.' He drew his sword and advanced.

'What dost thou believe thou art doing?' asked Rech.

'I can't escape, but I can't betray me country either. Yer know too much about the geography of me country, Rech. Me servants are already burnin' any records yer have. Just' leaves you.'

'I didst not foresee this,' said Rech, and he drew his sword and charged.

Helofumibola side-stepped and parried, then turned and lunged. Rech, despite his age, was quick enough to anticipate this and dodge, and he brought his blade back to ready stance as Helofumibola attacked. Several blows were launched, all of which Rech moved to parry, all of which moved aside and then slapped against his blade, beating it aside.

Rech fought to contain his anger, for an angry swordsman would act rashly and lose more quickly, but the Aisorbmian blade was faster than his and he knew he was only reacting to his opponent's blade. Desperately he lunged, but Helofumibola parried.

Rech reached to his neck and touched his own blood. He realised the Aisorbmian had killed him before parrying. It was a desperate manoeuvre, but Rech had accepted Helofumibola had no choice but to try. He watched as his old friend picked up Rech's blade and impaled himself with it, thereby providing Rech with honour while avoiding the otherwise inevitable torture.

They both saluted, and collapsed, and died before the invaders entered the office.

---

Cirolaminana stood in the building opposite the council offices as the Kingdom general, Reglan ar Crestis, entered with his elite. He pointed at the man. 'That's him,' he said. The other Rangers nodded. They all left the room, leaving no trace of their visit.

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The young man Telis de Telis straightened his red cloak, patted down his blue tunic and knocked upon the door of the Councillor's Office. When he was admitted, he found that Commander Reglan ar Crestis was sitting in the Kingdom Councillor's chair, and that the other had already been thrown out the window. There was blood on the floor. He was smiling; Telis guessed this was because the invasion had been as swift as he'd told all the riders it would be. He was a student of history, and had been surprised at the tactic; most historical Kingdom battles involved a lot of time spent manoeuvring and planning, and often came down to battles of attrition. There were usually many casualties. Not here. Telis wondered whether Reglan would be praised for such flouting of tradition.

'Thou hast a message for me, young sir?' asked Reglan, not unkindly. Telis nodded. 'Then I pray thou tellst it to me, for mine time is limited.'

'Our communicating psychics report this message, Commander. Lord General Manus iw Elbirt sends most hearty congratulations of thine speedy success, Commander Reglan,' said the boy. 'It ist his wish that he be informed of thine estimate for entering the lands of the Aisorbmii.'

'Very good. Thou shalt relay the following message to the psychic. Mine estimate shalt be decided upon the next meeting with mine company leaders, who art at this time scouring the city for traitors. It dost not seemeth premature for thine army to invade in the south. We shalt meet and have dinner in the Aisorbmii City of Elders as agreed.'

'Shalt that be all, Commander?' asked Telis.

'It shall, messenger. Relay it speedily,' said Reglan.

Telis bowed deeply, and left the room. There were three sets of stairs to descend before he could leave the building, and he managed to descend one of them. At that point he was grabbed, arms, legs and mouth, and dragged silently to a small room where he was stripped of his clothing and killed.

---

Cirolaminana was the closest fit to the dead messenger's clothing, so he put it on, all except for the cloak. The others moved carefully through the passageways not even their chosen Councillor had known about.

---

The next knock on Commander Reglan's door came ten minutes later, disturbing his ingestion of warm rice pudding, prepared by his own cook. He gestured for one of his men to open the door. The messenger wore a black cloak and a blue tunic, and was therefore of the Company belonging to his Senior Lieutenant, Samot fre Palin.

'I bring a report from the southern quarter,' said the messenger. 'Mine leader states he is making swift progress, but he wished to inform your commandership that he hast made a curious discovery.'

'What details dost thou have for me?' asked Reglan, intrigued.

'We wert aware that the supplies of rice pudding in this place might be low, due to the destruction of the factory at Anilomes,' said the messenger. 'We did not anticipate some form of substitute being distributed in the streets. It is a yellow pudding, always served hot, which is being distributed in similarly coloured tins, Commander. Mine leader wouldst request thine consideration of this mystery.'

'Interesting,' said Reglan. 'I must confess mine ignorance of such a pudding. I shalt come with thou, and investigate.' He stood, and two of the soldiers moved to the door. He and the messenger would walk between, with the remaining two guards behind. They left the office.

Men in green cloaks suddenly appeared before them, and stabbed the lead soldiers. Quickly Reglan drew the messenger with him back into the office. There were grunts and shouts then, too, and he turned to see another two green-cloaked men with crossbows moving out of a space in the wall.

His messenger struck him, and internally he applauded the Aisorbmii's swift counter-tactics before returning the blow. He drew his sword, keeping the messenger between him and the green-cloaks, moving back towards the other exit. There was a whistle, and he shouted, as a bolt appeared in his left arm, which was in the customary fencing position in the air behind his head, and easily visible.

He was not going to give in, however. He lunged, impaling the messenger, who fell. One of the crossbowmen growled and fired.

The Commander died there and then.

---

Cirolaminana grunted. 'I told yer he was meant to stay alive, Dunofet. We needed to question 'im!'

'Sorry, Cirolam,' said the guilty crossbowman.

'Stay still, Cirolam,' said one of the other Rangers. 'We'll sort it. There's still a way ter get information from him.' He turned to Dunofetilipe. 'Be useful. Get ter a psychic, get Kadocasitari summoned ter the City of Elders.' The Ranger disappeared at once into the tunnels.

'We'll still 'ave to carry his body back, tho,' said the Ranger. 'Difficult, but it'll 'ave ter be done now.'

'He... he won't struggle as much,' said Cirolaminana, rapidly aware he had moments left.

'Get out of here,' he told them. 'Go, now. I want to die alone.'

---

Rudomalitari lasted only a few minutes, when twenty soldiers finally broke past the bar in the inn. His hoard lasted perhaps an hour or so, since rice pudding supplies were very low. But the Rangers did escape to Aisorbmii lands.

No Man's Land was the first city to fall in the war, and would not be the last. Reglan's death gave the Aisorbmii more time to prepare their desperately untrained troops for battle.

What remains to be seen is how much use he was to the Aisorbmii as a corpse. Our account of Reglan contains no details of his battle plans, nor when he planned to dine with the Lord General.

Such is the way with research. No one source has all the answers to our queries. All I can do is assure you that that will change in due time.

But until then, the war continues...

Written by Ross O'Brien

No Man's Land fell. War continued.

The following account is taken from historical records.

#### Episode Nineteen: Rising Pressures

At Rene Ponit, the mage closed his eyes and opened his mind to the world. The battle began.

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News of Commander Reglan's disappearance had hit General Manus iw Elbirt hard. Marquis Vitix ar Gerrind could see it in his eyes as he rode. The savour was gone when the Marquis served breakfast, and there was only a semblance of habit, rather than appreciation and praise, when rice pudding was served to him, hot with chocolate sprinkles.

Only a few within the General's army had been permitted to hear of it. All they knew was that No-Man's-Land had been taken and purged, so morale was high. And as far as they were concerned, Commander Reglan was still fighting bravely to the north.

In the south, the Army of the Kingdom had met little resistance, mostly handfuls of Paladins or scouts. Many Paladins charged; some fled. All the scouts fled. Almost all died. Manus insisted one escape, to spread fear among his fellows... 'the Kingdom is coming in their hundreds and thousands, and nothing can stop them'.

Whether or not it worked, none could say. General Manus was employing a brute force approach to scouting; instead of sending one or two men, he would send a whole Quarter or Company. While all students of warfare in the Kingdom knew there were subtleties to battle strategy, Vitix would have to agree this method had merit: instead of risking one or two men to be killed silently by Aisorbmian scouts, leaving the Kingdom army blind, he risked twenty-five or a hundred, making sure that whatever was learned by one stayed learned by the others.

A week of fighting against low resistance initially led Vitix and campfire-mates of his to conclude the Aisorbmii had finally fallen from whatever dark pacts had kept their nation so powerful. Yet Manus would insist they were building up their forces. Vitix respected this judgement, even though he didn't believe it.

On the day an entire Company was massacred, he believed it.

The armies met at the south of the great forest. General Manus iw Elbirt stationed himself on a hill to oversee the battle, accompanied only by his own Quarter. The rest of his Company would be at the forefront of the battle, a dozen other companies of cavalry and infantry beside them.

On a hill to the east, he could see his counterpart, the Prime Minister. He too was accompanied by a bodyguard. Around him several hundred Paladins and Marshals were ready. They were outnumbered, Vitix thought.

Manus signalled to his bugler to sound the charge, but the bugler did not. He stood dumbfounded, as did they all, when the words came over the horizon.

'Theeay jovdahoo star dwell star t' now!'

Somebody asked Vitix what the words meant, then another voice, but when he looked around all the men around him were doing the same, none of them knowing who had said the words. The chatter increased, and Vitix was able to pick out words such as 'What's going on?' and 'Who said that?' and many other variations of these. They overlapped, some of them shouting, all of them sounding like a nearby voice. Someone said, 'Aisorbmii magic.' It began to quieten as they realised the magic used against them.

But silently the Aisorbmii had charged. The bugler remembered his orders and blew the bugle, which promptly thundered through Vitix's head, and apparently many men around him: he clamped his hands over his ears to no effect.

Then the ground moved-

---

Ranger Bitokatiwopa and his unit struck silently and true upon the hill-top. All had been hiding, grass-backed cloaks covering their locations, until the spell was cast by the mages; then they put on the charms which would reduce all noise to background volume, and then they struck.

Somewhere in the distance, to the east, three mages walked forward around the edges of the battlefield, trying to reduce the impact of their spell within the Aisorbmian army.

Archers on both sides fired arrows into horde. Other forces, readying themselves for combat – Bitokatiwopa could hear the picnics being disturbed in the west – were scrambling to find the source of the spell. Somewhere in the west other Rangers were waiting for their own turns to strike.

The General's bodyguard fell, man by man, at a point in full view of the Kingdom army. Bitokatiwopa slew the bugler and caught his bugle, blowing into it as hard as he could. The more the Kingdom army could be disrupted, the greater the advantage of the Aisorbmii, and the greater the glory bestowed by Prime Minister Terovaniceti.

He underestimated High General Manus iw Elbirt's ability to fight, however.

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Prime Minister Terovaniceti observed the Kingdom general fighting on the other hilltop. Blessed with keener senses by one of the mages, the seventy-year-old general watched the Rangers rise up, watched them fight and kill, watched them die. Only the general remained.

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Hundreds of warriors charged into battle. The unskilled, the unlucky... they began to die in their dozens. Many young Aisorbmii men and women, fired by rousing speeches and believing in their own immortality, were surprised to find their lives suddenly torn and then oozing away by blades, by arrows, by fists and rocks. Many young men and women of Kingdom, empowered by righteousness and determined to settle the grudges of a score of generations, were forced to watch – some for instants, others for agonising hours – as their opportunities to right the ancient wrongs was taken from them.

Following in the footsteps, eager for the fray, hundreds more young Aisorbmii men and women and hundreds more young Kingdom men and women charged into the fray.

---

The mage opened his eyes. The Reaper, Kadocasitari, was squatting before him wearing a concerned expression on his face.

'How long have I been gone?' asked Ardosilitidu.

'Two days. Did you find out what it meant?' Kadocasitari asked.

'No. The individual words still make no sense. I consulted spirits from ages past, both those who studied the prophecies and those who made them, and I have no answers. Worse, it has cost me all my remaining days just to return for a little while and tell you of my failure.'

'You have not failed, friend. You have given your life for the cause, as we all must. You explored the ether, when none of us could. Now we can focus elsewhere to find the answers.'

'Theeay jovdacoo star d'will star t' now.' I had hoped to find an answer.'

'Rest, my friend.'

'You will go to the City of Elders, as summoned?'

'Yes.'

'Leave Cafi and Fer here. Cafi must take care of Hopa for me.'

'They will stay anyway. A war is no place for them. And Hopa...'

'Raise her, Kadocas. I do not mind if she believes you are her father, or if she knows she is adopted. All I must ask is that she be loved.' He paused. Whatever time he had left, at least it appeared he had enough time to take care of his affairs. 'I hope Cafi can cope with two babies, instead of one?'

'She's stronger than she looks. I think she'll exceed your expectations, my friend.'

'More than any of us know,' he agreed. 'For the cause, Kadocas. For the cause.'

'For the cause', replied the Reaper. He left, in preparations to depart. He had many things to do before arriving at the City of Elders.

Sat on the aged stones of Rene Ponit, the mage collapsed, exhausted, onto his side and went to sleep.

His passing was by far one of the most peaceful of the age.

---

There is a need within us to belong to something larger than ourselves. Sometimes that something larger is good for us, and sometimes it steers us right, and sometimes it does not.

For most of us it manifests as family. And for many, the mistakes made in our youths drive us to teach our children not to make those mistakes. We are not always successful, and so the human race remains fallible and imperfect.

One mistake, made by the ancestors of both the peoples of the Kingdom and the Aisorbmii, is to allow hate to thrive. And so they fought for generations.

The Reapers sought to learn from the past. They learned to ask questions about their histories, and understand them. Their intent was always to find a way forward: to find answers to present problems, and find methods to prevent future disasters.

Watch Kadocasitari closely. Think of him as a... researcher, if you will.

Through him, and his research, we may yet find the answers we seek.

Written by Ross O'Brien

## Episode Twenty: Reaper's Path

Kadocasitari, the Reaper, brought his steed to a halt at the crest of the hill and looked down into the City of Elders. He dismounted, took hold of his horse's reins, and gently lead it down the hill.

Miles to the west, armies threw themselves into battle. Around the edges of the fray, Aisorbmii mages tried to maintain a perimeter around the Kingdom forces, throwing as many of them as possible into disarray with their siren spell.

They were starting to adapt, however. In order to prevent themselves from going insane, they were charging into battle without battle-cries, without declarations of ancient wrongs about to be made right. An eerie silence fell across the battlefield, occasionally interrupted by a commanding officer delivering critical instructions or a force of Aisorbmii Paladins charging within the perimeter and singing songs at the tops of their lungs.

Songs about cold rice pudding. Something to infuriate every Kingdom soldier on the field, who wouldn't dare respond with songs from his own land without risking deafening all his countrymen.

Kadocasitari smiled. History would like this tactic very much.

Prime Minister Terovaniceti ordered his troupe of over-eager musicians to signal new orders. It wasn't a system which the Paladins were used to, but it demoralised the silenced enemy and it made use of the bards who would otherwise just be watching events from the sidelines. He cast a superior smile at the Kingdom general, who at this time hadn't arranged for some form of sensory enhancement spell, and therefore couldn't see this gesture.

High General Manus iw Elbirt walked down the hill he'd chosen to view the battle from. Terovaniceti watched him converse in whispers with a young woman. He couldn't hear the actual words spoken, and he wasn't in the siren circle.

A helpful young Aisorbmii warrior, who was within the siren circle, did hear the whisper clearly, and would have happily run back to inform his Prime Minister to take cover had he not been disembowelled a few moments later.

Terovaniceti couldn't read lips. But when the woman's hands burst into flame, he reached for the Sword.

Aisorbmii troops all across the battlefield cheered as the Prime Minister held up the Sword in the Stone. Some of them switched songs. Some of the Kingdom troops got angrier and sloppier, and died quicker. Others became more dangerous, and survived.

The sorceress on the High General's hill threw a fireball at the Prime Minister. He swung the Sword in the Stone, which caught the brunt of the attack and cast it back into the far reaches of the Kingdom army. Only when it impacted did the Prime Minister see the sorceress casting more fireballs at points along the perimeter.

Kadocasitari felt for a moment the fear in each mage as the fireball prepared to engulf them, and pulled out before the actual moment of death. He'd faced it before; it was too grisly for his liking.

That and it smelt like bacon.

He strode down the hill, into the City of Elders. He asked directions to the Town Hall, and when he arrived he introduced himself to the Minister Setovarinesa, who instructed a Marshal to escort him to the Ranger House.

'Do you know why I was summoned here?' Kadocasitari asked the Marshal.

'The Rangers captured someb'dy high up in't Kingdom, but he died before we could get 'im 'ere fer interrogation. One of them suggested yer.'

'I see. Which Ranger?'

'I wouldn't know. Don't know 'em all. The Rangers does what they likes.' The Marshal paused in his speech, then added, 'I was wondering, do yer know what's going on at the front lines? The news doesn't come through me anymore.'

Kadocasitari stopped. 'Who wants to know?'

The Marshal realised Kadocasitari had stopped, and did likewise, turning to face the Reaper. 'What d'yer mean?'

'What's your name, Marshal?'

'Rekowarilara.'

'And the ghost in your head? What name does it answer to?'

The Marshal's jaw dropped. 'How'd yer know about that? I've told nobody about 'im. They'd lock me up straightaway!'

'Rest assured I'll tell no-one, Marshal Rekowarilara. But who is the ghost?'

Marquis Endam ar Berrito, sir.

'E's a Kingdom noble. Calls 'imself Endam ar Berrito. Annoying little sprat. Bad enough when I was an interrogator, I'd have their thoughts buzzing round in me head for hours after they'd died, but this... 'e says 'e's been dead for more than a month!'

'And how did you... acquire this ghost?'

'Dunno. I want 'im gone, though, he's driving me demented. Not that I was in the peak of me mental health before he arrived, but at least I was alone in me own mind then.'

The Marshal's eyes lit up for a moment in realisation, and then his brows furrowed in concentration. Kadocasitari closed his eyes and listened to the argument. 'I don't know if I can remove him or not, Marshal. My talent is in listening. I can sense a person who is dying... I can read the mind of a corpse.'

Might I ask how skilled you are, sir?

'Are yer any good?' asked Rekowarilara. Kadocasitari realised the Marshal had learned to find answers to the Marquis's questions, and that this was somehow giving his mind reason to stay in line, healing from whatever mental problems he'd had before.

'Good enough. People die all the time... the good Reapers can be selective of who they see die.' Rekowarilara gave him an odd look, so he added, 'The good ones stay sane. The... unlucky ones stay attached. It unhinges the mind. Even causes some to die with those they read.'

'Might know something of what yer meaning,' said Rekowarilara. 'I felt me brother die. Shook me real hard. Maybe I have some of yer talent?'

'Maybe,' smiled Kadocasitari. He realised he was enjoying the discussion; he rarely got the chance to talk to people, and this new talent with ghosts in living minds was fascinating him. His talents had often driven him away from other people, because to them he was a bad omen: he predicted death. Then the Reapers came for him; they understood that he could merely see further than they could, and had a talent for spotting the grim messenger coming over the horizon. Even with them easy, free conversation was difficult, and using ones abilities to serve was demanded of each of them.

Only Cafi had been so close. She was the exception. Everyone else had shielded themselves from his powers by staying away, following the same line of logic which led people to go indoors if the rain fell, because they would get wet. Shge maintained that if she got wet she would get dry later, and had strayed close to him and his talent without worrying that she would be changed irreparably by him.

She was changed, though; they had been through the first ritual of marriage almost a year ago. But neither regretted it.

'We're almost there,' said Rekowarilara. 'Tell yer what, after this, we'll get us a drink. Maybe a tin of puddin', too. It's good stuff, it always shuts the Marquis up.'

'I don't eat the stuff,' said Kadocasitari. 'But I'd like the drink. The talent makes you thirsty.'

'Aye, it does. All right, here we are. There's a bar down the road there, on the left,' indicated the Marshal. 'Ask fer Rek, that's me.'

Something about the Marshal's name finally clicked in Kadocasitari's mind. 'Wait. Your brother died? Was he Tekowariaura?'

'Yeah. He's me half-brother, really. Died a month ago.'

'I know, I felt him too.' Kadocasitari turned to enter the Ranger House, then turned back for a moment. 'By the way...'

Rek turned, himself on the way to the bar. 'Yes?'

'Not you. Endam. I don't know how to contact your Baroness.'

'He's suitably disappointed at hearing about that,' said Rek.

'He's an idiot,' said Kadocasitari, and entered the House.

Several Rangers were gathered within. He recognised none of them, but two apparently recognised who he was and they brought him into a small chamber where a body lay on the table.

'This is Commander Reglan,' said the lead Ranger.

The Reaper sat near the head of the table and placed his hands on the head of the corpse. 'You're listening?' he asked the lead Ranger.

'I am. We want to know his plans.'

Kadocasitari pushed his fingers to the temples of the corpse's head. He closed his eyes. His speech lost the nuance of tone, becoming a drone. 'Commander Reglan ar Crestis. Appointed by the King. Commands the Second Army. He was ordered to... to...'

'To...?' asked the lead Ranger.

Kadocasitari moved his fingers, concentrating to separate himself from the organised thoughts of the dead man. 'Please,' he instructed the Ranger in full voice, 'only speak when you're spoken to. In this state of mind, noise interferes. Once the memory is accessed, it fades... the information may be lost forever.' He let the importance sink in, then spoke softly. 'You might want to tell all the other Rangers in the corridor to use one of their countless dead sign languages. I need silence, or more may go wrong.'

The lead Ranger bowed, and indicated to his second that the Reaper's instruction be followed. Kadocasitari returned his hands to Reglan's head, and began to drone.

'Commander Reglan ar Crestis... ordered to... to... ordered to take No Man's Land. Purge the city of heretics.' The Reaper could hear the fingers moving in the enclosed space, but could ignore these small things now. He was making progress. 'Then... move east. Invade villages, making camp in Aisorbmii houses. Move around the north of the forest... avoid Anilomes.'

That disrupted his searching for a moment. 'Why avoid Anilomes? It's been destroyed.'

The Rangers communicated their suddenly frantic new understanding of the situation to each other. To Kadocasitari it was like screaming without disturbing anybody else. He probed.

'Attack the City of Elders from the north. High General Manus in Elbirt will attack from the south.' He smiled, but unlike his normal smile it was somehow more toothy, his cheeks slightly more stretched. 'The Commander had arranged to have dinner in the City of Elders in two weeks. With the High General. He wanted to recite a poem or two.' Another disengage; the Reaper blinked a few times and yawned before asking the Rangers, 'When was he killed?'

'Eight days ago,' said one Ranger.

Kadocasitari probed again. 'The next target is Rene Ponit,' he said. 'Take the holy place. Demoralise the Aisorbmii scum. And prevent...' he disengaged. '...what happened last time.'

'The Sword in the Stone,' said one of the Rangers. Kadocasitari's eyes closed, and he swayed.

Several miles west, the siren spell was gone, the circle of mages dead. Terovaniceti watched the Kingdom warriors charging into the fray again, shouting, screaming, chanting their own melodies. The Aisorbmii were holding, for the moment, but their numbers were inferior. They weren't going to hold for long.

Defiantly, the seventy-year-old Prime Minister walked forwards, holding the Sword in the Stone like a talisman. Aisorbmii reinforcements charged forwards to defend him as he advanced into the enemy.

The door suddenly opened, slamming against the wall. Kadocasitari spun around, but the Rangers had moved quicker, and were now holding a young man against the wall.

'I was told that you were the one,' said the young man, his pronunciation of the Middle tongue a little too careful. 'Kadocasitari. You can read his mind.'

'I did,' said the Reaper. 'We've learned the general tactics. I have numbers, strengths, organisational details, supply wagon routes. I must now provide these for the Ministry.'

'You can read his mind about other things,' insisted the young man. 'I just want to know... can you see if he knew anything about someone called Yeonan?'

'No rest, no rest,' muttered Kadocasitari. He moved to the door but the young man shrugged off both Rangers and pushed at the Reaper. Kadocasitari tried to shrug his assailant off in turn but saw the scar on the young man's arm. It was sword-shaped. Curious, he nodded. 'Anything specific?'

'My father told me, on his deathbed, that my name was important. I had to find my name. My name is Sunder pi Yeonan. I'm hoping he was some important figure, someone this general may have read about.'

'He's a commander, not a student of literature,' said Kadocasitari. Then he corrected himself. Reglan wrote poetry, he'd learned this. Perhaps he had studied literature. And what could one more scan hurt? 'All right,' he said.

He sat at the head of the table, indicating that the man, Sunder, be silent. He touched the temples of the corpse, probing, probing... 'Commander Reglan ar... ar... something,' he droned, knowing the name was already fading from memory. 'Yeonan... Yeonan, prophet of Inesa... he wrote about times to come. Sunset, nightfall, darkness... end of days. When the Sword will be drawn from its Stone at Rene Ponit.'

Kadocasitari heard the scratching of skin, and guessed that the young man was scratching around his scar. Nervousness, he thought. No wonder, either... the threads of destiny were drawing together. He disengaged a final time. 'Look for the Book of Inesa,' he said.

Several miles west, a company of Kingdom warriors engulfed the Aisorbmii fighters they were facing and managed to reach the Prime Minister. As one, the company of a hundred piled in.

Kadocasitari shook. He was weakening now, and was thirsty. 'I'm going to the bar,' he said. 'Look for the Book of Inesa, young Sunder,' he reminded the youth. Then he froze.

He was staring through his own eyes. The battle to the west was drawing to a close. Pulled in one too many a direction in the last few hours, he heard the deaths of dozens of Aisorbmii. They were looking for something specific to inspire them before they resumed the battle and saved the day, but it was gone... and suddenly their hope was gone too.

'The Prime Minister is dead,' droned Kadocasitari, feeling things slip away. Cafi... Fer... his duty... the Sword, hope of all Aisorbmii. Fading away... into oblivion, limbo... who knew?

The Rangers around him were surprised at the news the Reaper was speaking. Kadocasitari knew they would not like the rest. He just knew... but it wasn't important now... it was all falling apart... and he was as good as dead...

'The Sword in the Stone has been captured by the Kingdom,' he said.

---

\*sounds of sobbing in the background\*

To Be Continued...

Written by Ross O'Brien

The Second Fall took place merely a couple of weeks after the First. The Aisorbmii army was defeated, its forces scattering into the forests and outlands. Some of the Kingdom forces were despatched by Lord General Manus iw Elbirt to track these rogues down and kill them, in case they began to harass supply lines.

The Aisorbmii not involved in the battle were fortunate in some ways to hear the results early, by way of the Reaper Kadocasitari.

The following account is taken from historical records.

Episode Twenty-One: Retreat and Panic

Ranger Vinofetilipe lay in wait near the wall of the City of Elders, fearing what was to come. The army of the Kingdom army was advancing.

He wished his brother was beside him.

---

A week earlier...

Dunofetilipe turned to Vin, his brother Ranger. 'What do we do now?'

Kadocasitari was sat in the end of the table, staring into space. His announcement, that the Sword in the Stone had been taken, still echoed within the small room in the Ranger House.

'We tell someone,' said the young man – Sunder? – who stood at the door.

'There'll be a panic,' said Vin, his face pale.

'You're right. So we keep it quiet. You Rangers are supposed to be good at quiet. But the Ministers should be told.'

'What about 'im?' asked Dunofetilipe, indicating Kadocasitari. 'We can't all go, 'e might say more.'

Sunder cast a curious gaze at the brothers. 'This is a real shock to you, isn't it?'

Vin turned on him, and struggled to keep his voice down as he spoke. 'Yer the Kingdom messenger boy, 'en't yer? I'm surprised that even a scruff such as you hasn't 'eard of it. The Sword in the Stone 'as been an Aisorbmii treasure for a thousand years. It's been 'eld by all the leaders of the nation. Of course we're shocked!'

Sunder took this in. 'All right. One of you stays. The other comes with me to the Ministers.'

Vin nodded. 'Sounds reas'nable to me. I'll stay here, keep things tight. Dun, go with 'im to the Town Hall. Tell 'em ev'rythin' that 'appened 'ere.'

Dunofetilipe nodded several times, glumly, then bowed his head to his brother and put his hands together. Vin did the same, and they waved the hands briefly like snakes – the sign of the Rangers. Then he gestured to Sunder, and they left the room.

Outside Ranger House they met a Marshal who seemed familiar with Sunder. He introduced himself as Rekowarilara to Dunofetilipe. 'Is Kado- Damn! Fergot 'is name. Odd feller, talent with death. Is 'e still inside?'

'Is body is,' said Dunofetilipe. 'is mind's gone.'

Rekowarilara's shoulders slumped. 'Damn. I'd planned to 'ave a drink an' a tin with 'im. Came back 'ere 'cause the inn's run out of puddin'.'

'I doubt he'd know why,' said Sunder, drily.

'Pillock,' said the Marshal. 'E said he never ate puddin' anyway. Strange feller. Did 'e find out what 'e was supposed to?'

'Yeah,' said the Ranger. 'We're goin' ter tell the Ministry now.' Rekowarilara asked to join them, and the three walked back to the Town Hall.

There weren't many at the Hall. Several Ministers had accompanied Terovaniceti to his assured victory, and they would not return for days. The trio were not greeted immediately; various Ministers were trying to calm various merchants and traders down. Dunofetilipe recognised Minister Salomeritova among them.

Another Minister descended steps from a roof on a higher floor, and looked at them all with recognition, though Dunofetilipe didn't recognise the man at all. It was probably just his green cloak which had been recognised, he supposed. 'You bring word from Ranger House?' he asked, quietly.

'We do. You'd better call the others,' said Dunofetilipe. 'This is serious.'

When the various Ministers were gathered, the Ranger outlined the broad strategy of the Kingdom forces: Commander Reglan's army arriving at the City of Elders from the north in six days, if a new leader could be found; the High General's intention to be at the south gates by the same deadline, and the principle to siege the City before moving to take Rene Ponit. Then Dunofetilipe had taken a deep breath, and turned to Sunder, who seemed far more able to communicate the awful news.

He told them. There was an awful pause. Most paled and shook. One fainted.

One spoke. 'We must confirm this report. Discreetly. If it is not yet true, we must prevent it; if it is true, we must decide carefully how to proceed.'

'Minister Setovarinesa is right,' said another. 'We must know if this catastrophe has actually occurred.'

'I think Minister Setovarinesa is deciding things too quickly for this council,' said Salomeritova. 'What more did Kadocas say?'

'He told me to find a book,' said Sunder. 'With this council's position, I intend to travel back to the Kingdom and seek it out.'

'With all our plans, no doubt,' said Salomeritova. 'Request denied.'

'Why do you want this book?' asked Setovarinesa.

'My father, Remolorirati,' Sunder said, using the Aisorbmii form of his father's name, 'told me on his death-bed to find my own name. My name is Kingdom. The book is Kingdom. There are no books here; all the histories are told by the Ministers, the Teachers. So here, I won't find the answers.'

'What are you looking for?' asked Setovarinesa.

'Does it matter?' asked Salomeritova. Setovarinesa ignored him, and continued to wait for an answer to his question.

'Kingdom names mean things,' said Rekowarilara, slowly, which surprised them all. 'There's a first name, an infix, and another name. The infix tells yer what the second name means. Some of them are trivial. 'De' or 'del' means 'who is called'. 'Ir' or 'irl' means 'is the child of'. 'Ar' means 'was born under the star of'. And Sunder's infix, 'po'-'

'Pi', said Sunder. 'My infix is 'pi'. It means, 'prophesied by.'

'Prophecy said,' stated another Minister, 'that the Sword would be pulled from the Stone in time of greatest darkness. When we thought times were dark thirty years ago, we all rushed to pull the Sword. And though we failed, the war was ended, for a while.'

'But now... war has resumed. We are not prepared. One battle, if what you have said is true, has already been lost, with many casualties, and the Sword has been taken. I think the time is very dark.'

'I hope not,' said Salomeritova. 'If now is our darkest time, and the Sword is pulled out now, who do you think will be in possession of it?'

'Don't treat prophecy too casually,' said Rekowarilara. 'The prophecy of Tekowariaura, my half-brother, is still unfolding. Some things have come true. Some have yet to come true.'

'May I travel to the Kingdom?' asked Sunder. 'If these events are truly fated, we should know what is yet to come.'

'Where do your loyalties lie, Sunder?' asked Setovarinesa.

'With peace,' said Sunder.

'Then go,' said the Minister. 'Rekowar, go with him. You seem to know enough about the Kingdom to get by.' Rekowarilara smiled.

'Wait!' said Salomeritova. 'Marshal Rekowar's loyalties are still unproven! And I think this sudden quest should have more than just your word behind it, Setovar!'

'Marshal Rekowar has interrogated for the Aisorbmii for many years. The death of his brother has not brought with it any treacherous tendencies that have been witnessed. I remind you, young Salomer, this council demands evidence before making a judgement.'

'Send them,' said another Minister. 'For no fault of their own, the Aisorbmii do not trust these two. They have pasts which people worry about. Let them go and be useful away from here.'

There was a consensus among the Ministers, and it was decided. Minister Setovarinesa spoke to Rekowarilara and Sunder in private for a moment, and then they left.

'Is there anything else, Ranger Dunofet?' asked Minister Salomeritova.

'Marshal Rekowarilara wondered, earlier... why are rice puddin' supplies so low? The head of Ranger House also asked me to ask yer about it. What's goin' on?'

'The last from Anilomes was eaten a month ago,' said the Minister. 'Other factories are further away. And two others have been destroyed, as Anilomes was. We have been keeping that news quiet for now, and redistributing the food to just the Paladins. We were also storing large quantities at Rene Ponit, and bringing some to this city quietly, but I think we may have to return it to the sword-mountains now.'

'Is there none for us Rangers?' asked Dunofetilipe. 'We must 'ave some factories left in the west.'

'Acoipat, in the north-west, is still in happy production. The most recent delivery arrived this morning. One of the merchants was arguing that more guards were needed, but... I, faith, we're low on men as it is.'

'We're lower on puddin',' re-affirmed the Ranger. Salomeritova nodded agreement, and walked with Dunofetilipe outside to a covered cart, whereupon the Minister retrieved a small crate containing twenty-four tins.

'What's on this cart is going to Paladin House,' said Minister Salomeritova. 'I'll grant you two of these boxes. Keep your observances to a minimum.'

Dunofetilipe took a tin from the crate, and drew a tin-opener and spoon from a pouch at his belt. 'Me an' me brother'll share this,' he said, carefully opening the tin so that it could be re-sealed. He took a small spoonful. 'Fer the cause,' he uttered, minimally, and ate from the tin.

The taste, long anticipated, was very sweet. But euphoria dissipated rapidly as he realised it wasn't right, and by then it was too late. His throat was burning, his hands began to shudder...

'Doctor!' shouted the Minister, catching Dunofetilipe as he fell.

---

Vinofetilipe remembered Minister Salomeritova coming to him, taking him to a quiet place in Ranger House, and explaining what had happened, but he did not remember the words.

He remembered that the body of Kadocasitari disappeared from Ranger House during his absence from the room, but there was no time to investigate how he had vanished.

He remembered that the rice pudding delivery had not been taken to Paladin House. Instead several doctors had examined it for poison.

Minister Salomeritova's shout had had unfortunate results... curious onlookers had discovered that their rice pudding supplies were suddenly very unreliable... and the proposed defence of the City of Elders became suddenly unrealistic.

En masse, the Aisorbmii had run, just as thirty years earlier. Only now there was no Sword to be a rallying point.

The Paladins escorted as many as they could to Rene Ponit. A small force of Marshals and Rangers, all of them volunteers, occupied the walls of the City of Elders, maintaining the appearance of a defended fortress. Kingdom telepaths were rare; while the defences wouldn't last long, the Kingdom army would not ignore the City.

Vinofetilipe was one volunteer. With the death of his brother, he had no remaining family to mourn for him. If the Aisorbmii were doomed, if there was no-one left... why not be one of the first to go?

The first Company of Outriders came into hearing range. The first of them faltered as the horses' legs fell into rabbit-holes, some real, many artificial. Many were unhorsed; some of the horses' legs were broken, and the cumulative effect of many such cracking sounds was dispiriting to both sides.

The Marshals began to use bows and arrows from the wall, slaying the remaining riders as the Rangers slew the fallen. One Ranger, an impressionist, managed to mimic the noise of a lion in the ears of the crippled herd, and some ran, others failing to follow. The Rangers despatched the horses too, and then disappeared, retrieving arrows and removing any fallen comrades from the battlefield as they did so.

The first skirmish lasted minutes. But then the army arrived.

Vinofetilipe, last of his line, died in the siege, an axe severing his neck.

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Curious viewers may note the prevailing Aisorbmii perspective in these episodes. Sadly historical evidence from the Kingdom perspective was not in surplus until nearer the end of the war.

Others may wonder what happened to the Reaper, or what Setovarinesa discussed with the two questors. To them I can only say... wait and see.

The history of the Great War is our primary goal. While the reasons why and wherefore always come before great events they are mostly revealed in full long afterwards.

Answers are long overdue. Soon, many shall be revealed, as we reveal the research of others.

The dark times continue to approach, viewer, wait and see...

Written by Ross O'Brien

For so long we have talked of the sun setting on the last Great Age, and of the twilight and dusk. For years men have told stories in the dark, around camp-fires. Ghost stories, when things appear to us, and in our minds.

In our records we find one incident where ghosts may be the only explanation. The spirits of Endam ar Berrito and Erica del Erica, which played within the brains of their hosts, can perhaps find no other name. But whatever their name they were important to the age. They scored the first victory against the Dark.

The following account is taken from historical records.

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### Episode Twenty-Two: the Resolve of Psychics

The librarian, Dushkama del Rayma, meditated, focusing within, trying to judge when she was not sensing outwardly anymore.

It was a strange trick, one her late mentor had not lived long enough to teach her properly, but she no longer had a choice. The King wanted to know where the Resurrected Baroness Erica del Erica was, and he wanted results. His normal leniency had been dashed to shards by the war, and so the Palace staff were, in proportion, more stressed.

The intent of the trick was simple enough, once you understood the analogy. An ordinary person sees light, shining from energy sources and reflected off everything around it. In the day the sun is an energy source and the sky has light in abundance, so it is easy to see. In the night, the sun is absent and the human eye must adapt, or use other light sources such as candles. This adaptation is slow; if all the candles in a room were suddenly blown out, the eye would take time to see the little light which might remain.

A telepath, such as herself, felt the minds of people around her, each like a light source. Focusing on one individual would be difficult, especially since she did not know the exact location of the individual, nor did she have line of sight. Some telepaths could roam, but she could not: she needed to gaze. The lights of everyone else she would sense was distracting her search.

If an ordinary person put on a blindfold, they would not see anything. If the blindfold were removed, the eye would be adjusted for low light levels. Any light in the room would be intensified. The telepathic equivalent was to blindfold the mind, focusing within, and then suddenly peeping into the intense glare, hoping the target would become visible.

She peeked.

There were people in the tower, she sensed them first, the King, the two young travellers, servants going about their duties... other psychics, following the Queen's orders, searching for others. Many servants. Many nobles, ready to partition for glorious roles in the war. Many people, farmers, craftsmen, weavers.

Fainter 'lights'. The armies in the distance, the light hazy as more died. But in the forest... darkness.

She closed her eyes, concentrated, took deep breaths, slowed her heart rate. Then she descended into the tower.

The King was sat at his now-usual table, an unfinished meal beside him, various tomes around the table. He was almost asleep, and in the absence of anyone else Dushkama supposed it was her decision to rouse him, so as to let him get a proper night's sleep, or to leave him be, and let him get what rest he could.

'This is the King?' someone said, softly. Dushkama turned, finding the two young men she had sensed earlier, both dressed in travelling clothes.

'This is indeed his Majesty the King Arit fre Togr,' she agreed, also softly. 'It does appear to me that thou seeketh some assistance within this library. Might I be of assistance?'

'We have recently come in need of the Book of Inesa, and thought it might be found upon these shelves, but it has been many years since last I walked within these walls, and I fear mine memory is not as it was,' said the younger of the two.

Dushkama gave him an odd look; she didn't remember seeing him here before. 'Gladly shall I present to thou the text, though I fear you may not borrow it for his Majesty the King has been in intense labour over its wording, and wilt require it when he wakes from his temporary rest.'

'Does there not exist in this library a second copy of this text? It seemeth me odd that a volume of such apparent importance hast never been duplicated,' said the older man.

'Might I have the pleasure of your names, sirs?'

The two men exchanged a glance. 'Mine companion in this quest for knowledge is Sunder pi Yeonan. My own name is Rekow ar Ilara. Might I ask that you return your advantage, together with the answer to mine earlier question?'

'It is my honour to be the Librarian in the Palace, Dushkama del Rayma, and I shall admit an earlier replication of the Book of Inesa doth exist in storage; I shalt write a note that thou might request it from the Stores on the fourth floor.' She carefully did so, requiring a signature from each of them, which they hastened to provide. 'And now I must request thine forgiveness, for the King requires silence and I have tasks to perform.'

The one named Rekow took the note. The other, Sunder, spoke: 'In return for thine assistance in this matter, mayhap we can be of assistance in thine own. Can we help?'

'Only if you possess some capability in the realm of the psychic. I dost search for a ghost hero of the Kingdom, and my efforts have so far been in vain.'

'I have some ability, inherited from my father and his,' said Rekow. 'Who doth thou seek?'

Dushkama hesitated. She had been sworn to secrecy on this entire matter, but she decided that to tell one or two others and be successful would please the King better than telling no-one and failing. 'Baroness Erica del Erica.' Both recognised the name. 'She hast been resurrected by a dark foe, unknown to us except in legends, rumours. Seeking knowledge she infiltrated that foe, travelling to the forest on the border, near her victory at Anilomes. No news has been heard from her since. The King seeks answers in books of ancient lore, while the Queen grows ever more desperate for the lines of her family.'

'It seemeth me thou hast betrayed a great confidence telling us of this news,' said Rekow. 'In its stead I must trust thine conscience with another, which I hope thou shalt keep. Librarian Dushkama, peer into mine mind, and ask a name.'

Bemused, Dushkama did. Greetings, Librarian. I am Endam ar Berrito.

She sat down, immediately. 'Thou art Aisorbmii,' she said.

'Aisorbmii in heart and body. The mind is shared, though I do not know how this came to be,' said Rekow.

'I do,' said the Librarian. 'In thine mind I see a severed link, a connection to another brutally torn away by death. A resurrection spell must have been cast and fallen into disarray, causing the summoned spirit to seek any conduit into life he could. Such a spell would require the blood of a wizard or witch, perhaps the last name on his lips being the name of the Marquis.'

'Marquis?' asked Sunder, not understanding. Rekow shushed him, and Dushkama felt it wiser to choose her words more carefully.

'Wilt thou help?' she asked.

'I will', said Rekow.

The two sat on chairs, facing each other. Dushkama reached her hands forward and touched the temples of the Aisorbmii, and he moved his hands forward to touch her temples.

Rekow. In the spirit I am called Rayma. Are you ready to search?

We are, the voices said.

We are three, she said, altering the traditional mantra to their unique circumstance. We are three.

She felt the power swell, his talent mixing with hers. The lights grew brighter, and together they soared high. Under the thrill of the rush, they touched the clouds, and then looked upon their land, seeing for the first time all the borders, all the coasts, the whole land.

Pretty, said Endam. Down! said Rek.

They descended, the forest swelling around them as they searched for Anilomes in the darkness. To her frustration, Rayma could still not sense the lights.

I cannot sense her, she cried. Nor I, admitted Rek. We are lost.

Erica! cried out the spirit of Endam ar Berrito, into the dark. Erica!

There was light. The three fastened onto it. Catching onto the idea, they shouted in unison, soaring towards the source.

And then they hit.

Now there were five of them. Get out of my head! said Ar'mais, Halfglint, the nightfall. No, said Rek.

Erica? called Rayma, and Endam echoed the question. Endam? replied Erica del Erica.

They all felt the body move, the heart swell, as the two embraced, spirit to spirit. You have lived with this fiend? asked the Baroness. He is devoted to his land, said the Marquis. We have talked.

You have talked, protested Rek. I have lacked sleep.

Get out get out get out of my head!!! cried the nightfall. Take me home, said Erica.

We can, said Rayma. We can bring her home.

I forbid it! screamed the nightfall. Shut up! cheered Endam.

You're an idiot, said Rek, But I agree. We have found her, now we will leave with her.

She stays! cried the nightfall. Is needed!

I thought he wanted us out of his head? asked the idiot.

I'm leaving, insisted Erica, and Rayma felt her power sap a little. Perhaps more.

The nightfall screamed, and mentally they blocked their ears, their power draining as Erica began to glow in the one mind.

And then fade. Room for one more? asked the End of Days.

More! screamed Erica, and she glowed anew. Rayma felt stretched, she could sense it from them all... and then Rek glowed too. Your mind in mine, what was taken restored, what was split is made whole...

Destroy the foul horde! chirped Endam, several years of literature and idiocy adding up into one last line of poetry. The least whole of them all, he faded and vanished.

Rayma too felt the stretch, tearing her from her anchor, trying to separate her completely from her body. If this happened... there would be no more.

But the spell was cast, and the nightfall began to fade. Once he was gone, the mind was Erica's, and the strength to banish the end of days from this place was theirs.

But then she faded, and did not see it.

---

There was a knock at the door, and Lady Mirella zrey Tabitha humbled herself again to open it for the shadow. This time it was Fyendodas himself, which was unusual for the Conspirator Lord usually had others like T'Neuss summon his guests to him.

The last two weeks had been curious. There had been stories of old grudges and atrocities far in excess of any the Lady Mirella could imagine, and had blocked by singing opera in her head, allowing her to ignore the bloody history the Conspirators took pride in their ancestors for. And their insistence on individual rooms, such that she could not even have a handservant in the morning, was ghastly. She imagined the ladies at court would find her recent behaviour dreadful.</I>

He grinned wickedly, though his cheeks were flushed. 'The day has not gone right well. One of my men is dead and gone. She is gone, escaped, as has one of her companions, the ghost Rek. I am not happy. Other plans will have to accelerate.'

She did not understand, but when he grinned the gesture spoke volumes. The terror was real. 'And so, I must find something else to amuse me for a moment. Besides, you know too much and are useless to my cause.'

---

The means of Lady Mirella zrey Tabitha's death is too grisly for my old eyes, and so I must save the reader from her last moments.

Dushkama del Rayma was lost, her spirit destroyed in the battle of the mind. The reader can rest assured that Ar'mais, Halfglint, the nightfall, lost and was destroyed, and that Erica del Erica could now make a home in the mind of a man.

But what of Rekowarilara, Endam ar Berrito, and the Great War... what of the fight against the Conspirators, the battle at Rene Ponit, the Sword in the Stone?

The story is still long in the telling, but rest assured, the answers are coming.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The City of Elders fell within days. The Aisorbmii spent that time well, bringing Rene Ponit to fighting shape as the General Manus iw Elbirt gathered together his army and the army of Commander Reglan and started his march for the fortress.

Meanwhile, in the west, someone made a small effort to bring peace to a loved one.

The following accounts are taken from historical records.

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### Episode Twenty-Three: Rene Ponit

The hunter Terid gu Dagda moved through the woods. He was hungry, and somewhat angry, since the nobles had taken much of his town's harvest to feed their troops, and other nobles were taking far too long transferring surplus supply to the town. The way of the world, he thought, but it was not a fair thing.

He heard a voice in the bushes and he paused, remaining silent. 'What strange fates have befallen you and I, dear Endam,' the feminine voice said. He moved closer, peering between leaves and branches. A man was digging a grave for another man's body; he could not see the woman.

When the grave was dug the man knelt beside the body and held it up into a sitting position. Terid could see it more clearly. It was old... weeks old. And the back of the head was missing. Then the digger kissed the dead face on the lips, and said something softly. Then he reverently picked up the body and placed it in the grave.

Terid rose to get a better look, but the digger turned around. 'Can the fathers not allow a woman one peaceful moment to say goodbye?' he said, in the feminine voice Terid had heard earlier. Then the man said more words, and a smell of fire began.

The blast, and the heat, hit Terid gu Dagda full in the belly, and his body flew back through the woods, where he hit his head on a rock, and did not rise.

---

There were less of them now. Not many. The security around the supply wagons had increased since the Second Fall, so casualties were higher. But the remains of Paladin Legodatiperi's unit were resolute.

Marshal Senodenilapa bobbed his head over the ridge and saw the wagon approaching. He turned and squatted in a circle with the second squad. 'Five,' he whispered. Three or four others in the group backed away, moving to specific positions, and started angling mirrors at pre-defined angles. Then they used simple sign language to alert the other squads to ready their bows.

Senodenilapa's own squad drew their swords. Today it was their turn to charge. 'Now remember, lads. No unnecessary risks. If yer 'as ter pull back, yer pulls back. Yer more important than them wagons. The more o' yer comes back from each the raid, the more of us there are next time. So stay alive, yer got it?' There was a hum of general agreement from the squad; they'd heard it all before. 'Good. That's all I've got ter say.'

They'd heard that before too. It was Senodenilapa's catch-phrase. He'd used it all the time he was at Anilomes, and at the Great Meeting before the War, and every time he spoke since, but he also had a cool head under pressure and he wielded a sword well.

'First squad ready, Sen,' said Farofasigala, putting away his mirror. First squad was the Paladin's squad. Paladin Legodatiperi had been a Defender with the Iron Jantins, and they all looked up to him, now more than ever, because he'd kept them alive this far.

They could hear the chatter of riders now, in the pass. The first squad would make the first move, firing arrows from in front; then the third squad, harassing them from behind. Then the second squad would charge at those who fled in their direction, if any.

Arrows flew. A wave, then a second. A third and fourth, as the archers drew more arrows. A fifth, a sixth, and then Senodenilapa rose and charged. Now the archers would shoot more carefully, lest they hit their own.

The second squad charged down the ridge. Careful arrows had killed a dozen guards in scant seconds, and the survivors drew their swords to counter attack. The lead guard suddenly stopped and fell with a bolt in his forehead. The rest charged into the fray.

Senodenilapa slew one across, the second up, the third in the back. A fourth leapt back from Farofas's sword and caught Senodenilapa with a foul blow in the ribs.

He screamed, 'Aaaaaargh!' but that was all he had to say.

---

Squire Benopelicora lay back and looked at the sky, and the way the Rene mountain range stabbed into it from all sides. The mountains were huge, serene, peaceful... completely oblivious to the ravages of siege warfare which was spilling Companies-worth of blood at the first wall.

Rene Ponit, mountain fortress of the east. It was here that the last war had been ended. It was here that that last war began, a thousand years ago, hordes of exiles forging their new country of Aisorbma beneath this mountain when the mad King had proclaimed cold rice pudding-eaters as outlaws.

It was here that the Aisorbmii had fought won all their great battles. The only reason this time might be different was the Sword in the Stone. The Sword captured by the enemy.

Benopelicora felt himself being lifted and moved to a bed. His heart wasn't racing as much as earlier, when the Kingdom soldiers in their really awful uniforms had started climbing the ladders.

It was exhilarating... more so than that last lacrosse match, months ago... though it lacked the basking in adoration part, sadly... between every moment of striking, killing an enemy direct or watching him fall off the ladder into the spears of those bustling around below below, there was a sweet taste of life.

It seemed so sweet now he couldn't feel the ground beneath his feet. He couldn't feel any part of his right leg, either, since that dagger had landed in it. He'd heard about wounds like this. He hoped he wouldn't lose the leg. Next season he was going to need it.

There was a lot of blood, though. The doctor's hands were covered in it. Someone mentioned the word 'artery', but he didn't know what that meant.

The sky was grey, and the white mountains stabbed into it. Huge mountains, he decided.

How insignificant we are.

---

Milosarituva was on wall two when Genokefirica found him. The siege had paused, since the Kingdom had run out of ladders again and the bodies were impeding their assault. Soon sorcerors would use their magic to remove the bodies, and if they could, use some of their more deadly spells to attack soldiers on the wall. The nobles would take this time to raise morale among the soldiers, reinforcing their belief that the walls would be taken. No-one had yet made it, but the Aisorbmii were taking heavy losses and the Paladins were taking as much rest as was available.

Paladin Genokefirica was the Iron Jamtin Captain. He was the one who'd told everyone else about the deaths of their coach and their winger at the last match. Since the siege started he'd been the one to tell them about all the other deaths.

This time he hadn't said anything, but Milosarituva knew. 'That's seven,' he said.

'I wasn't countin',' said Genokefirica. 'But it's too many, no matter how many it is.'

Milosarituva heard the stress in the Captain's voice and realised then just how much their lives had changed, from players to paladins. Gen seemed suddenly old. The Striker's shoulders slumped, failing to alleviate the tension he felt. 'The walls are holdin',' he offered.

'Great why didn't we 'ave these walls at No Man's Land? Or th' City of Elders? Might've been useful.'

The two men stood quietly for a while. Cool winds blew across them from the north.

'When are yer next fightin' on't wall?' Milosarituva asked.

'I'm standin' on't wall next charge,' Gen said. 'Got me sword blessed by one of the priests a bit ago. Might do a bit more damage. Doubt it'll be as powerful as Setovarinesa's, though.'

'I think he's sittin' the next one out. Don't blame 'im. 'E's fought every fight goin' since we got 'ere.' Milosarituva considered for a moment. 'I think I'll ask ter borrow 'is sword, an' join yer on the wall.'

'I'd like that. Defence needs a bit more team spirit.'

'Oh, in that case I'll ask some of the ladies ter start a cheerleadin' squad.' Milosarituva smiled wanly, and he could see humour in Gen's eyes even if his face didn't show it. Damn, he looked older.

He left the wall, leaving Gen to watch the world go by, and marched along the wall to the tower, where Minister Setovarinesa could usually be found watching the Kingdom forces.

'Benopelicora died today,' the Striker said.

'Him and two hundred others,' said the tired Minister. 'I think there's somewhere over four thousand dead in the last month or two. And no rice pudding to cheer them on their way, either.'

Milosarituva sighed. 'I wasn't countin',' he said. 'I just came ter ask – I heard yer were sittin' the next fight out. May I use yer sword?'

'Yer heard wrong,' said the Minister. 'I'm fightin' the next one, and the one after that. Have to be seen fightin', Milosar. Raises morale. That's what the noble's 'aven't worked out. They're all fine an' dandy makin' speeches about how the fortress will fall, but they don't lead. They just pat 'em on the head, tell 'em ev'rythin's goin' ter be all right, then point 'em at the wall an' sit back. Men need ter be led, fer cryin' out loud.'

'Best keep quiet about that,' said the Striker. 'Don't want 'em ter hear yer, they might try it. But as fer you... Setovar, yer only human. Gen an' I are goin' ter lead the next one. Come to think of it, I'm hopin' there's a couple of Fireballs down there, wantin' a rematch, so's I can tell 'em what for with the sharp end of a good sword. Get some rest, man, an' lend me yer sword.'

'Best not,' said Setovarinesa. 'I think it's only lucky fer me.' Milosarituva was about to argue the point further when there was a cheer in the west. Both men exited the tower and took the rope ladders down to wall one, where they looked out at the enemy.

Several men were carrying the Sword in the Stone towards wall one, moving to a point well in sight of the defenders but well out of range of any attack. The besiegers began to move back to the fortress, the earlier bodies teleported somewhere else.

Someone yelled attack, and fresh ladders started to rise towards the walls. Ropes were quickly tied around the tops, and then pulled sideways as men began to reach the top, but the attackers were picking secure sites for their ladders now and the intended cascade of Kingdom soldiers didn't occur. Instead they proceeded to fight.

Setovarinesa weaved his sword in glittering arcs, slaying several, and he pulled Milosarituva back to point out an activity behind the Kingdom advance.

'They're trying to pull the Sword from the Stone,' he said.

A fresh wave of Kingdom men dressed in blue started over the wall and the two moved straight in. Setovarinesa seemed tireless in battle, and men just fell before him.

Milosarituva wished the Minister hadn't shown him the nobles' tactic, because it was working. If the Kingdom succeeded in pulling the Sword from the Stone... times were truly dark. Perhaps that's what the prophecy intended, he thought.

The middle of a siege was never the place for such complacent thought. The fear would kill you before the enemy would.

But in one distracted moment they arrived at the same time. He collapsed into the dirt and blood and 'That's eight,' before he died.

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Rabit de Turson bowed in proper time, spoke slowly and calmly, in every way befitting the position of messenger. He hoped the detail that he wasn't a messenger would be overlooked, and that he could get on with a more pleasant business of carrying a message or two home.

When he had finished the Lord General Manus iw Elbirt summed up the situation. 'There is a lack of food in the Kingdom, because of food supplies being sent here. And so, after several peasants tried poaching rather than starvation, and have been found dead... there is a revolt.'

'Yes, lord general,' said Rabit. At the General's look he knew he had made a mistake: interrupting.

'I don't recognise you,' said the General, slowly. 'But at the moment, I think we can relax discipline. Get a sword. Join the warriors at the ladders. I think you'll do us more good there.'

Rabit began to protest, but the General drew his sword. 'Go,' he said.

Rabit moved away, without bowing, and then the General moved swiftly towards him and cut him down. 'Definitely not one of mine, and such a waste, too,' said the General. He moved out of Rabit's sight, back to his desk, musing.

'The peasants are revolting.'

---

Rabit was no loss to the Kingdom army, being among other things a dissenter and a coward. The loss of another Iron Jamtin, however, was another blow to Aisorbmii morale. The first wall did not fall that day, but it would not stay held forever.

In the west, the revolt began, and so strife begin in Kingdom territories. Violence spread. As has been noted, people have rarely learned that violence is not the answer.

The King and Queen responded in their own way, as we will explore next time.

Written by Ross O'Brien

At Rene Ponit the Aisorbmii continued to defend the first wall against the Kingdom. As had been observed, the Kingdom forces were divided; the nobles stayed at the back, trying to pull the Sword from the Stone, to inspire the men who actually charged the defences, and keep them from knowing that at home, their families were starving as food supplies were moved.

Would that hunger had merely driven them to protest, to argue, to simply disobey the rule of the sovereign nobles. But no. Some became organised, and the circumstances of the revolt became far more dangerous.

The following accounts are taken from historical records.

#### Episode Twenty-Four: Revolt of the Peasants

Ditups ar Talpa did not consider himself to be a reckless or vainglorious man. When he took his liege's coin and became a soldier of the Kingdom, he had little doubt that dashing heroics, fame and saga would not be the primary outcome.

Not even surviving the war was certain. He was well aware that the majority of his new companions in their flashy new burgundy uniforms might not return to their wives or children. Theirs not to question why, theirs but to do and die, he remembered.

Ditups was in it for the food. The nobles were off to war; they had ordered much of the available food supplies to be transported with the Company, and more behind. The peasants who remained would be rationed as much as those who enlisted, or they would starve as fresh supplies did not arrive quickly enough from the west to replace those taken to the east. This way, Ditups got to eat, and all for following a few orders.

Today all he had to do was walk beside the third wagon - much easier than tilling earth, he thought. There were seven wagons, all sent by the Lady Gillian del Freya. Some had food. Some had tents, to sleep in overnight, and woolly jumpers, in case the men got cold. The one Ditups was walking beside carried a catapult.

So far they had walked for almost day. They had been told it would take perhaps two more weeks to reach Rene Ponit, choosing a route carefully to avoid pirates. They would stop at villages of the Kingdom, resting in the care of their countrymen during the night.

The sunlight was fading as they reached tonight's village. Ahead the villagers had gathered in force to receive them. Some carried torches, to help the riders see to guide the wagons. Some, who shivered, gathered near the torches to stay warm. Some carried their hoes and scythes and shovels, fresh from the fields.

Ditups's eyes rested on a large villager ahead of the convoy. He was tall, muscular, but thin, and his face was pale. He carried a hoe, the metal gleaming in the torchlight.

The villagers charged the wagons, leaping for those with food on. One reached the cloth-wagon and started throwing the jerseys to their cold countrymen.

The motion took Ditups so by surprise that he did not register the first few times he was told to draw his sword and hold them back. When he tried to draw it the scabbard stuck to the blade, and then his sword-belt snapped as he tried to force it clear.

An apple flew through the air, and he caught it in one hand and started to eat it, holding the sword in his right hand, putting himself between villagers and wagons. But several of the villagers swamped him, a shovel beat his sword far to one side and he was clubbed back against the wagon. He blacked out.

---

Marquis Astomus de Getal walked down the corridor towards the Palace dining hall, occasionally discussing with various servants small matters concerning the sudden revolt. Would the King prefer the curtains to be closed during this time? In the absence of apple supplies, would he accept a blackberry pie as part of dessert? Various nobles had requested an audience to find a solution to the problem, were there any details which should be known before assigning palace rooms to them?

When he reached the door he carefully and briefly took a look at the clock on the wall. A few minutes, he decided. He concentrated. Something – he imagined a rock, or some such – was heard to collide against the far corner of the corridor, and various of the servants looked for the source of the sound. Astomus pulled open the door to the dining hall, and suddenly stepped back into a passageway behind the door.

He moved quickly and silently through the passage, passing several small chambers until he came to the one he desired. With practised care he indicated to the scribe that he would take over, and the scribe left his little desk.

The wall here was unduly thin, but only in a few places, sufficient for one to put his ear against and listen in. There were also eye-holes, but the scribes tended not to use them, preferring to allow extra light into the chambers so they could see what they were recording. Astomus had no intention of recording anything; in fact his task was to prevent all recordings of the imminent conversation. He peered through the eye-holes.

There was a nurse in the bedroom, a pretty one, to Astomus's eyes. In the bed was a fair haired man, his face clean-shaven, his eyes closed, his breathing slow. There was a tap at the door, which the nurse answered. She left.

King Arit fre Togr entered the room, a young man beside him. The King sat on a chair beside the bed, and gently shook the arm of the man in the bed. 'Master Rekow, canst thou awaken?'

The man in the bed stirred. Astomus shifted position; he was not used to remaining so still for extended periods. Rekow coughed a bit, and licked his lips, but did not wake, and the King repeated his gentle action, to similar response.

The young man hit Rekow in the shoulder. 'Arrrrr,' said Rekow, 'all right all right, I'm up I'm up. What's the matter with yer? Oooo,' he said, his surroundings coming into focus. 'What's 'appenin?'

'Thou art a guest at the Royal Palace of the Kingdom, my Aisorbmii friend. Mine understanding indicates thou didst risk thyself to determine information we art most desperately seeking. I wouldst hear it from thine lips firsthand.'

'Aaarrr. Sodit,' said Rekow. 'Sunder, who is this?'

Astomus was astounded at the impertinence, but the King smiled. The young man, Sunder, answered earnestly. 'The King, Rek. This is the King. He wants to help us.'

'What makes yer so sure?'

'We're not dead yet.'

'Ah. Prob'ly a good point.' Rekow yawned, sat up, and stretched. 'I couldn't 'ave a cup o' water, could I?'

There was a jug on the table, and the King gestured Sunder to pour some into a glass. Rek accepted the glass and threw it over his own face. 'Now I'm up,' he announced. 'What yer wantin?'

'His Majesty has been investigating the prophesies of Yeonan, like we have,' said Sunder. 'He and I have been looking over the Book of Inesa all week, piecing things together.'

'All week?'

'You've been unconscious since you helped out that librarian girl. She's comatose, by the way.'

'Unggh.' Rek swung the sheets aside, climbed off the bed and poured a glass of water, which he drank. 'All right. Yer've been readin'. What've yer found?'

'Yeonan was born under the star of Inesa. He was a Kingdom philosopher who lived a generation or two after the Aisorbmii split off from the Kingdom, a thousand years ago.'

'The prophet wast a student of history,' said the King. 'He believed that much of it could be applied, for great profit, to the future. Mine tutor when I wast young was also a follower of this discipline. Mine father didst consider him a sound man, if a little rebellious in spirit.'

'Turns out he did a lot,' continued Sunder. 'He sailed to other lands, across the seas, and he recorded what he'd found. He believed some other land out there, some dark place, had sent beings to these islands to change them and rule them. He recalls visions of these places, these peoples, and decided the same thing would happen here.'

'One of his companions was a student of the spells which run through Rene Ponit. He had swords forged there.'

'Tis a powerful place,' said the King. 'As thou mayest be aware, swords blessed there render their users invisible to spells of searching, among other properties.'

'The Sword in the Stone was one of them, the greatest of them,' said Sunder. 'But Yeonan knew, in that time of strife, that its power had to be used against the dark. He locked it into the Stone, and it's been there ever since.'

'I didst order it to be sent here, upon word of its capture,' said the King, 'in order that I mayeth examine it. Mine instruction has apparently been lost, for they persevere in trying to draw it within a mile of thine defences.'

Astomus moved position again. The chamber was dusty. When he returned his eyes to the eyeholes Rekow had swung his legs from the bed, poured himself another glass of water, and this time drunk it. 'Prophecy,' he said. 'There was a prophecy about the sword bein' drawn in a time of darkness. Was that Yeonan's?'

'It seemeth me such a line wast probably an instruction by Yeonan, which hast been corrupted into song over the centuries,' observed the King. 'Mine analysis of his journals indicate he wast most clear-headed, if disbelieved. It still seemeth strange to me that in the face of such disbelief, his journals should have survived the passage of time so as to appear in this library.'

'Fine. Yeonan prepared for battle against some darkness,' Rekow summarised. 'Here's a question, hope yer've got a good answer fer it. What makes yer think this darkness is 'ere? Now?'

'Mine ability to sleep heavily is not what it was,' explained the King. 'Mine Librarian, Dushkama del Rayma, didst speak of a darkness in the forest to me several times.'

'But yer was already lookin' up yer books then,' countered Rekow. 'There's more ter this, in't there?'

'Rek, this is the King,' protested Sunder. 'Try and have a bit more respect, please.'

'No. So far it's all speculation from ancient writings. If I'd known how ter write I could've written a story about bunny rabbits in a dark forest a thousand years ago an' yer might still be 'ere arguin' about it. Now I'm grateful for the help, yer Majesty, and I'm sure Sunder 'as appreciated yer story-tellin'. But there's more to it than dark woods.'

The King looked at Rekow carefully. 'Is Endam still in your mind?'

Rekow seemed shocked. 'Not any more. How'd you know about 'im?'

'In the library, you mentioned a Marquis. I also heard in my slumbers thou babbling in thine trance. It seemeth mine assumption was correct, however, so I mayest continue.'

'Yeonan didst describe, in some detail, the powers these dark creatures have. Manipulation. Disruption. Resurrection. A love of war and death. The histories of mine ancestors and predecessors indicates almost a thousand years of war, followed finally by thirty years of peace.'

'Think, Master Rekow. Two nations trained for war, bred on hatred, now struggle uneasily for peace. After three decades the skills fade, unused, but the rage remains. All that is required is a spark, and two weaker nations will fight to mutual destruction.'

'It wast mine misfortune to know Marquis Endam ar Berrito long before his demise,' said the King. 'He had some renown as a swordsman, as did Baroness Erica del Erica as a witch. I had once considered for him a high position, some advisory capacity to the royal throne. I determined he did not have the wit.'

'He was an idiot,' said Rekow.

'Do not insult the dead,' snapped the King. 'He disappeared shortly after that. Almost a year ago. Suddenly thine fortress factory, Anilomes is destroyed. Endam is revered as the architect of the raid. We have a spark, but my suspicions wert aroused.

'Sadly the fight for peace wast futile then, as conspiracies took opportunities to right ancient wrongs by committing more wrongs. I didst question the Baroness Erica del Erica upon her return. She said merely that the Marquis had uncovered evidence against the Aisorbmii, but this is not difficult. She believed from her capture that your Rangers had magic. She was deceived. Mine Queen and I felt she might be a compromise to the security of the Kingdom – an unwitting agent of the dark. And so she was killed, and later resurrected.'

'Kingdom magic does not influence minds so easily as Aisorbmian magic,' said Sunder. 'The Kingdom did not order the raid. And even if the Aisorbmii conspired to start a war, would they choose a rice pudding factory?'

Rekow nodded. 'This makes sense. An Aisorbmii would start a war by- oh sweet hell.'

'Conspirators from the Kingdom ordered your Prime Minister dead,' said the King. 'I knew it wouldst happen, and sent word to him of several ways that might endeth the war before it began.'

Astomus sat back, thankful he could not be seen, that he shock was not apparent. The King had conspired with the Prime Minister to prevent the war?

His leg had gone to sleep and he rubbed it awake again. He heard a whistling noise, and a \*CRUMP\* kind of noise. The sound reverberated through the chamber. He wondered what it was.

'Strategically these dark forces maketh sound moves,' admired the King. 'They hath caused a war. They organise the assassination of a major leader, then his replacement-'

'Two replacements,' said Sunder. 'Another has probably already been selected.'

Whistle. CRUMP. What was that?

'Quite so,' said the King. 'I can only wonder what will be nex-'

CRUMP.

The ceiling collapsed on poor Astomus, winding him, followed by a huge boulder which tore through the wall and crushed his legs.

'Catapult,' said the King. 'It seemeth me we hadst best move to safety.'

'Most sensible thing I heard all day,' Rekow said.

'The conspiracy of light can continue in the downstairs dining chamber,' said the King. 'I think there is blackberry pie.'

Astomus could feel the floorboards weakening beneath him, and feared they might break, for he might fall through and be crushed for certain. With trembling arms he worked his fingers forward to his legs and probed the damaged area. There was something sticky there.

Where on earth had the peasants got a catapult? he wondered.

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Mitosipilitz was annoyed. For a day his factory of Acoipat had ceased all production, its workers sent home. His protests had been noted, and ignored. When he'd taken affairs into his own hands, he'd been placed under guard by the Paladin Torosanifeya.

Unwilling to let the interlopers continue their investigation unobserved he had remained, and fidgeted. Happily it seemed they were now finishing. Perhaps work could resume. There was rice pudding to be produced.

The chief inspector, a Doctor Medofesipanu, gave him a look which penetrated his eagerness and opened his eyes to gloom.

'There's poisons here,' the Doctor said gravely. 'One's easy to spot. Fast acting. A tin in every fifty, maybe a hundred. The other's more difficult to find, and I think, damn near impossible when consumed. One tin in fifteen has that.'

'Yer can't be serious,' said Mitosipilitz. 'We've been producin' rice puddin' here for centuries. Never had anythin' like this before.'

'Times have changed. I'm deadly serious. This poison killed my daughter,' said Medofesipanu. He turned to the Paladin. 'We'll 'ave to destroy the place, an' probably test the rice fields too. I want the source of this thing'

Torosanifeya nodded, stalked to the end of the factory, and drew his broadsword. He took several hefty swings at the machinery before it broke. When it did he knelt and prayed. The reverence continued to terrify Mitosipilitz – the sheer malicelessness, the necessity of this action.

Both the Doctor and the Paladin apologised before they left. When they were gone Mitosipilitz ran to the destroyed machines and knelt and cried. He grabbed for a sharp shard of metal, the despair so strong he decided he would prefer to take his own life.

How long he deliberated, he would not know. He cried, the sharp metal hovering above his bare wrist.

And then he heard a command, and the wall cracked, and fell outward and apart. A regal woman wearing white, red and gold, leading a Company of riders, entered through the hole and peered at him. Her expression was calm and gentle, and she moved her hand down towards him.

An angel, thought Mitosipilitz, but this first thought was soon dismissed as she held forward a picture. There was the face of a young man in his teens on it.

'Mine name is Queen Srindra del Bou,' she said. 'Hast thou seen mine son?'

'N-n-n-no, ma'am,' said the terrified man. His right hand lowered, the metal pricking his left wrist. He dropped the metal and clamped his right fingers over the cut.

'Ah,' said the Queen. She cast her gaze around, observing the inactive and damaged machinery, the absence of other people. Her expression hardened. 'Fine. Min search will continue elsewhere.'

Mitosipilitz knew the wound would heal, as it was. He had not cut deep enough. But he could see the Queen's next instruction coming.

He clutched at the metal again. A second try, quick.

'This is a squalid place,' she said to her Company. 'Destroy it. And have this unhelpful creature killed.'

The Company leader drew his sword, and advanced.

Blood spilt.

---

The peasants managed to fire a few more boulders before they ran out. They found other objects, but they did not work so well. So their leaders made other plans.

In the east, the first wall of Rene Ponit fell. The casualty rate soared for a few hours, but the second wall was defended far more grimly than the first.

And for us, my dear viewer. The conspiracy of light began in the palace, birthed by a union of minds of different nations, birthed by the answers we so desperately seek.

How would this conspiracy fare, we might ask. Where many questions have been answered, many others remain. But the truth, the full truth, is coming, dear viewer, worry ye not.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The four horsemen are riding.

Thirty years ago, the battle of Rene Ponit ended the thousand-year war between the Kingdom and the Aisorbmii. Thirty years on, the war has resumed, and the battle for Rene Ponit has commenced. The defending Aisorbmii do not have the Sword in the Stone, which saved them last time; every recently chosen Prime Minister – the rightful wielder of the blade – has been killed. Plague has infected their holy food, cold rice pudding. Morale is low, but they fight on.

In the west, delays in Kingdom supply-lines have caused a famine and now a revolt in their lands. Peasant-manned catapults now besiege the Royal Castle. And growing rumours of a darkness spreading from the Forest persist.

Thousands have been killed. But there is hope. The King is assembling a conspiracy of light.

It was almost the end of that Great Age. In a time of great desperation, a time of desperately-needed trust began. A person's word was now of great value.

The following account is taken from historical records.

Episode Twenty-Five: a Reliance on Promises

The passages beneath Rene Ponit were an old secret of the Rangers. Doctor Medofesipanu supposed there were many such secrets, unknown to many Aisorbmii. He was a curious man, given in his retirement years to considering many of the mysteries he had discovered and not solved in his youth, but this was one best left unsolved. So long as the Kingdom did not find them, what did it matter how many there might be?

The tunnel came to an end behind an east-facing secret door between walls three and four of the fortress, out of sight of the incoming army. Medofesipanu took a moment to adjust to the bright daylight, the keener clashes of blades on blades and bones, and the less musky air before following his assigned Ranger up to the Keep beyond wall four.

He took what chances he could get to look west, down at the battles raging at wall two, and beyond at the Sword in the Stone in the Kingdom camp. That wasn't right, Medofesipanu thought. He remembered Galomanisula, the last Prime Minister of Peace, who had comforted his late daughter Lidh. In his possession it had been a symbol, a heritage. Down there it was a desecration.

'Greetings, Doctor,' said the new Prime Minister. Medofesipanu looked upon young Salomeritova and sighed, because he had missed the ceremony. He then reconsidered, for there was no cold rice pudding to be had – all of it being removed, and tested for poisons – and no Sword for him to wield. The position of Prime Minister could only be an honorary one at best.

'Greetings, Prime Minister,' he replied, without congratulation. No point in drawing attention to the hollow title.

'Time is brief, Doctor. Yer all come back in one piece?'

'All alive. All but one returned. Paladin Torosanifeya is visiting settlements near the City of Elders, looking for survivors.'

'And yer tests at Acoipat?'

'Infection. Pestilence. Probable sabotage. I think we'll 'ave to replant the fields... it could take years ter find a cause.'

'Years we don't 'ave. We 'ave a killing ground between walls one and two, and a lot of arrows ter fire into it. But they 'ave the Sword, and I've no doubt they 'ave catapults somewhere. Dunno why we 'aven't seen them as yet, though.'

'And food and men, Minister? How fare we there?'

'We have four or five thousand men, I think. It is tricky to keep an exact head count.' Salomeritova paused when he saw the Doctor's expression. 'Terribly sorry, Doctor, but I've found a little humour keeps me spirits up when times are grim.'

'Yer sense of humour's a bit callous, I think, Minister.'

'I know. That's why I don't share it much; I keep it to myself. But if you want good news, here it is: we'll soon have enough supplies to last us a year if necessary.'

'That is good news. Where are we getting these supplies from?'

'A trader who worked at No Man's Land. Her name is Dremgadona.'

'Not Aisorbmii then.'

'No. But she has promised us ten wagons by the end of today.'

'She will have trouble passing the Kingdom army. They 'ave forces scouting the countryside for Ranger passages. My Ranger... damned if I can remember his name... thought they were preparing for something. They've stopped trying to pull the Sword from the Stone. I don't know what they're expecting.'

'I do,' said Salomeritova. 'There's a psychic on each wall of Rene Ponit. The one on this wall is called Warolanimasa. You may have heard of his sons?'

'Minister?'

'The prophecy-giving Paladin Tekowariaura, and the strange Marshal, Rekowarilara. They both acquired their strong psychic talent from their father.'

'Both men have been very influential on recent events,' observed Medofesipanu calmly. 'If we win, their names will probably be etched in story and saga.'

'I hope not, for their father's sake. He was a peaceful man. He would be known as the Great War, or some such.'

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COUGH!

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Baron Tidor iw Vatenus liked magic tricks. Not magic, itself. Illusion. Sleight of hand. The simple deceptions of getting an audience to look at your left hand while your right hand pulled rabbits through the eyes of needles.

There was much of it going on here. He was sat, as were eleven other nobles, around a large round table in the King's wine cellar, which he had been informed was heavily fortified in case of siege, for the protection of Queens and Princess and other important ladies of state. But there were no women here, that he could tell. Just twelve nobles, the King himself, and three men in the garb of advisors. They could well be peasants, Tidor thought. This place may be less safe than we have been led to believe.

All the nobles had been summoned from their positions within the Royal Castle to attend this meeting. All had been made to say an oath:

Mine oath I swear, mine hand on heart,  
'Gainst darkness wilt mine sword defend.  
Mine oath I bear, till death I part,  
I'll see hope's light rise in the end.

Baron Tidor iw Vatenus knew the game of sleight of hand very well. Someone was trying to pull an elephant through the needle's eye.

They had all read the oath from the parchment, of course; to refuse would have been considered treason. It was unlikely to be a spell, for King Arit fre Togr had never been known to have real magical ability. And now they were to listen as the King made a most unusual conference. He described history from the last thousand years, vague prophecies, ancient

preparations and mystic weapons, and all with the conviction that prophecies were being fulfilled: rising darkness, resurrected heroes, psychic rescues, the coming of heroes with great old swords. It was all a nonsense to the Baron.

He had given them tasks to perform, too. Tidor was instructed to arrange a grand military spectacle north-west of the forest, for nobles in the north who had been left at home to maintain estates while others went to war. Under cover of this he was to arrange for cautious scouting parties to map out the north forest. He was irritated that there was no hunting of revolting peasants involved. Had he been truly focussed on the conference, however, he would have been loudly furious at all this. But he was distracted.

Sleight of hand. Everyone in the room seemed focused on the King's planning, and would be trying to work out exactly why he was not concerned with the war effort. But he was focusing on one of the advisors' hands.

They had been introduced as a psychic, named Rekow ar Ilara, a researcher, named Sunder pi Yeonan, and a labourer named Halfglint. Halfglint's eyes were cold, and his arms and upper body were very muscular, but his manner was somewhat effeminate, and his hand kept moving on top of Rekow's. Rekow had seemed surprised the first time. Now he seemed comfortable with it. His gaze would move to Halfglint's on occasion, and his lips would move a little. Perhaps he was exchanging psychic messages with the labourer, Tidor thought. Who could tell? But the hand movement made Tidor uncomfortable.

'I have finished imparting to each of thou mine knowledge and mine requests for you all,' said the King. 'I trust you can all accomplish them without difficulty, but I have anticipated many questions. This is an open discussion. Please, I would hear your thoughts and queries.'

Marquis Dibon de Fifelech asked the first question. He'd been asked to take a Company around the south of the Forest, near the battleground where Lord General Manus iw Elbirt had captured the infamous Sword in the Stone. He was asking a predictable question of what to do with any Aisorbmii stragglers found near the battleground. The King had asked him to stay on his assigned route, and not to attack. The next few questions were administrative and obvious. Tidor's question was naturally more curiosity-driven. 'What task hast been assigned to thine three advisors, Your Majesty?' he asked.

'Their mission is to retrieve a weapon of power from the east, Baron Tidor. Nothing more than that.'

This was the elephant, Tidor decided. He connected the phrases together: a weapon of power, mystic weapons, the coming of heroes with great old swords. Who could imagine three servants, one of them with apparently deviant sexual tendencies, rising into saga with a blade of legend? No. Tidor iw Vatenus wanted the glory. His best chance to achieve this, really, would be to switch places with Dibon de Fifelech, and command a Company in the south.

'Thine place is in the north, Baron Tidor,' said the King. Tidor recalled the psychic's gaze peering into him, and then at the King, just moments before.

'Mine apologies, mine liege,' he said carefully, 'but let me voice mine thought. Some months ago, when the armies were raised, several nobles like ourselves were gathered at this Castle and slain for treason and conspiracy. Now I find mine person gathered without reason, made to swear an oath, and probed by a telepath. Mine loyalty is with you, Your Majesty. Such measures are unwarranted.'

'Thine presence and oath were voluntary, Baron,' corrected the King, 'but mine apologies for Rekow's behaviour. He hast proven himself to cause of thine oath, and knows what thoughts to sense in a man tainted by the dark. His gaze is needed, especially where he goeth today. Just as thine place is in the north, Tidor. Thy relatives include Duke Tenil gu Srandar and Duchess Cairra iwl Srandra, whose estates were north. Thine bloodline has dictated thine place.'

The conference was dissolved, and the nobles sped to their horses to begin their journeys. Tidor timed his departure to coincide with Dibon's, to discuss once more his place.

He would never recall what choice diplomatic phrase had spilt his anger, and caused him to draw his sword. The trauma of the next few moments would wipe it clear as his mind sought to recover.

For as he stabbed the Marquis, he heard in his voice the words of his own oath: 'Gainst darkness wilt mine sword defend. Mine oath I bear, till death I part.'

Following it, a message in the condemning voice of King Arit fre Togr. 'Oath-breaker.'

The young Baron Tidor iw Vatenus suffered a heart attack in front of his intended victim, there and then. He could not focus, as once he had, on two things at once; the pain around his heart was too much. It increased sharply when the three feet of steel pierced between his ribs.

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Medofesipanu rested for a few hours, then offered his healing hands to wounded men behind wall three. Every so often he would glance west, down towards the Kingdom camp.

At the end of the day a trumpet fanfare sounded, and he left the hospital for a time, and walked to wall four where Warolanimasa stood. 'What can yer see?' he asked the psychic.

'Queen Srindra del Bou,' replied the old one. 'Royalty returned to Rene Ponit.' Warolanimasa then smiled warmly, which surprised Medofesipanu.

'Why are you smiling?' he asked.

'I have an empathic link to my surviving son,' said Warolanimasa. 'I've felt his emptiness and despair, his hope for new acceptance. Now, somehow, he's feeling comradeship, and affection. There's something strange, uncomfortable, about it, but I like to feel it. I hope I'll get the chance to meet her.'

The Doctor nodded. 'It must be nice to have something to smile about, and maybe look forward to.' He then marched further back to the Keep.

When he entered the office, the Prime Minister was talking with a woman. They acknowledged him as he entered. 'There are four thousand six hundred and nine men on the walls, and the Queen has arrived in the Kingdom camp,' he said.

'I see,' replied Salomeritova, rising. 'Doctor, this is Dremgadona, our new supplier. By all means, try some of the food, see what you think. I will be back soon.'

Salomeritova left the room hurriedly. Medofesipanu looked among the supplies: there was fruit and vegetables, and salted meat and spices, oat biscuits and tins. 'Have you brought any rice?' he asked Dremgadona, picking up one of the tins.'

'No rice,' she said. She then indicated the tin. 'That's a dessert we were trying recently in No Man's Land. It's called custard. Would you like some?'

Medofesipanu gripped the tin, and extended his own talent inside of it, analysing what he saw within. 'Very... fluid,' he said. 'There's more here than dessert, too... a few unusual flavourings...'

'You can see into the tin?' Dremgadona asked, surprised. 'It's not poison,' she added hurriedly.

'No,' said the Doctor firmly, slamming the tin on the table. 'It's an antidote to the poisons which have infected our rice pudding supplies these past months. What is the meaning of this?'

'Things are changing, Doctor. Have faith that they are for the better,' she said, darkly. He backed away, but she was younger and faster and blocked the doorway, then closed the door shut. 'I think you are a danger to our plans. Fyendodas would not like you at all. Too inquisitive.'

'Who is Fyendodas?'

'You won't need to know,' she replied. She drew a long knife from her hip, and advanced upon him. 'Keep quiet, Doctor. I have promises to keep.'

Medofesipanu grabbed the tin from the table and threw it at the trader, but she sidestepped it and advanced. He concentrated his talent into himself, preparing himself for hurt and swift healing, but she did not use the knife on him. She cut her own palm, and licked the blood from the wound. Before his eyes, her canine teeth and fingernails elongated, her eyebrows thickened and her pupils thinned to vertical black slits.

She pounced on to him, slamming his spine against the desk and then the floor, and slashed into his chest, and bit his shoulder. Suddenly she racked back in pain, and the Doctor moved his hand forward instinctively to push her off him. He shoved at her breast, and her hand swiped across his throat, raking it and-

He could see his daughter, Lidh. 'Come on, daddy, come and play,' she said happily. He ran to her.

Snap.

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Was Warolanimasa the Great War? Did his years of experience make a Great Age? Well... yes and yes. But not the Great War or Great Age of this series.

Yet what makes a war or an age great? Not the events themselves, but their impact on society. The Aisorbmii and the Kingdom had fought for many generations, led by leaders of far greater charisma and strength; surely the renewal of war, and a continuation of fighting, could not be so significant? No. It is about what happened later, when the next age began.

How does one define when, specifically an age begins. One can't. It's a fuzzy system... it's like asking at what height does a person become tall?

But the real beginnings of the next Age, the current Age, we will cover next episode. For that is when the darkness arose, and the veil of shadow fell.

Keep reading, dear viewer. For the times are changing fast, and there is so much to cover.

Written by Ross O'Brien

This is the end of the last Great Age. This is the beginning of the new age. See now the truth of how it began.

The following account is taken from historical records.

Episode Twenty-Six: the Rise of Powers

'Yer all pay th' price in th' end. Ev'ry last one o' yer.'

Paladin Torosanifeya cleaned his sword on the outrider's hood, hoisted the bag onto his back and walked through the empty streets of the City of Elders. It was strange. There were no sounds of industrious working, no sounds of merchants bawling their wares, no sounds of children running between horse-drawn wagons.

A city of ghosts. Just like him.

He found the deserted Ranger House and entered. Carefully he made his way to the room where Kadocasitari had vanished before the evacuation of the City.

Kadocas's widow, Cafialerasun, sat on the table, holding their four-month-old child Ferokadicafi in her arms. 'Is this the place for a baby?' Torosanifeya asked.

'He's with his mother. Where better for a baby to be?' snapped Cafialera. 'What's in the bag?'

'A witness account from one of the outriders. History continues,' said the Paladin. 'Where did you bury Kad's body?'

'I took it to the Reapers' Cave during the evacuation,' she replied. 'It was buried properly.'

'That's not what I'm annoyed about, Cafialera. You took his body from the guard of the Rangers. The darkness is everywhere and spreading, and the Reapers have been preparing in secret for a thousand years. Why did you risk exposing us all?'

'Do not take that tone with me, Reaper Torosan. You'll upset Fer.' Admonished, Torosanifeya stood back and waited patiently for an answer to his question. At last she spoke.

'History continues. The Reapers learn from the past, they document the present, they write the histories the future will learn from. The Reapers have been learning for more than two thousand years, Tor. What have we learned? People live, and people die. And because people die, they have children to continue their race. But because people live, they want to be remembered.

'For some, especially mothers, it's enough to have a child, and see them grow up. Everything from conception to birth takes such a toll on a woman's life that it makes a difference. But for others, especially men, who are only involved at conception... they don't feel the force of generations moving through them. They have to make their presence on the earth known in other ways. Fighting, hunting. Wars. Statues and monuments.

'But ultimately, people live, and people die. And Kadocas is dead. And I loved him. That matters more than anything the Reapers can accomplish, ever.'

He nodded quietly. 'You're right. The Reapers serve the people, and their lives, not the other way around. But the Reapers go on.'

'I miss him, Torosan.'

'Yes,' Torosanifeya said. He paused, and then approached her, and sat on the table, and put his hand on her near shoulder. He thought she might have leant her head on his shoulder, but she didn't, perhaps because she was rocking Fer gently from side to side. He was an attractive baby, he thought.

Eventually he said, 'We should go. We should not be found here, and we have work to do.'

She nodded. 'What will you be doing?'

'I'm supposed to be carrying messages to villages near here, but I'm going to go and scout Anilomes instead. I want to see my tower.'

'It's not safe there, Torosan.'

'It's not safe anywhere, Cafialera. Someone has to go there, and learn what they can.'

Cafialera considered this for a moment. 'I still think it's very dangerous, but if we can't go into the darkness with an army, then one man has a better chance. Good luck.'

'Thank you,' said Torosanifeya.

'Torosan. I'll tell you now, you've got three days. After that, I'm going to report your disappearance.'

'The Aisorbmii will wonder why I have gone into the forest at this time. They may demand more answers than you can provide.'

'You mean, I may have to tell them something about the Reapers? Is that such a bad thing, Torosan? They need to know what is really happening. The war has clouded their eyes to the real enemy.'

'You will not tell them,' Torosanifeya said, sternly. Cafialera met his stare. 'Fine,' he said. 'Say what you must, but no more. And I will be back in three days, so not a word before then.' He stood, and readied to leave. He left his bag on the floor. 'See that this record reaches the archives. Just in case.'

He left Ranger House without waiting for an answer and quickly left the City of Elders via the main gate. For a few hours he walked towards the Anilomes factory fortress. A full moon appeared in the sky before night set in, but he kept walking, planning to make camp when the moon got higher. He caught a rabbit for his supper, and made a simple spit to cook it on.

And then he was surprised from behind.

When he awoke he was gagged and his wrists were bound, his armour had been removed and he was inside a large room. He was inside the Anilomes fortress, he realised. The walls were surprisingly intact. There was machinery here, some of it familiar, for putting food in tins, some of it less familiar. There was a lot more space here now than when a hundred Aisorbmii workers had made rice pudding in these walls.

There were two black-hooded servants kneeling at a pit, praying in an unknown tongue. There were three other captives nearby, two men and a woman, bound and gagged as he was. Torosanifeya could see no other soldiers.

The great door opened, and four people entered in two pairs, a man and a woman each. The male of the lead pair was immense, and clad in black and bloody crimson. He wore a mask with immense silver teeth. His companion female also wore black, and she was blond and attractive, with thick eyebrows and... long canine teeth. Conspirators! He averted his eyes, but tried to concentrate on their conversation, trying to learn something.

'The Aisorbmii have their first food delivery, including one wagon of custard,' said the woman. 'There was one troublesome wretch, a Doctor with an attitude and some talent. I disposed of him.'

'Good, Dremgadona,' said the silver teeth. 'Ar'gokarn? How is the Kingdom?'

The second woman spoke. 'The famine is widespread. Someone has found a cache of custard at No Man's Land, and it is keeping them alive to revolt against the King. They do not appear to have discovered our subterfuge.'

'They are fools,' sneered the second man. 'Any competent leader would think to check that their orders were being carried out properly by their men. As it is, half their food has been sent to their army at Rene Ponit, and half has been sent to the Aisorbmii defending the same fortress!'

'There will always be fools, T'Neuss,' said the leader. 'So much the better, but we are still pressed for time. I had hoped that the witch Erica del Erica could have been manipulated, and her powers could have strengthened our own. Instead we must perform the Summoning. Soon afterwards we must raise a new defence shield around the Psyopalace, for the veil of shadow will fall. Look! The moon is rising; we have little time. Take your places.'

The four moved apart, each to one of the captives. The leader moved to the girl. The one called T'Neuss moved to Torosanifeya, and kicked him in the side. The Paladin-Reaper rolled to his back, and the Conspirator kicked him again, then again, until he rolled over. Torosanifeya tried to steady himself with his legs, so he wouldn't move any nearer to the pit, but T'Neuss continued to kick, and his legs gave way to the sharp toecaps.

The hooded servants stood and chanted. 'Theey jovdaccoo star d'will star t' now!' Torosanifeya recognised the chant; it had accompanied any great Aisorbmian magic performed in the past few months. None of the mages had understood what it meant; there were no stars named 'Jovdaccoo' or 'D'will'. But then no-one, not even among the Reapers, had thought the Conspirators had this much influence over the magic.

T'Neuss drew a knife, and cut Torosanifeya's shirt from his upper body. He paused, smelling the Paladin. He muttered a word to the leader: 'Reaper.'

The leader nodded, then carried the girl to the two servants, who held her by her shoulders and feet. The leader then drew his own knife and cut her end to end. The blood spilled into the pit. The leader then approached Torosanifeya.

'Reaper, Reaper,' he said, inhaling, seeking the same scent T'Neuss had found. He smiled in the moment of discovery. 'There is a scent on Reapers. The scent of knowledge. I am pleased... the sacrifice will be complete. Watch and learn, Reaper. Your knowledge will do your kind no good.'

'From the land of the Kingdom!' he roared, dragging Dremgadona's captive towards the pit. He took his bloodied knife and dug into the man's chest, listening in glee to the muffled scream desperately seeking escape from the dying captive's mouth. The leader reached his hand inside, and ripped out the heart, throwing it into the pit.

Black smoke gushed from the hole, smothering the girl-corpse, and billowing towards the captive. His gagged was removed, and he tried to scream with the moments left to him. The smoke entered his mouth, and he screamed afresh...

The leader now moved to Ar'gokarn's captive, who squirmed far more now. 'From the land of Aisorbmia!' roared the leader, again dragging the captive forward and viciously retrieving the heart. It too was thrown into the pit. Black smoke issued forth as before.

The leader moved to Torosanifeya and lifted his head so he could see the first captive. 'Learn,' he hissed. The muscles in the captive's arms and legs were rippling, swelling. The skin around the gaping hole in his chest was stretching, sealing over the wound, and then stretching forwards. A grotesque face emerged, and Torosanifeya could see the rib-bones now angled as teeth.

The beast grew in stature, the demonic face of the beast grinning and drooling, and useless human head above it. There were ripples around the neck between the two heads, and then the human head fell off, hitting the floor with a crack.

Dremgadona took the head to the window and threw it outside. What remained was a giant, ten feet tall, its immense arms ending with long raking claws, two columns of bony spikes jutting from its back on either side of its spine, coming to a point just behind the beast's head. Its legs were long and muscular.

'The first Beast,' said the leader. 'I will send it to the Kingdom, to destroy the Royal castle, to slay the King, and his Queen, and his Prince. The second Beast' - the leader indicated the now-transforming second captive - 'I will send to the Aisorbmii at Rene Ponit, to slaughter what remains of their defences.'

The leader grinned. 'You I will send to the Reaper's Cave. You know where that is, and so shall the Beast you will become.'

Torosanifeya struggled futilely as the leader dragged him forwards. 'From the caves of the Reapers!' he roared, cutting in with the bloody knife. Agony soared over Torosanifeya then, and he screamed, fighting to keep his eyes open. The gag was removed and he could hear his own yells, and feel the impending change.

'Praise be, Fyendodas!' said T'Neuss, Dremgadona, and Ar'gokarn. They all stood tall now, all strong. The spells had made them grow too. 'Theeay jovdaco star d'will star t' now!'

'Yes. From this day forth we are no longer merely Conspirators. We are Blood Lords!' boomed the leader, Fyendodas, the Terrible. He then repeated the syllables of their chant, separating the sounds into new words which became far too clear to the soon-dead Paladin-Reaper. 'The Age of the Custard will start Now!'

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The threads interweave. The famine of the Kingdom; the plague of the Aisorbmii; the Great War; the multitude of deaths. And now the Rise of the Blood Lords' Power.

The Age of the Rice Pudding ended, at great cost. The Age of the Custard began, also at great cost. And some prices are yet to be paid.

But hope remains. The Sword in the Stone remains, awaiting the One who shall draw it forth.

There is still time. There is still hope. Keep watching, dear viewer.

Written by Ross O'Brien

Some of our sources provide short accounts, and others provide long accounts. This is another long account, I'm afraid, but rest assured we haven't much further to go. The Great Duel, the climax of this history, isn't far away.

But let's see. We can't rush these things. Last time we discovered the Beasts, and their origins under the full moon. The first one went to the Kingdom, as Fyendodas said, and the last would seek out the Reapers. But our research lends more importance to the second one, which was to go hunting in Aisorbmii.

The following account is taken from historical records, beginning the night before that foul full moon.

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## Episode Twenty-Seven: Ride of the Patriots

Paladin Legodatiperi had been watching the moon as daylight began to fade. His band were bantering away, telling old stories around the fires to keep themselves entertained and warm. Legodatiperi hadn't known any of them when he took charge of the unit; now he knew all of them well. Every one of them was on familial-name terms, a small enough thing to earn for surviving so long.

Personally, he'd lost count of the number of days since the Second Fall, though that didn't seem to matter. It didn't feel like a war any more, not here, anyway. There was miles of wild countryside all around, except for a small village a few miles away which the Kingdom army had missed. Someone would always have to stay alert near the pass, but they had started running around, racing, playing games. There was an idea at one point of putting together two lacrosse teams, and to Legodatiperi that idea seemed grand.

Word had reached them of the fall of the City of Elders, and the struggles at Rene Ponit. They had been told to stay put: they were performing a useful task, and the resources needed to bring them back to defend Rene Ponit weren't available. So they kept harrying supply troops. There were only eighteen of them left now, not enough for the three squads of earlier tactics, but enough to fight the few troops which attempt to pass.

There was a whistle from the ridge, and Legodatiperi rose swiftly. Far, the Ranger, was on watch, because his eyes were keener, and so he took the sunset shift when the sun could make watching difficult. 'How many, Far?' he called.

'Full Company, Leg. Cavalry,' Far replied. That was a hundred warriors, Legodatiperi thought. Their element of surprise – such as it was, given the number of raids they'd made – and their knowledge of the land would not contest five-to-one numbers. 'Scatter plan?' the Ranger suggested.

They'd had plenty of time to anticipate larger infantry forces sent to reinforce the Kingdom army at the mountain fortress, and had come up with several ideas. Scatter plan involved firing arrows, scoring what casualties they could, and running like hell, scattering to try and minimise their own casualties. It would probably still end their band, but the ten archers could probably kill ten men instantly and thirty more before they got up the rise. They might double that against cavalry, who would have to ride around, but then they would be killed by pursuit. It would be the end of the band.

They could let this group go, of course. The horses wouldn't be much use at Rene Ponit, though a hundred men would. Rene Ponit was more defensible. This ridge was not. Fight the battles you can win, Legodatiperi thought.

'Wait,' said Legodatiperi. 'Get th' lads up, but we'll see what they do first. They might be after us,' he added.

He started to be worried when the Company stopped a distance beyond the range of the archers' bows. They were being cautious, they were planning to spread out around the pass. Scatter, he thought.

Then the Company moved north, off the road, away from the pass, towards the forest.

'Ave they given up?' asked Tid. Legodatiperi shushed him swiftly. He didn't know what they were doing.

'Three,' he said. Far looked up, surprised he hadn't seen them himself. Three riders who had probably been with the Company were entering the pass. How strange.

'Now?' asked Tid. Legodatiperi shushed him again, then-

A bearded face suddenly appeared in his mind and he jumped, startled, and fell down the ridge. <I>Whoops</I>, said the face. Didn't mean ter startle yer. I'm Rekowarilara. We're Aisorbmii. Don't shoot, he said.

'Don't shoot,' Legodatiperi said, then a bit louder, to the startled few still at the top of the ridge. 'Don't shoot.'

Cus helped him up, and he walked up the ridge and ambled down the other side. The three riders stopped and the cloaked leader dismounted. It was clearly Rekowarilara, he recognised the former Marshal clearly from the funeral of Prime Minister Galomanisula. Rekowarilara ran forward and embraced the Paladin.

'Call me Rek,' he invited swiftly, as his companion riders dismounted. 'This is Sunder,' he said, introducing the first, a young bearded man wearing a fairly elaborate Kingdom uniform, black sash over black jerkin, silver trim, blue buttons. Legodatiperi now saw that Rek was wearing the same uniform beneath his cloak.

The last rider appeared to be having trouble dismounting. He was small, cloaked and hooded, hid his face and said nothing. Cus stepped forward but Rek stepped in. 'No offence, lad. She's wary of people she doesn't know, at t'moment.'

'She?' asked Far.

'Best not t' ask questions,' Rek said, 'since yer not getting' any answers.' He looked west suddenly, and watched the sun set. 'Yer got tents?' he asked hopefully.

---

The village was three miles or so south. Rek and the hooded companion stayed apart, leading their horses on either side of them. Legodatiperi looked at them occasionally; they seemed close, though Rek occasionally looked at the moon with a worried expression on his face. After a while the men ignored the pair; if the companion was female, then she seemed secure with Rek; if male, it wasn't for them to say anything. Some men preferred men. What could be said?

Far remained near the pass for an hour, watching in case the Company moved again. Cus had ridden ahead with Sunder's horse, to let the villagers know they had more guests. Meantime, Sunder made himself friendly with the band. He talked about the Company, briefly: they were led by a Dibon de Fifelech, and they were scouting the Forest, preparing for an attack there. An attack from what, however, he wouldn't specify. Certainly the band hadn't heard of any other Aisorbmii movements near here.

He was friendly, anyway, and talked about his father, and old sports, and stories from his home, wherever that was. Legodatiperi watched the three carefully; they had been with the Kingdom Company and they were holding something important back, so he wasn't going to take them at face value here.

Rek and Sunder acted swiftly when they got to the village. Upon being offered a house to stay in they took the saddlebags off the horses and led their companion inside quickly. Sunder then posted himself at the door, effectively standing guard, but happily chatting with any of the villagers who were curious and approached to ask questions while offering food. The food was taken, the questions unanswered.

It was bound to start gossip, and theories started flying when the band started drinking. Legodatiperi kept an eye on their house for a while, then decided to get a drink himself.

Come, said Rek's voice in his head.

Confounded by their mystery, he walked to their house, where Sunder let him in, indicating the bedroom. Legodatiperi entered.

The hooded man had revealed a face with soft skin, and neck length hair. He was wearing the same uniform as Rek and Sunder, slightly pronounced at the front but definitely mannish.

'Yer psychic,' Rek announced. 'Yer got the gift, it's how I knew yer was on the ridge and why I called yer here. Don't try 'n' deny it an' don't raise yer voice about it. Just accept that I know.'

Legodatiperi nodded. 'I've 'ad to keep that secret an age,' he said. 'Not even the band know that.'

'Not easy for psychics, is it?' said Rek. 'Me brother an' me were same. Latent talent for dreams, not much more, 'riginally. Mine grew with me interrogating.' At this, the companion blinked rapidly for a moment. 'Me father couldn't hide 'is talent. Got it in spades, 'im. They become communications people. Send messages. Scout high. Always orders. So he tells us, hide it. Tells us mind-ter-mind, so no-one sees, but they look 'ard, yer know?'

'Am I 'ere jus' ter talk about psychics' 'ardships?' Legodatiperi said.

'Nah. I'm just sayin' I know a bit more about yer. Tryin' to get yer to trust me. I'm guessin' yer've used yer talent a bit during yer lacrosse. Not while yer playin', obviously, too many spectators, yer lose focus. But yer go an' watch other teams, read their skills, am I right?'

'What do yer want?' Legodatiperi interrupted, annoyed.

'I want yer to ride with Sunder. An' someone else of yer own choice. Yer saw his scar?' Legodatiperi nodded. 'He's goin' ter pull the Sword from the Stone.'

Legodatiperi sat back. 'About time.'

'Erica's in a bit of a way, here. It's complicated, don't worry about it, but she can't go further. Can't ride. Yer need to go today, though. As soon as daybreak. Ride like hell, get the sword, got it?'

'I will,' swore the Paladin. 'Why were you with the Company?'

'The King's helpin' us. Shhh, I'll give yer the simple answers. The Sword's not meant fer fighting the Kingdom. There's summat else, in the forest, an' that's the darkness. Erica 'n; I reckon it'll rise tonight. Yer have to get the Sword. Then... then yer face whatever comes at yer. The Aisorbmii'll rally around yer quick enough, yer know that.'

'I know. This... this is a lot to take in.'

'I know. Get some rest. Ride at dawn. Get a rider - that Cus feller, yeah - wear uniforms from the saddlebags, you'll be disguised as Kingdom soldiers for a bit. Follow Sunder's lead. Get the Sword.'

Rek stopped, allowing a quiet time to let it all sink in.

It was an amazing set of concepts. The Sword, finally drawn; a strange alliance with the Kingdom, which was very new. The King himself?

'Rest,' Rek said. 'Sunder?'

Legodatiperi stood, slowly, dizzily, and left the room. What Rek and this 'Erica' did together wasn't his business now. Just the mission. 'How many uniforms are there?' he asked Sunder.

'Five, altogether.'

'Get them all. I'll get Far, Cus and Tid to join us.'

'You have two more horses? It's eighty miles before sunset, no-one's walking.'

'We'll ride. We'll make it.'

---

Legodatiperi tried to sleep, but couldn't. He was too excited. He hadn't explained the mission to the others yet, though he'd told them they'd be needed. At least they would be rested, he thought. Anxious thoughts like these passed through his mind as the moon shone high in the sky.

Then he felt something high in the air, and he moved - <I>moved</I>, astrally – towards it. He left his body, his bed, his house, and saw Rek on top of his, with a woman.

This is Erica said Rek. Her body is changing. It's something to do with the moon, and the darkness. This is why we can't go with you.

She's Kingdom, but lovely commented Leg.

We're beyond Kingdom and Aisorbmii now Erica said. We're of the light.

How did you meet?

We started with a prisoner-interrogator bond said Rek. Then we shared death experiences said Erica. They change life a lot

You mean near-death experiences? asked Leg.

No they said together. Death. Few understand. Few return Erica smiled.</I>

And you're together Leg asked uncertainly.

Erica backed away a moment, while Rek came forward. Her body is male, and changing. Whatever's changing it runs through the blood, arouses passion. She feels safer away from it, so I help her share the sky. The world of the psychic.

Our private world Leg affirmed. I'll rest now.

Do so. Sky's not as safe as it looks. The magic's changing.

Leg decided not to ask. He returned to his body and slept.

---

At dawn Legodatiperi gathered Cus, Far and Tid to Sunder's room, where they put on the black outfits. Tid was the smallest and wore Erica's. No-one asked where the outfits came from, which was just as well, since Legodatiperi didn't want to think about the unlikelihood of Rek having spare clothing. He supposed their own clothes would suffice the pair.

They kicked off the gallop at dawn. They rode north-east, stopping after two hours. Legodatiperi had never tested their loyalty like this before, but when he told them the mission, their faces seemed to glow, their chests swelling with pride. Legodatiperi started to wonder if the glow was related to his extended psychic use the previous night.

They horses rested for ten minutes, and they started again. Legodatiperi begun to wish he'd managed more sleep, but he clung to the horse and let it follow the others. It was an exciting ride, but there was only the ride. Every so often Sunder would watch the sun as it began to fall. The night was deadly, he said. Today was all or nothing.

It was a direct route, but around unfamiliar terrain. Far managed to navigate much of the route from memory, but there were delays when he came across areas where Rangers could travel quickly but riders could not. Sunder believed they might have lost half an hour's time, somewhere. But they pushed on.

They saw the mountains from forty miles distant, between the hills. Legodatiperi's heart soared as he saw the peaks, and he pushed on, reinvigorated.

They arrived near the Kingdom camp an hour before dark. Cus tried to wash down the horses as much as he could, but Sunder felt it was time to move in. Let Kingdom servants start to deal with the horses, he said. We have something bigger in mind.

He led the way, and they took his lead. The camp was an organised affair by some standards and a display of gratuitous farce by Aisorbmii standards. Nobles being peacocks, they felt. They made an area for themselves near the Sword in the Stone and waited, listening to reports as they passed by. Wall two almost fallen, news from home, a duel over some random slight... a lot of nonsense. Legodatiperi didn't like sitting, waiting for dark and not doing anything against the Kingdom troops while he was here, but Tid produced a deck of cards and he, Cus and Sunder kept themselves amused with it for a time.

Legodatiperi really started to worry when a few nobles joined in, and others started betting on the outcomes.

The sun touched the horizon. It was red. Bugles were sounded as the units came away from the wall and started to count their losses.

Sunder stood to watch the last rays fall. Far took his place at the game. Legodatiperi watched them all nervously. He was a lacrosse player, awarded the Paladin rank as an honour, not a duty. What was he doing here, sitting here?

They played by lantern-light and firelight for a while. The five remained alert as some nobles came and went and were noisy about coin. And it got very dark.

Then a roar erupted from the west, and he drew his sword.

---

It was immense. Three times the height of a man, at least. The campfires and lanterns did not illuminate it all, just giving it an ethereal glow. Then there were screams, and everyone knew how real it was.

An alert noble began ordering troops to open fire at it with arrows, which they did. Legodatiperi couldn't see the damage, so he projected himself forward a little, looking for spirit auras. There was none, only darkness.

The cry went up to fire at something at the west end of the camp, and overeager nobles, eager for the prize, did not think to consider the distances.

The card game, long since forgotten, fell apart as three nobles fell with arrows in their backs. Legodatiperi looked to Sunder, who was running for the Sword now.

The roar erupted again, curdling everyone's blood. There was screaming, there was panicking, there was the continued yelling and firing of arrows. Legodatiperi ran towards Sunder. Time, he thought. If there was a darkest time this was it, this is time.

Sunder cried out. An arrow had struck him in the leg, metres from the Sword. Legodatiperi reached him, glanced at him, and decided to try and pull the Sword out anyway.

First try, no luck. He came back for Sunder, dropped his sword to lift him, but then heard a whistling and ducked. Sunder was struck again.

'Have to...' Sunder gasped. 'Me... destiny.'

Legodatiperi reached under him to try and carry him, but that proved difficult to focus on while protecting himself from idiotic nobles' orders. He grabbed at Sunder's back, lifting him, trying to get him nearer so he could release the Sword with whatever potential he had.

Another whistle of arrows. A roar from the beast. Cus and Far came up beside Legodatiperi and carefully lifted Sunder, moving him forward. I'm glad they came, Legodatiperi decided.

Sunder gasped, his breathing heavy, and he was coughing blood now. His arm remained outstretched. The others just ran with him now. All he needed to do was touch the hilt, maybe-

He touched the hilt.

The sword hilt shone, it glowed. Gold sparkles appeared like raindrops within a few inches of the hilt. Legodatiperi clasped Sunder's fingers around the hilt and began to pull it out.

'Duck!' said Far, who did, as did they all, as another torrent of arrows fell, probably attracted by the sword-light. An arrow got Legodatiperi in the arm, and he screamed, and he dropped Sunder's hand. The sword stopped glowing.

The roar was louder now. He could hear it breathing near, lumbering closer. He could feel an absence of people in the narrow path from the west of the camp towards him.

Sunder gave a last gasp, and died.

This is our darkest hour, thought Legodatiperi. We were not ready for this.

The beast, he thought, was now only metres away. But it was an arrow which ended his despair.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Written by Ross O'Brien

Times change. Sometimes it takes years to notice the change. Sometimes one night makes all the difference.

The following account is taken from historical records.

#### Episode Twenty-Eight: Rally Point

There was a playing card under Tid's nose. He couldn't move his arm to shift it, because that was under a body, and moving the body might attract more attention from the Beast, which would definitely attract another flurry of arrows.

This wasn't a conscious deliberation. Fear had long since taken the reins from logic. Fear had probably long since thrown logic off the wagon, too, and since Tid was alive he presumed it was doing a pretty good job doing the steering.

He stayed low, and quiet, until the roaring seemed to pass by. Then he tried to get up, but the body was heavier than he'd thought. It was starting to smell. Well, of course, Tid realised: it had soiled itself. Bodies did that, didn't they? One of the good reasons not to stay under them... he heaved himself up. Something snapped above him, he didn't know what, but he could pick himself up now.

The Beast was still in sight, he could see its' silhouette in the firelight. There was no missing something three men tall. It was further east now. Somewhere under the sound of its roar Tid could hear the rain of arrows continuing, and the screams of more hapless victims of casual carelessness. How difficult could it be to hit something so big? Tid wondered.

Leg, he thought. Cus, Far, Sunder. The Sword. Where were they?

Logic still hadn't got back to the wagons, so Tid did the simple fearful thing. Look. See. The Sword had been somewhere in front of him, to the left, somewhere behind the Beast. There!

Tid stumbled towards it, tripped over another body, hidden in the dark. All four of them were there. Sunder had arrows in his back and leg, and was bloodied front and back; Leg has one in his throat.

Feth how times changed. Not ten minutes ago they'd been playing cards. Why hadn't they gone to the Sword earlier, before people started firing arrows? And why...?

Logic suddenly kicked in. Why hadn't the Beast gone for the Sword?

The Beast was moving towards the fortress of Rene Ponit. Behind it was a wake of corpses and screaming bodies. Somewhere past it was Wall One, where many Kingdom soldiers were camped... firing fire arrows. On Wall Two, more torches. More spectators. The siege had come to a standstill.

Tid looked around. The Kingdom camp was immense, ten thousand men had camped here when the siege began, and not all of them were behind Wall One. The rest were... the rest were running. North, south, west, away, whichever way that happened to be.

He heard a grunt, and saw Far move his arm. Gently he reached forward and took the arm, helping his friend up – only to see him collapse again, dead. There were arrows in his back. Grunting behind him, trying to stand up, was Cus, who fell over.

'Sword,' said Cus.

'It's here,' said Tid, kneeling down, digging his fingers into the ground below Cus's shoulder to help him get upright.

'Pull it!' Cus said, gasping at 45 degrees.

'I'm getting' you up first!' Tid said. 'Sword can wait. Beast's not interested in it.'

'I fething am!' Cus said, reaching his arm up, trying to clutch at the Stone behind him, but he was too far. Tid eased him into a vertical position, then moved around to try and get him standing again.

'AAAAAargh!' Cus shouted. The roar in the background paused for a moment, and Tid quickly slapped his hand over Cus's mouth.

'Quiet!' he whispered, then cried out – marginally more quietly. His hand was in pain - Cus had bitten his fingers – and then Cus started to fall again. Tid ducked down, trying to catch his friend.

'Just get the fething sword!' Cus said.

'It's going that way. It'll get the Kingdom bastards first. I draw that thing, it'll come this way!'

Cus turned his head and looked at Tid, his face a mixture of anger and disappointment. 'What kind of answer is that? Of course it'll bloody come this way! Then we kill it!'

Cus didn't wait for an answer. He scabbled his hands up again, then down to the dirt, and dragged his weight forward. Then he clutched to the sides of the Stone and, hugging at it, heaved himself upward. His leg was twisted at the knee, and the joint looked sore, and Cus's teeth were clenched. He scrambled to push himself upward, and then-

The Stone fell over, taking Cus with it. Suddenly he was on top of it, and he rolled off, arms flat out at each side, the twisted leg under the good one. He cried out. Tid watched for the huge silhouette again, and heard no change in the pace of the Beast. There was a lot of crying all around, he heard, and more beginning.

Cus dug his right elbow into the earth, and swung his left arm over to his right side, moving his weight against his legs. Tid moved forward, carefully taking hold of Cus's good leg enough to move it off the bad leg, so he could restore that.

Then he saw the light. Cus had reached the Sword.

Bright light blinded his vision. He didn't hear the pause in far away earth-rumbling footsteps. He couldn't smell the fresh blood from Cus's leg anymore. He couldn't feel the cold night any more.

The Sword's light was warm. He could hear the rasping as Cus was drawing it out, inch by inch, grasping it by the blade, since he couldn't pull it out in full, he didn't have the reach. Slowly it slid from the Stone, from its millennium-long resting place.

Then darkness, just as blinding, swamped his vision as the Sword was dropped, and in the one flitting moment of light he saw the Beast before him in all it's height, one large foot where Cus's head had been.

In Tid's arms, the twisted leg had been completely healed, but now it was limp.

We should have grabbed the Sword earlier, he thought.

'RRROOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRR!'

---

Fear must've grabbed at the reins again, bullying Tid's vision into use again. He was still kneeling beside the Stone. Cus's body, or what remained of it, was still sprawled in front of him.

The Beast was still there, but it hadn't attacked him.

The Sword was on the floor, fully drawn, unbloodied, with no visible wielder.

The two seemed to not be connected. The Sword hadn't killed the Beast. What had?

'Hiyaah!' cried another voice, some effort behind it, and nearby. Tid couldn't place the exact location. The Beast began to topple, sideways. Ten feet of hulk, horns and claws collapsed to its side, revealing a much smaller man behind it, trying to pull something from its back as it fell.

Tid regained the presence of mind to breathe.

'Good evening,' said the man. There were more men behind him. One moved to take a look at Tid himself. A few moved to inspect the dead Beast. Most moved towards the Sword, but they did not touch it. They left that to the first man.

'Who are you, my friend?' asked the first man.

'Tid, sir,' said Tid. 'Tidocaziwena, sir.'

'Tidocaz, I am Minister Setovarinesa. It's strange to see an Aisorbmii out here, in the Kingdom camp. Were you a captive?'

Tid looked at the man, who must've somehow read his expression and decided to stop pushing. 'My sword was magical. Blessed at Rene Ponit itself. Very rare. They were invisible to magic searches, and render their users undetectable in the same way. And it looks like it could kill big things like this, too.'

Was, were, could? 'Could?' Tid asked.

'Gone,' said someone. Set just plunged it into his back, and it's gone.'

'Rene Ponit?' Tid asked.

'The Aisorbmii are still on Wall Two,' said the Minister. 'But there are passages. We saw the Beast, and we saw the Swordlight shining behind it, and we knew someone had reached the Sword. So some of us came. Not too many, mind. Despite the obvious danger there's still a battle going on around here, we didn't want to draw attention to the tunnel or leave too few men behind. And I can see... you've had a rough night. Lost several friends. I imagine everything I've said has just completely washed over your ears. Det, Bur, don't just stand there, help him up. Get him back to Wall Four, keep him safe. Gad...' he trailed off.

The Beast was changing shape, shrinking... more than that Tid couldn't distinguish. It was blurring, into something humanoid... all apart from its missing head. It was naked, too, and Tid could only guess it was male from the chest. The, err, lower regions were gone.

'Rest in peace,' said the Minister, holding his sword over the body. Tid stared at it. The skin was stretched and wrinkled, and blacker in hue, and really beginning to stink, easily blotting out the stench of Cus, and Far, and Leg, and Sunder, and the others... there were lots of them.

Setovarinesa picked up the Sword. It began to glow again, its light merely illuminating the area now. He turned back to Rene Ponit, and walked towards the fortress. Two others, Det and Bur maybe, whoever they were, moved in to try and bring Tid to his feet.

The Minister swung the Sword in a figure eight, and pointed it at the sky. It had a musical lilt to it as it swung, an airy whistle, but toned like a flute.

He could hear voices. Chants, cheers. The sound of swords clashing, and shields.

'The Aisorbmii are rising,' he said. 'They're descending Wall Two. They're attacking the Kingdom!'

Tid could only see the flames on the fortress walls, some falling, the two lines blurring together, and the cries ringing out again. But he could cheer them on.'

'Aisorbma!' he called.

'Aisorbma,' spat someone else. Tid topped as whoever was supporting his right turned around and then fell. Whoever supported his left got a blade in his ear, then fought to wrench it out as the bodies fell. Tid, who'd been holding their shoulders but swinging below their necklines, ankles on the floor, lived to see the new attacker ram his blade into his gut.

After all that, he thought. Killed by the Kingdom General himself.

---

In the darkest hour, battle resumed at Rene Ponit. Their morale raised by the Sword's presence, the Aisorbmii retook Wall One.

Deep behind enemy lines, Setovarinesa, Aisorbmii Minister and wielder of the Sword in the Stone, prepared his blade for Manus iw Elbirt, High General of the Kingdom armies.

For the first time, the Aisorbmii took advantage in the War.

The story continues. The Great Duel approaches. Two more Beasts, and their foul masters, remain.

Times do change. Sometimes it takes years to notice the change. Sometimes one night makes all the difference.

Written by Ross O'Brien

Times do change. Sometimes it takes years to notice the change. Sometimes one night makes all the difference.

On that one night, the second Beast attacked the Aisorbmii. The first Beast, as we know, made its way to the Kingdom, where the revolts were quietening down, and a few desperate messages were being sent.

The following account is taken from historical records.

#### Episode Twenty-Nine: Royal Pretenses

The pigeon loft was airy. There was a caged partition at one end, where Lady Gillian del Freya was struggling to bind a note to a pigeon's leg. It was difficult; the sun was setting, the pigeon wouldn't keep still, and she feared that at any moment her pink gloves would become soiled, which would not befit a woman of her stature.

Or former stature. The War had given her very few opportunities to show off her jingoism, except for that campaign early on where she'd organised a committee to stop those awful white feathers being handed out (they were so last season). Her husband being involved in a treacherous conspiracy to start the war against the King's wishes hadn't helped, particularly when she'd been widowed as a result.

'Ooh, thou shalt remain in a singular position while I attach this important message to thine leg, foolish creature,' she cursed.

'Doherty knows not how to remain in a singular position, dear Gillian,' said the King, entering the loft. 'I wouldst recommend to you the pigeon Caterfly, who is to mine knowledge one of the best trained pigeons it has been mine fortune to use for conversation.'

'My thanks, Majesty. Which bird is Caterfly?'

'She usually sits on the third or fourth perch, next to Alfonso.'

'Which is which?'

'Let me think... these two have blue rings on their wings. Caterfly's is on her right wing.'

'Hmm. This one has... no rings. Two stripes, though.'

'That will be Betrani. Perhaps someone is using Caterfly.'

'No, this one is Caterfly. Right wing, you said?' Without waiting for response, she reached forward and brought the pigeon nearer, managing to finally attach the message to the bird's leg. Then she scooped it up and moved to the open airway. The King stopped her.

'Let me see this bird. Blue ring... right wing. My word. My word,' he said, sitting down. Gillian released the bird into the air. 'Lady,' he said, as she turned to leave, 'Alfonso is missing.'

She turned again and moved to sit beside him, but not too close, as she did not wish to be too familiar. 'What do you mean, Majesty?'

'Alfonso is missing. Someone must have called for him.'

'Many people call for many pigeons, sire,' offered Gillian.

'And many pigeons aren't under specific orders never to move unless they are permitted to by their masters. Alfonso was to remain within call until summoned.' The King breathed. He took a breath, for it was clear he was flustered by this. 'It's been five months, though. Perhaps it's worn off.' Gillian didn't – couldn't – know how to respond to this, so she merely looked at him, questioningly. She moved her hand on top of his. 'I have been very foolish, Gillian del Freya,' said the King.

'Nonsense, Majesty. You are very wise.'

'And because of that I can admit my mistakes as a wise man should. This war should never have begun. It has cost us lives in their thousands, almost a dozen thousand. It has ended many families, noble and otherwise, drained us of supplies... we have truly lost the war, Gillian.'

Gillian considered. Her knowledge of military affairs, aside from what colour of camouflage outfit would also serve as a dinner suit, was limited. But an organiser of catwalk showdowns was never left without an idea. She remembered the portraits from the walls of the Palace. 'Your Highness, have you considered raising the morale of the men by leading yourself? The royal armour wouldst be most splendid upon the battlefield.'

'I never sought to fight the Aisorbmii, Lady. It is true, I have little taste for their petty organisation, their arbitrary selection of leaders, their grubby customs, and especially their love for their rice pudding to be served <I>cold</I>.' They both involuntarily shuddered. 'But I could not order one killed unless I could prove for myself it was not him.'

'Not who, your Highness?'

The King had adopted a very guarded expression, shielding his emotion, and now regarded her very carefully. 'Lady, I remember your son, who urged us to war. The son who died. Know this, and keep it to yourself: I too have a son.'

'For many years there has been no Heir to my throne, just as my brother sired no Heir to stand before me in the line of succession. But for some years I had a son. You must have heard.'

'I heard of his death, Majesty... I heard of a tragic accident, which killed him as it did my son. A poisoning, I remember it quite clearly.'

'It was a lie. My son was not killed. He was exiled. He too had a taste for cold rice pudding.' They shuddered again, in unison. 'My son is among the Aisorbmii, somewhere. My beloved Queen Srinkra has been searching for him for months.'

'Canst thou not use magic to find him?'

'We have tried and failed, for five months. I asked our late Librarian, Dushkama del Rayma, to search for him psychically, but she could pierce his thoughts, and could not recognise him visually. It has been a wearisome task.'

The King placed his hand on hers. 'Dear Lady, now you know why I have tried to maintain peace, and struggled to prevent war, and why I have not embraced, or added my own powers to, the cause of our people.'

'Was I wrong?'

There was a moment there when she might have said again, patriotically but in unthinkingly, that the King was never wrong. But his mood was solemn, and he had already berated that kind of response, and he wanted a serious answer. An upbringing in a society filled with ancient traditions and tales of glorified kings passing their wisdom down the ages prompted her to think of law. 'Under Kingdom law, he committed one of the most serious of crimes. And there are legends predating even the Kingdom which suggest betrayal is the gravest of sins.'

'But was I wrong?' he asked again.

There was no shield in this expression, and she saw the father's love. If her son, if Tarek ir Teriss, had done this thing to them instead of dying... would she have been so enthusiastic for war, knowing the Kingdom forces would be out there hunting her boy?'

'No,' she said. 'You were not wrong. But only because you are his father.' That sounded nice and poetic, she thought.

'In that case... I think it's time I behaved like a King.'

Slowly, deliberately, dramatically, King Arit fre Togr stood and strode towards the door, then down the stairs, and through the Palace until he came to the Armoury. He beckoned a servant to ready his horse and bring him to the Fourth Door, and with deliberate gestures instructed Lady Gillian del Freya to help him put on his Armour.

The steel was polished and intricately carved with symbols of eagles or other great birds, representing his superior perspective, and the ability to command an area far greater than the humble man could see. His sword was similarly decorated, the winged hilt coated with gold, the bird's eyes focused directly along the three-inch-wide blade which he placed reverently in the scabbard by his side.

When he was ready, he strode just as purposefully to the Fourth Door, and mounted his white steed, Kinanteor. He touched his heels to the horse's sides and the horse rose up on its hind legs, and whinnied. He drew his sword, looking the picture of legend in the twilight. Then the forelegs touched earth, and the horse began to gallop.

She ran forward to the door and watched the King ride east into the darkness, the blade swinging expertly back into its scabbard, and he disappeared over the verge.

'Good tidings, your Highness,' she said into the night.

'Your Ladyship?' asked the wrangler. 'Doth thou know when the King shall return?'

'No. He goeth to do what needs to be done, and he will return when he is done.'

'Then, your Ladyship, there are few nobles in the Palace; most of those who did not travel east have returned to their homes to tend to the revolts.'

'It wast mine understanding that most of the peasants had ceased their disenchanting behaviour,' Gillian said.

'Indeed, Ladyship, but the nobles must still regain their loyalty. There are very few, therefore, available to stand as guardian of the Palace, and your Ladyship wouldst appear to be the highest-ranking personage present.'

Lady Gillian del Freya nodded, trying to grasp the magnitude of this wardenship, and bid the wrangler go about his business as per the King's orders. Very little would change in the day-to-day affairs of the running of the Palace, except that the flag on the least-damaged turret would be lowered in his absence. She would have to clear her calendar for some days hence, indefinitely, while she tended to partitions and affairs of state, but strangely she felt up to the task.

Until the King returned.

Under her new responsibility she sat at the end of the Dinner Table, and had tea. One of the servants made her some rice pudding, from the few remaining supplies, and she enjoyed it thoroughly. When it was finished a page entered and told her of a disturbance sighted to the east, and that a scout was waiting in the Throne Room.

She moved their quickly, and at the servant's direction sat on the Queen's throne, and summoned the scout forward.

'It is an immense beast, ten feet tall, horned, with spiked shoulders and long claws. It came in the dark, its roar woke the city, and it is siwft and merciless. It has killed dozens in minutes...'

'The City Guard?'

'Some were among the slain. Others are fleeing with the populace.'

'The Royal Guard?'

'Defending the Palace, as per the King's orders.'

'There must be reserves who can rally the City Guard. They must assemble.'

'With respect, your Ladyship, the Royal Guard move only under his orders.'

'He is not present,' she answered. 'He has gone east...' she could not say, <I>where he is needed</I>, '...to support the war effort. I am guardian of the Palace. Assemble the Royal Guard.'

'Yes, your Ladyship, at once,' said the scout, bowing and leaving the room.

She rose to follow, looking for a high room where she could look into the night and see this being for herself. When finally she beckoned a servant to show her to a useful vantage point, she looked down five storeys to the grounds where a shadow pervaded the darkness, slaying torches and fires as the people screamed.

So swiftly, so suddenly, lights disappeared on the high road leading to the Palace itself. For a moment Gillian put her faith in the moat, for was it not said that demons could not cross running water? But it did. At that moment the drawbridge lowered and the Royal Guard charged into battle, their terrific battle-cry sounding them through the night.

As heroes they died, and the Beast entered the Palace. Moments later something gave in the floor, and the building shook. She moved back to the Throne room, summoning the Royal Guards to return there and defend the centre of the Palace.

Where once there had been two Companies of the Elite soldiery, now there were perhaps fifty or sixty preparing to defend the throne room from this one foe.

They all had swords drawn, they had all the doorways surrounded, they had a reserve group to swiftly reinforce the group around the unlucky door.

The floor again shook. The great stained glass windows smashed. The floor they were all standing on tilted ever so slightly.

Then the door exploded, and the Beast, its head centred on its chest, raked its long claws through the first line of men and their swords. Shards of tempered steel clattered the the ground beside heads of brave men. The second arm swept forward gracefully and slew the first of the reserve group into shreds.

The other two groups, now knowing their doors weren't to explode, flanked the Beast and charged from either side, but Gillian del Freya, a spray of thick red blood across her blue dress, closed her eyes and sat in the Queen's throne, her hands before her, praying.

She heard it utter the sound 'Kingdom,' before smelled its heavy breath near her face. She opened her eyes and saw the blood-red pupils in black eyes, sunken behind the horrific face, the face...

'Not Queen,' the Beast affirmed, and then she lost all feeling below her shoulders, and fell off her own body...

---

COUGH! COUGH!

The Beast left the Palace as he'd entered, causing far more destruction, until something above the second floor gave way, and the storeys above it collapsed onto the survivors below.

The last of the family of Samfr de Samfr, who had also fallen from the fifth storey long before, died in guardianship of the Palace, whose official Residents were east, being involved in the war. King Arit, Queen Srindra, Prince... who was that Prince?

Soon we shall find out. Soon the Prince will return. All too soon.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The tale has been long in the telling, and it is nearing time for the tale to end, time for the War to end, time for the Great Duel to decide the victor.

Time for the Prince to return.

### Episode Thirty: Return of the Prince

Lord General Manus iw Elbirt watched grimly at the battle-worn warrior he had just challenged. He was an impressive sight: tall, his stance alert though tired, his grim expression only evident by his silhouette in the light of fading fires.

Of course he was impressive. After weeks of siege defence, anyone who had fought on the walls would be a survivor. Tonight this man had infiltrated the Kingdom camp and slain a Beast from beyond darkest legend. And now he wielded the Sword of the Stone.

Only a very brave or a very foolish man would ever seek to face such an adversary, but as at this moment, right now, he was tired. The entirety of the Aisorbmii morale rested on the shoulders of one weary, worthy warrior, and for the morale of the Kingdom forces Manus had to hope he could now be slain.

He twirled his sword, watching the glint of firelight reflect in a wide circle around the camp, and issued the challenge. 'In the name of the King, and the Peoples of the Kingdom, might I have the pleasure of thine name, that it might be remembered when the sun rises and illuminates the place where thine own star has fallen?'

The warrior's head rose and looked at him. 'My star is Inesa, the Star of Hope, which must never fall, and my name is my own to any warrior who challenges from the dark where he cannot be seen.'

Manus licked his lips; the reply was formal, and therefore respectful of the challenge, but also slighting of him, and to continue this challenge he must now present his own name. He worried for a moment that the warrior had shown no sign of backing down from a fight. 'Mine name is Manus iw Elbirt, Lord General of the armies of his Majesty the King Arit fre Togr, and my blade no darker than thine own. Canst thou cast thine own name out of the darkness as quickly as I?'

'Neatly deflected, Lord General, though it will do you little good. The Aisorbmii have retaken wall one of the fortress, and soon they may leap from the walls and chase you all the way back to the Kingdom. But the challenge is well given, and for the people of Aisorbma I accept: mine name is Setovarinesa, wielder of the Sword of the Stone.'

The Minister had moved back into a fighting stance when the shout came across the camp: 'STOP!'

And so the Queen Srinkra del Bou finally entered the fray at Rene Ponit, and intervened in a duel which could decide the war, and the Lord General, having adopted a fighting position, was caught between advancing to the Queen's defence and bowing at her presence. Mere moments later, he was completely astonished as she advanced herself on the Minister and embraced him closely with a cry of 'MY SON!'

There was a clatter of steel as several of Setovarinesa's men dropped their swords, and for a moment Manus thought he had dropped his own. Slowly he moved forward to ask 'What is happening here?'

The Minister disengaged from the embrace, and turned to his men, leaving the Queen to answer. 'He is of royal blood, my blood, he is the exiled son of Arit and Srinkra. Prince Setov, born under the star of Inesa.'

Manus looked the revealed Prince up and down then, failing to envisage the royal stature because it was dark and the Prince was facing away, facing towards his men, and then Manus realised why he was doing this. Because none of the Aisorbmii knew of his past.

They couldn't see him clearly, though, so he had to speak. 'She's right,' said Setov ar Inesa. 'I'm a Prince and Heir and Exile, and that's why I could never be Prime Minister, though my friend Galomanisula was always supportive of me. Before the War we worked to prevent war from happenin'. We wrote a letter, 'im an' me, to reply to the King and Queen's request for peace, but we never 'ad time to send it. Durin' the war I've fought and bled with yer fer months. If yer can tell me, truly, where I've shirked my duties then the Sword is yours, an' I'll say nowt more, but you won't find anythin' cos I've never

shirked. I've fought every day, and now I'm the wielder of the Sword of the Stone, but I want yer all to think: should yer still be my friends?'

Friends, not merely troops. Like an Aisorbmii would, he'd placed himself equal to those he commanded, and brought sword-brothers with him on his mission. But in this revelation, would they trust him.... Or, Manus thought, happily considering an alternative, would they kill him themselves?

Some of them were nodding. One sheathed his sword, stepped forward, and touched Prince Setov's hand. The Minister smiled, and then-

May I interrupt? asked a voice. Is this a good time?

---

They are standing among woodlands, trees, he and the Prince and the Queen. A stone building, fortified, glowing. Several small creatures, like three-foot-long alligators, black and oily, small-mouthed, walk up and down and around the glow, which surrounds the fort around and above. Not far away, dozens of Kingdom men move around hurriedly. Some are more stealthy, others more cautious, and the last merely paranoid and panicked.

One Marquis Dibon de Fifelech stands upright, confident, and firmly in the cautious category. With him, three others. A woman, who seems to see right into him, and he senses a name: Cafialerasun. A man, who speaks. The third is man and woman, and ever changing, and silent.

Setovarinesa, says the man. I travelled to the Kingdom as you asked. Sunder, prophesied by Yeonan, met his destiny: he drew the Sword from the Stone. The sword must face the darkness, here at the Psyopalace. The Great... ooh. The sword's shiny, isn't it!

Manus looks at the Sword, which shines white in Setov's hand. What darkness could stand against this?

What darkness? Manus has head of no darkness.

Lord General Manus iw Elbirt. Your strength is required west, at the forest, to face the enemy. The foe which began the war, which organised a famine and spread a pestilence, which unleashed needless death upon thousands of Kingdom and Aisorbmii. The foe which has eradicated all rice pudding from our lands, hot and cold.

A truly unholy darkness, thought Manus.

Your Majesty, Queen Srindra del Bou. I am Marshal Rekowarilara, of the Aisorbmii. Your power, too, may be required. The fortress is protected, shielded. The creatures generate it, and we cannot attack them with what talents we have. The talents of a powerful witch would be useful.

The Queen nods, and so Manus does, but Setov does not. Rekowar. You have done well – too well for a mere Marshal. A Paladin, I name you, and shall do so when I arrive. I have one question: where is my father?

Shift. A change in moonlight, a sudden grip of geography, whatever, Manus knows he is west of the fortress. A rider approaches: he is armoured, and carried a wide-bladed sword in his scabbard, a shield on his arm. It is the King Arit fre Togr. A pigeon in a nearby tree – sleeping, for they do not fly so well in the dark - moves to him and delivers a message.

My son! cries the King. He is well, and seeks to end the stalemate at Rene Ponit. Manus, and Rekowar, and Queen Srindra all look to Setov as he says swiftly Yesterday's news, and then the King exclaims, and looks up.

My son! My general, my Queen, he says.

I do not understand, says Manus. How does he know we are here?

He is a Wordsmith says Srindra del Bou.

The King nods. A gift, lord general, like the Healer's to cure, the Mage's to cast, the Psychic's to see, the Truthseer's to divine. I am a wordsmith, and I have power over words.

The letter to Prime Minister Galomanisula contained a spell, such that only one who had touched the letter could summon this pigeon, and establish this communication. And the oaths to which I bound Dibon de Fifelech, and Rekowarilara, and others: I have bound them by words. A useful talent, you might agree? he smiled, and looked at the Prince. What good fortune that my son, whom I never thought to see again, should have touched the letter.

What ill fortune, says Queen Srindra del Bou, that he carried a sword from Rene Ponit all this time, and rendered himself invisible to us for so long. But perhaps now is the time for all family wrongs to be righted.

Now is the time, my Queen, my lady! Let us go in clean conscience. The darkness is ahead, to east of me and west of you. Ride to the fortress, I shall meet you there. The darkness must be felled. Then, my son, we will have our peace.

The Sword pulsed, shining once then again, as a shadow emerges behind the King.

Ah, the Beast, it follows, says the King.

There is another? says Manus, before Setov.

Two says Cafialerasun. Be here soon.

The shadow advances, the Beast gains on the King. Within the Shadow, Manus can see... the Palace at the Kingdom is destroyed.

---

Just as suddenly they are in the camp at Rene Ponit. The first Aisorbmii has clutched Setov's arm and shook it in the warrior grip. 'I'm with yer. Just tell me where!' he said, to the approval of his fellows.

Setov's smile faded. 'Then come, now, Gen,' he said.

No time has passed, Manus realised, but the Paladins among the Aisorbmii step forward at once. The Prince looked to the Queen, and much is shared in that glance: an instruction to move closer, for her spell requires proximity; an urgency of purpose; an expression of fondness on a face used to regret. She closed her eyes, gathering power in this dark night, and they closed in around her.

The Prince cast an amused grin at Manus himself. 'Lord General. I have it on good authority your strength was requested. On behalf of my mother the Queen I repeat that request and ask you to move closer to us.'

Manus, belatedly, did so. He still holds his sword, and started to sheathe it. 'Don't,' added the Prince. 'We'll be fighting very quickly.'

The Paladin Gen took a ball from his pocket and rubs it against the area of cloak resting on his chest. 'For luck,' he said, replacing it.

Queen Srindra del Bou put her hands together, then arced them outwards, expanding a shining ball of light around them all. And then everything around them grew a lot bigger... Manus realised they were shrinking to size which could far more readily be blown west by the winds.

The world became black, and as they returned to normal size Manus could pick out trees, huge trees. The Forest, evidently. The shining bubble shrank, moving through them back to the Queen's hands where it glowed. As he moved outside the bubble Manus saw dark figures running away from them swiftly, in panic.

A red glow appeared between far trees and flared towards them – specifically, Queen Srindra del Bou's hands.

Manus grabbed the Queen at the waist, lifted her and leapt away, landing on his back and rolling to cover her – but the missile turned.

The Queen, the Lord General, and everyone else within a few metres of them were blown apart before their mission had really begun.

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The threads are weaving together now, as forces of light and dark finally gather at the Psyopalace. All that stands between them and their Duel is a magic shield.

An impasse, at the brink of the end.

Next episode: the Realisation of Prophecy.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The vision of Tekowariaura went as follows:

A pride of lions, dozens strong, all marching together, a silver lion at their head. A convocation of eagles, in their hundreds, descending to attack. Another lion becomes a snake and silently attacks the silver lion. Lion and snake fall to the ground, swallowed by shadows. The lion's silver teeth remain, shining in moonlight. The grass grows around lions and eagles, smothering them all.

Cafialerasun holds a sword in her right hand. She wears black. The sword is stained.

The snake again, striking without sound. A voice.

'Your blood has seen this too.'

Episode Thirty-One: the Realisation of Prophecy

King Arit fre Togr had seen the teleportation spell once before, and he recognised the bright sphere of light which shone around the Queen and the band of unlikely warriors materialising around her.

Recognition quickly became despair as a bright explosion echoed from their arrival point. He spurred the horse into a gallop, swiftly urging the tired horse to the explosion site.

It saved his life, for the Beast behind had not expected such a sudden movement.

The King dismounted at the site, and one of the Aisorbmii survivors took the reins while he knelt beside what remained of the cloak. There was a great pile of ash on it. Lord General Manus iw Elbirt's head was a short distance away, in the hands of a woman he didn't know.

'Your Majesty,' said Baron Dibon de Fifelech. 'Majesties,' he corrected, as Prince Setov ar Inesa brushed the dirt from his trousers. 'Mine apologies for not asking Rekow ar Ilara to provide a warning. We were not expecting an expenditure of magic. It attracts great attention from the creatures,' Dibon said, pointing.

The fortress was surrounded by a magic shield, generated by small alligator-like creatures which walked around the inside of the sphere. The nearest, which had probably been the one to open fire, looked a little frazzled.

'What ist our status, in thine estimation,' asked the King, suddenly weary at the discovery of his Queen, deceased.

'The Company hast taken a lot of casualties during our first assault. When we tried to make camp Trebonaire conjured a fire, and his camp went up in a similar explosion. We have forty men left, and they fear the ways of magic now.'

'Setov?'

'I have brought a few trusted men from Rene Ponit: Paladins Genokefirica and Sazorenigita, who you may know from the Iron Jamtins lacrosse team; Marshals Tedonenilefa, Forogatilidh and Gutomiricatu; Ranger Yanodaginupe.' He introduced them all, though he knew few of the Kingdom officers would remember their full names. King Arit knew enough about the Aisorbmii to know how their naming structure worked, and remembered what he needed – Gen, Saz; Ted, For and Gut; Yan. Any more was unnecessary.

'Rekow?'

'Jus' th' three of us,' said Rekowarilara. He was smiling a little, because when the Prince got around to it he would become a Paladin. He indicated the black-clad woman holding Manus iw Elbirt's head. 'Cafialerasun joined us a little while ago. Says she knows where the Beasts came from. They're human, she says, mutated by sorcery.' He paused for a moment. 'Erica?' he asked.

The form in the hooded cloak stepped forward and chose that moment to take off the cloak. It fell to the floor around a pair of bare ankles. The form revealed was... was...

Erica del Erica.

Original, in the flesh, so to speak.

King Arit fre Togr had been there when Erica had returned, interrogated, wounded and tired, from the raid which destroyed the Anilomes fortress – which now stood, to some extent repaired, within the magic shield. He'd been suspicious of her return, and the means of her success. The Queen had been more suspicious, and they had believed her to be a security risk; potentially a spy of the dark. He'd been there when she died of poison, and there when she returned in the form of the Conspirator Halfglint, which meant Nightfall. She had fought the dark, all the way, rescued once by Rekowarilara. She deserved to be here at the end, but he never expected she would be here in the same form she'd had at the beginning.

He had a crude thought, swiftly suppressed. Was it the same form?

Erica spoke. It was her own voice, but then her male form had always been capable of it. "Their magic has been very strong for the last few nights. They've been changing their bodies to what they want to be: Blood Lords. Powerful, superior, strong. And my... Halfglint's body was one of theirs. So I changed back to what I wanted to be."

She looked at Rekowarilara, and attention shifted to him for a moment, and back to her. It was becoming rapidly clear that not only had he already been privy to the knowledge she was changing, and what she'd changed into, but that she'd chosen to become woman again for him.

Back at the beginning, he'd been the one who'd interrogated, and wounded, and tired her out. He had been enemy. Now he was not. Things had changed, yet come full circle. It was a strange moment. Arit wondered how the young man felt, seeing again and perhaps loving a face he'd once tortured as an enemy as part of his job.

A roar from behind him brought all their thoughts back into focus. The Beast was back.

Setov drew the Sword of the Stone and turned and charged. Arit, a little older and slower, followed him in, as did others. That they were all attacking made Arit smile: there was no lacking in bravery here!

The Beast met Setov first, punching aside his Sword, then beat away Arit, who yelled as the long claws raked through the armour and gouged a hole in his side. Marshal Gut received the next wound, and Marquis Dibon the fourth – Holy Pudding the Beast was quick – before Setov used the momentum of the deflected Sword and swung it around.

Instead of being beat away by the force of the Beasts' attack, he kept his arms loose and acted as a pivot, adding his own strength into the manoeuvre, using time bought dearly by the men behind him.

The attack came around again and slew the head clean off the Beast, who collapsed -

- on top of Arit, the long bony back-spikes impaling the King as it landed heavily to the ground.

Arit, suddenly winded, coughed out all his air. Why had he charged in like that... was it because of the Queen?

'Medic!' called Ranger Yan.

'No medic,' said Dibon de Fifelech. 'Too much magic.'

Some of Dibon's Company simply stood there, stunned – who could blame them, the Queen was ten minutes dead, or less, and their King seemed bound to join her – but others immediately pitched in to lift the giant Beast's body, gently, so that the few who could heal could get to the King. It took twenty minutes, and more than twenty people, but eventually the corpse was lifted.

The woman, Cafialerasun, stepped in to help, but Rekow shooed her away, and let the Paladins come closer. They were lacrosse players, used to rough play and injury, so he supposed they might have some talent.

Saz gently removed the King's armour and the two tried to staunch the wounds with cloths, but Arit's fear was confirmed when Gen looked to Saz and shook his head. They both then looked to Setov.

'Setov, my son,' Arit croaked. 'My heir,' he pronounced, so they could all hear him. 'King!' he spluttered.

Setov came to him and knelt by his side. 'Father,' he said.

'It seemeth me my time is short, but I have some requests. Setov, take my throne.'

'The throne is gone, sire,' said Rekow. 'The Castle fell last night to the Beast we've just slain. I saw it,' he added, off the gathered looks.

'Rebuild it, then!' spat the King. 'Setov: give Rekow his Paladin name. Bring Rekow here.'

Rekow approached. 'Sire?'

'How fare you and Erica?'

Rekow blushed properly now, at the direct question. 'Close, sire,' he said in hushed tones. 'We should have observed the first wedding by now, if you see what I mean?'

Setov was close enough to hear, and smiled; Arit saw the visual in his mind as well. The Aisorbmii had two weddings for couples: one when they came together, one when the first child was born. 'Then, if you are willing, Setov can grant you this too, Rekow.'

Rekow nodded, confused. The idea of marriage probably hadn't entered his mind yet, and the idea of the Kingdom blessing such a ceremony was unusual, even for him.

'There was a prophecy once,' said Arit. 'You remember it, Rekow?'

'It was my brothers, sire. Lions and eagles approaching to fight. The part about an assassin already came to pass. The silver lion left behind some teeth... perhaps something the Prime Minister said, we've yet to pick up on. Then the grass covered over them all.'

'The grass. Was it the famine? Or was it this enemy, appearing from beneath us all, unseen, trying to take us all over?'

'It could have been either. I've started to wonder about the voice: 'Your blood has seen this too.' Perhaps it meant me. Perhaps it meant them, the Blood Lords,' he said, pointing at the shield.

'There is hope,' said the King. 'Setov,' he requested. 'I had an idea. A game of cricket!'

'Cricket?' Setov said, not understanding.

But the King couldn't explain any further.

---

COUGH! COUGH! COUGH!

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Sazogenirita saw the light die in the King's eyes, and then watched the uncomfortable Kingdom men standing by, wondering what they should do next. He stepped forward, taking the crown from the head of King Arit fre Togr and placing it on the head of Setovar, who beckoned Rekow and Erica forward.

'First blessing,' he said. 'Rek, son of the man War, son of the woman Lara, declare your love.'

'I declare it, on life itself, which must continue.'

'Erica, daughter of...' there was an awkward pause. 'Declare your love.'

'I declare it. We will walk the path.'

There was a cheer, which Setovar ended by tapping Rekow on the shoulders. He then did the same for Erica. 'With the authority of the Sword in the Stone, I dub thee both Paladins, to fight the Dark.'

Sazogenirita cheered with them all, and posed the important next question. 'Cricket?' he asked.

'A sport,' said Setovar. 'It was played before my father's reign.' Sazorenigita was interested, as was Gen, and some of the others, so Setovar explained further. 'You have two teams. One team scatters around a field, and one of them is a bowler, and the other team chooses a representative, a batsman to face them. The bowler throws the ball, aiming for three wooden posts behind the batsman, and the batsman has to use his wooden bat to stop the ball, and hit it far away. While the first team tries to catch it, the batsman scores points by running a short distance several times. If they catch the ball, or the bowler hits the wooden posts, the batsman is eliminated from the game and another takes his place. When the batting team is finished, or the bowler has done enough bowling, the teams swap places, and whichever team has scored the most points wins. Basically.'

'Cricket,' Sazogenirita said.

'A bowler throws the ball. The batsman hits it,' said Gen. Sazorenigita smiled: Gen had an idea. 'The ball could travel very quickly. Perhaps if we hit one of those little creatures, we could hit the shield.'

Sazorenigita took a ball out of his pocket, and looked around for a moment. He picked up the King's scabbarded sword, which was a very wide blade. Setovar smiled. 'That will do,' he said.

Gen took up the ball, and moved nearer to the shield, then turned to face Sazorenigita, who touched the sword to the ground, holding it with both hands. He stood at angle, aiming for one of the creatures. It would be a lucky thing, he supposed, if he were to hit one of them.

'Excuse me,' said Erica del Erica. She moved to Gen, and held the ball for a moment. There was a pale glow, but the creatures did not react, possibly because her body was recognised as one of the enemy.

When the ball was blessed, Gen tossed the ball for a moment, indicating to Sazorenigita that it was about to be thrown. Sazorenigita hefted the sword.

Gen threw. Sazorenigita swung. Ranger Yan, standing too close behind, was struck in the face by the ball.

'Try again,' said Rekowar, throwing the ball back to Gen. Gen bowled again.

There was an almighty CRACK! as ball struck scabbard and then a whistle as it flew through the air, and impacted on one of the creatures. There was a purple crackle of energy, fired from the impacted creature to all of the others, and then the shield around it collapsed.

Setovar, holding the Sword of the Stone, ran through, as did Cafialerasun, and Gen, and For, and Ted, and some of the Company. Sazorenigita couldn't move.

The shield reappeared, crackling, held by the remaining creatures. They fired a blast of energy against him, and he flew through the air.

His last thought was of success. They were through the shield.

---

Fyendodas watched the group enter the Psyoplace, and waited for them to gather before him.

'Prime Minister Setovarinesa. King Setov ar Inesa, wielder of the Sword in the Stone. Your star shines in the sky, the first to appear against the Dark. I am Fyendodas, the End of Days, wielder of the Khada Sword, the Dark Shadow. Well met!'

Setov stepped forward, as Fyendodas knew he would. 'I challenge you, on behalf of both the peoples that I represent, to a duel.'

'A Great Duel, Setovar. Your blade against mine. I have seen this moment coming, and known that the fate of this whole land rests on the edges of our Swords.' He lifted his black Khada Sword.

'We will duel, you and I. And now.'

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To Be Continued. Next: Riposte and Parry.

Written by Ross O'Brien

The Great Duel, which was to decide the fate of the war, and the ages, took place one night after the full moon in the Psyopalace, as the Blood Lords had rechristened the remains of the Anilomes fortress.

King Setov ar Inesa of the Kingdom, wielder of the Sword of the Stone and therefore Prime Minister of Aisorbma, represented all that had been, and all that was Light.

Blood King Fyendodas, wielder of the Khada Sword, also named Dark Shadow, represented all change to come, and all that was Dark.

A battle between kings.

COUGH! COUGH!

Episode Thirty-Two: Riposte and Parry

Fyendodas watched as Setov entered the arena, positioned himself at one end, drew the Sword of the Stone from under his belt and held it with the point almost touching the floor. Fyendodas mirrored his stance. Neither lifted their blades yet; there would be no point until they were closer.

He allowed Setov a few minutes more to get a feel for the geography of the building. As an Aisorbmii Minister Setovarinesa would no doubt have been here before, but that was before it was changed. The arena was stark and simple, and calming in Fyendodas' mind. That was important: the new King had every right to be very emotional at the moment – he'd just been accepted back into his family, coronated, and orphaned.

That had not been intentional. The darkness which had veiled the Psyopalace naturally deflected Kingdom or Aisorbmian magic; the Beasts created from the representatives of those nations had focused that magic here, and the shield had been designed to keep the more explosive effects of that suddenly uncontained magic from, well, exploding. The destructive effect on nearby users of those magic types was a by-product, a side-effect. And of course, it hadn't been anticipated that anyone would be there, much less a teleporting Queen.

Giving Setov some time wasn't just compassion, it was right, and fair, and inspired the notion of honour. Dremgadona had been most displeased with the notion, she preferred opulence and orgy behind closed doors, but from now on the right impression had to be made.

The Blood Lords would now be operating in the open.

Well, as soon as this duel was over, and Setov was dead, anyway.

Setov ar Inesa lifted the Sword. His entourage kept back, probably under the assumption they would then be out of harm's way. Fyendodas didn't have time to consider happily the idea that they were wrong; he lifted his own Sword.

He had to fight to suppress all thoughts of fear, too. The young King was a fearsome fighter; he'd survived every day on Rene Ponit and had slain two Beasts – no mean feat, even with magical swords. Fyendodas hadn't anticipated fighting a young and capable swordsman in this crucial, inevitable duel. That had been the entire point of the War – wear down the two nations, encourage the deaths of the best warriors through subterfuge, traitors, assassins, poisons, famines, battles and Beasts, and leave very weary warriors to represent their nations in this final fight. From the careful gathering of information the Conspirators had gathered, Fyendodas had expected to fight Saromeritova and Arit fre Togr tonight.

No! No! Suppress all nervous thoughts. Setov ar Inesa would die tonight, and the new nation would be forged. Victory must be mine! Thought Fyendodas.

Setov ar Inesa strode forwards, the point of his blade high, and smoothly lunged forward. Fyendodas parried easily and riposted, to which Setov parried away.

The two Swords, one light and one dark, held against each other, neither relenting against the force of the other – but then, why would they? They were magical blades, irresistible, but also antitheses. Therefore they held their own, but could not be superior. It was another equaliser of the duel: only skill could win.

The duellists remained locked for some moments longer before Setov twisted, beat away the Khada Sword and swung around. Fyendodas lunged for Setov's back, but Setov was swift and parried with added momentum. The beat attack gave the King an opening and he lunged again, but Fyendodas side-stepped and then parried.

Fyendodas was impressed. A ball of sweat trickled down the side of his face and he felt a pang of shame for sweating first, but he masked it. Setov, predictably, grinned; a standard tactic to make oneself appear more confident, usually causing the opponent to reconsider their technique. Anything to inspire doubt or fear, for these are deadly opponents in a duel. But Fyendodas knew the technique, and allowed Setov his grin. No advantage won there.

They were in stand-off again, so Fyendodas backed off. Setov kept his blade high, and shifted his weight back to en garde. Fyendodas moved around, circling Setov, forcing him to shift position.

Fyendodas leapt back and slashed with the Dark Shadow, aiming first for Setov's sword arm then for across the chest. He was predictably parried, so he circled his hand around, bringing his blade under Setov's, then over and resumed his move before Setov could catch up. Setov stepped back, but Fyendodas advanced in time, and Setov had to keep moving back until he could parry.

The blades held each other again, but Fyendodas tried to press on his advantage and swung his blade again, this time swinging himself under Setov's sword arm and attacking the back. Setov responded by advancing out of range, and turned again into the en garde position, this time in quart, possibly hoping Fyendodas wasn't familiar with left-handers.

Fyendodas palmed the Khada Sword to his left hand effortlessly. Following the rise in his kind of magical power, he'd become ambidextrous. Now Fyendodas grinned, and dared Setov not to sweat.

Setov made the next attack, and Fyendodas parried again, and riposted. Setov parried, counter-riposted, was parried and counter-riposted in turn, and the two clashed blades, angling around to put the other off-balance. Setov paused a moment between a parry and a riposte and made a lunge for Fyendodas' head, but Fyendodas parried en cinq and then worked to thrust. Setov parried, swung back and disengaged.

Fyendodas was pleased to see that Setov was sweating now. He twirled his blade, loosening the muscles in his left arm, and readied himself again.

Setov lunged, but not to hit: he danced his sword around swiftly, keeping it ahead of Fyendodas's sword, so the two didn't meet. Fyendodas grew bored of the game within a few seconds, but continued it patiently, blocking all obvious avenues of attack and searching out his own opportunity. Setov, already weary from the long day, tired quickly and backed away again, but Fyendodas launched in then, clashing the Dark Shadow furiously against the Sword of the Stone, trying to beat it from Setov's grasp, or at least make an opening. But the Swords continued to make their own defences, and Setov could not be touched.

Fyendodas backed away for a moment, giving Setov a brief respite, and then began a sudden ballestra, roaring deeply like a lion. He charged and Setov moved aside, but Fyendodas twirled quickly and they clashed blades again. The two swords clattered and clanged again and again as Fyendodas circled Setov, forcing him to keep up or meet a quick end, continuing to tire himself out. A quick lance to the shoulder was deflected by the Sword, and Fyendodas continued to infer that the Sword was magically protecting its owner.

The Blood Lord gave the King another few moments to rally before launching in again, this time managing a few attempts at attacking the legs, but Setov parried them all, and gained strength by breathing deeply during the pauses. The strength was always short-lived, and Fyendodas was not yet tired. He took a scarf from a pocket and tied it over his glistening brow, and took up a ready stance at one side of the arena, the point of his sword near the ground as they had been at the beginning.

Setov stood to his full height and mirrored the stance, and they shared a look which suggested this was endgame. Fyendodas assessed his capabilities and Setov's, quickly: Setov had been stronger against the right-handed attacks, and could read him well enough to defend his lower half. Some readically instinctive movements had saved him several times now, and Fyendodas also judged that he'd tired beyond more momentum-building agile manoeuvres. Setov would probably still

be capable of withstanding a few more barrages of parries, ripostes and counter-ripostes, but making the first lunge a death-blow would still be his best tactic.

Fyendodas walked forward calmly, the Khada Sword in his left hand, still pointed at the floor. Setov continued to mirror, the Sword of the Stone in his right hand. They raised their blades to vertical and saluted in time, and then touched the points together. A tiny chink radiated around the room.

Setov twirled his blade and resumed position, but Fyendodas attacked and was parried swiftly. They scraped their blades back together to points touching, and then Setov lowered his blade to horizontal. Setov attacked this time, and was parried, and they resumed the motion back to points, but suddenly Setov lunged again. Fyendodas caught it, swung his Sword down to septeme, and lunged back.

The blow was parried, but Fyendodas made swift use of momentum and twirled himself clockwise, smoothly palming the sword back to his right hand and thrusting.

Pain lanced through his body, and he saw with sick horror Setov's Sword mirroring his own, transferred to left hand and thrust through the heart.

Fyendodas fell back, collapsed sideways at the knee, and hit the floor. The Sword of the Stone shook through him as it impacted on the stone ground first.

---

Is that it yet?

COUGH!

No? How many more?

Just two, then. Oh good. The end of the war. What happened after. Right.

The last episode of Next to the Custard.

COUGH!

The Restoration of Peace.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

Written by Ross O'Brien

It was in the last days of that great age, when the Kingdom and Aisorbma faced each other across their forested border, that the great events which shaped the modern world took place. There were great heroes from each side, men and women whose names were written in the very stars, and whose actions touched every life on both sides of the conflict.

But great events pass by, and wars end. Where great heroes once stood tall to defend civilisation as they know it, other great men and women must now stand tall and rebuild it.

COUGH!

Episode Thirty-Three: the Restoration of Peace

Rekowarilara lay content in the grass outside the shield. Erica del Erica was beside him, her bare leg over his thigh. Neither was wearing much, but the night was warm.

It wasn't exactly the most romantic area in the world at the moment, but it served their need more than adequately.

Erica had happily fallen asleep not long ago, but Rekowarilara was not tired. It wasn't the kind of night where one felt tired, since a lot had happened and he wanted to see it through. It was possible, he mused, that the strange new magic of the area was responsible for these subtle changes, though; it had restored Erica to a fully female body, perhaps it had made him more awake.

The stars were brighter here. Suddenly he saw one shoot across the sky, and he smiled. He wouldn't wake Erica – she was tired from all the transformations anyway – but he would appreciate the little romantic moments while they happened.

The shield, invisible but for the pink ripples which moved whenever the little black creatures moved around, flared pink and then disappeared, creatures and all.

Rekowarilara's psychic talent, suddenly able to peer past the shield into the fortress, opened up and saw what remained.

Fyendodas, the Blood King, was dead.

Setovarinesa, King and Prime Minister, was dead beside him.

Cafialerasun was holding the Sword of the Stone, exactly as he had seen in his brother's death-vision.

The three remaining Blood Lords had bared their elongated teeth, reared up to their full height, and were smiling at the remaining Company, fleeing for their lives. The first pounced across the room, slew a man where he stood, and backhanded another.

Rekowarilara stirred Erica, and they grabbed available clothing. Paladin Genokefirica was the first – and they realised in subsequent moments, only – one to escape. His back armour was torn, his sword gone, but he seemed unscathed himself, running as fast as he was. Rekowarilara threw him a thought, indicating he should move towards them, and he did; they met, and hid for a time, watching for pursuit. If Genokef had been embarrassed at their near-nakedness, he didn't show it in his expression.

We leave now, Rekowarilara pulsed. They rose together and moved carefully through the Forest, conserving strength where they could. Erica led, since she claimed she could see in the dark quite easily – leading Rekowarilara to fear more greatly that their pursuers could, too – but they heard no sign of pursuit for more than an hour, when they came to a clearing in the woods.

Endam's grave Rekowarilara felt Erica say, and they walked around the area more respectfully than stealthily. Genokefirica led their movements away from the site, but as Rekowarilara took Erica's arm, bringing her along, he heard a sound in the undergrowth.

Faster he pulsed, and they moved faster, then -

Genokef must have pushed forward a branch, and not thought for a moment to hold it there as they passed; Erica, either by being shorter or quicker, escaped it, but it struck Rekowarilara swiftly and he landed heavily a few paces further back.

Something roared in the bushes and lashed out at him, and he felt the death-blow strike, and then saw the bolt of electricity which Erica threw through the air. It took the creature, whatever it had been, and took it into the air, sending it far into the Forest.

Genokefirica dared to speak: 'We must move.'

Rekowarilara touched fingers to the wound across his chest, and felt the warm blood. We won't make it to anywhere this can be treated he pulsed, opening his mind more so they could all speak freely.

But they didn't. Erica looked at her newer lover, and wept; Gen turned away, and moved to stand guard.

The blood was flowing freely now, despite Erica's trying to staunch the wound with limited clothing.

You know Erica said.

I know Rekowarilara replied. Name it... name her... Lidh. I knew a girl named Lidh. She died before her time.

I love you she said. He lost the strength to reply.

---

So died a great man. Gah! I'm losing strength. One to go, Liv...

COUGH! COUGH!

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The psychic, Warolanimasa, felt his second son's passing with a heavy heart. It wasn't right for parents to outlive children.

He was standing on Wall One at the time, watching the Aisorbmii below enjoying Kingdom campfires, and celebrating their victory. Prime Minister Salomeritova had allowed it, despite warnings from his advisers that the war was not yet over. The King, the Queen, and the Lord General were still out there somewhere; there would be more battles to fight. But Salomeritova had ignored them, suggesting that the men had deserved this victory and their fun. Tomorrow's battles could wait until tomorrow.

He had shown a very brief moment of responsible thinking, however, when he told Warolanimasa and the remaining psychics to look beyond the battlefield, in search of these individuals who might inspire the Kingdom army to rally. Salomeritova had followed up this decision with the decision to explore the battlefield himself, and try to recover the Sword of the Stone, last seen in the midst of the Kingdom army.

Warolanimasa knew who had taken it, and to where, but he decided he didn't want the Prime Minister to know about that yet. Following his orders, he discovered that the King was dead by a Beast this night, similar to the one which had so royally damaged his forces here. The Queen and Lord General had been killed by an explosion in the Forest.

It was also discovered that the Royal Castle had been destroyed, and that the Kingdom government would soon depend entirely on nobles bred to lead, all of whom would want the new throne.

Warolanimasa touched, in his psychic voyage across the realm, the mind of former Baroness Erica del Erica, who knelt with Rek's head in her lap. It wasn't right for lovers to be separated either, he thought, remembering Aura, his first wife, who had borne him Tek so very shortly before her untimely passing. That young Doctor, Medofesipanu, had told him it was a cancer.

That had been hard, so very hard. Just as hard as accepting Lara, to be a mother figure for Tek. It had been a great release when they fell in love and wed truly, with the birth of Rek. And now she, and he and he, were dead too, and the years weighed very heavily.

He sighed, thoughts in turmoil, mind swimming through old memories, when the young man on Wall Two summoned him. The forest, War. Something approaches.

Together they soared and looked... and saw... Beasts. Many, a dozen, two dozen. Unlike the first, they wore the tatters of freshly torn uniforms.

The last Company, who had accompanied Setovarinesa into the Psyopalace, had been transformed, and they were approaching. Fast.

He sought the Prime Minister swiftly, seeking across the battlefield, but could not see him. Where had he gone? Who knew. He returned to his body and walked swiftly to the alert bugler, who sounded the alarm. Surprised Aisorbmii troops engaged in various forms of looting looked up towards Wall One. They eventually began to follow one flustered deputation, led by an impatient Minister holding a sword hilt. 'It's the remains of Setovarinesa's sword,' the Prime Minister explained as he arrived. 'Why the bugle call?'

Warolanimasa didn't say anything: he showed Salomeritova instead. Beasts, twenty, each as tall as two men.

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Aargh. COUGH! COUGH! Gonna have to finish here, Liv...

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War ended there, that day. The surviving Blood Lords defeated the remnants of the Kingdom army easily, and swiftly conquered the forces of the Aisorbmii at Rene Ponit.

At the Psyopalace they erected a statue to Fyendodas, and in line with his new philosophy of honour, they erected one to Setovarinesa as well. The two warriors would stand, blades touching, for years, though Setovarinesa's statue was quickly worn away by the elements, and Fyendodas' was toppled and destroyed by a dissenter group a few years after that.

The Sword of the Stone disappeared, and no-one knows where to. Nor does anyone know – we've run out of time, Liv.

Goodbye, brother.

This was the story of the last Great Age, the Age Next to the Custard. Narrator Dyeoferihopa, signing off.

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At that moment Liv stabbed her blade through Dye's heart, and killed him quickly.

There was a wet human brain in his hands when his body fell off the chair. It made a wet squelching noise as it hit the dirty ground.

To Be Concluded...

Written by Ross O'Brien

## Epilogue: the Remains of the Preservers

REAPER'S CAVE. SEVENTY-SIX YEARS AFTER THE GREAT WAR. 5AM.

Liv dropped the knife instantly. There were tears streaming down her face. Vurc just looked on, totally stunned at her devotion. Luk broke down and jumped forward to try and save Dye, but as Liv turned away she swept both her arms around him too, holding him tightly away from Dye.

Luk burst into tears himself, and the surviving members of that family gathered in that dusty place stood and wept and mourned the necessity of Dye's death.

Between them, now, they knew it all. How the last Great Age had ended, and with it much of the culture of the two lost nations: the Kingdom, which had been largely eradicated, and the Aisorbmii, largely enslaved.

The public school system would have the people believe that the nations were destroyed by fearsome beasts created by dark sorceries, which were in turn hunted down and destroyed by the arrival of the Blood Lords, who came from an island across the north sea. These Blood Lords rebuilt society, giving them new knowledge, technologies, and a new sense of civilisation. This history would have the people believe that the ancient ways of rice pudding were archaic and false, and that custard was the true gift of the gods.

The three here tonight knew now that the Blood Lords had not been named for their genetic superiority, or their ability to heal, regenerate wounds, provide strength, and even enhance the physical form. They were named for prices paid, sacrifices made, blood spilt.

Seventy-six years ago they had conquered. There had been many Beasts, but initially there were three. One had destroyed the Kingdom. One had failed against the Aisorbmii. The last, now known to be Paladin-Reaper Torosanifeya, had been sent to the Reaper's Cave to destroy their ancient records of the past, and all the knowledge they possessed.

It had been a great battle. Almost all the Reapers had been killed. The Cave only survived because of the timely arrival of Cafialerasun, who wielded the Sword of the Stone. As the eldest surviving Reaper, she made the decision to close the Cave, and hide its secrets. She warned them all not to seek it out again.

But then, these four had rarely obeyed their grandmother.

Livoferihopa – literally, 'live for hope', named in the Aisorbmii male fashion because of the convenience of her parents' names – was the image of her grandmother, and most dedicated to The Cause.

Vurcoferihopa was a follower, not a leader. Perhaps it was in the nature of good-natured strong men to be followers, lest others become afraid of them, Vurc didn't know, but others also assumed for the same reason that he was stupid, for reasons that Vurc – an intelligent man – couldn't fathom.

Lukoferihopa was the youngest, at fifty-four, and the most genuine. Again, others took him for a fool, but he wasn't. He was far more emotionally open than any of them, and consequently had a much greater capacity for reading deeply into others' feelings as a Reaper. Such a trait might have led one to believe he was ideal for their mission, but he was not. No... Dye was the best choice.

Dyeoferihopa had always been grim. It had been said, many times, sometimes to his face, that he might be one of those few Reapers who was attuned to their own deaths, and therefore might even have known the circumstances of his death. Who knew?

Well, they would, soon enough. Vurc realised he was staring at the brain on the floor again. He moved forward, and carefully picked it up...

...and put it back into the preservative-filled jar where it belonged...

...and put the jar back on the shelf of the cave, next to...

...the others. Rows of jars on stacks of shelves. Each preserving a brain.

This one was the memory and remains of Warolanimasa, the Great War. Beside it, the last remains of Rekowarilara, and then Fyendodas himself, and then Sazogenirica and King Arit fre Togr... and all the rest stretching back in order to Marquis Endam ar Berrito.

Fifty-four brains. Some, like Tekowariaura's and Baroness Erica del Erica's, removed after their funerals. Some, like Lord General Manus iw Elbirt's and Prime Minister Terovaniceti's, had just been lying around. Silomenituda had been killed in the name of research. So many, so many...

There were absences which might have made the record complete. Prime Minister Galomanisula, whose remains had been cremated. Queen Srinkra del Bou, whose ashes presumably still lay on the ground near the Psyopalace. None of the wielders of the Sword of the Stone – Sunder pi Yeonan, Setovarinesa, Cafialerasun – had been reaped like the mind of Commander Reglan ar Crestis; perhaps an extension of the magic sword's protection, in that the wielder could not be seen magically or psychically.

Kadocasitari the Reaper was also among these collected minds. Their grandfather, for whom Dye had wept as he reaped.

So many... so many. And for what?

For The Cause, perhaps. This was the rebel movement founded by the last Iron Jamtin, Paladin Genokefirica. A simple name, for a simple goal: remove the Blood Lords from power. Sadly, no longer a simple task. The people had learned to live with the advanced technology the Blood Lords offered.

Hence the project entitled Next to the Custard. A documentary of their true nature, told from the perspectives of actual eye-witnesses, to be broadcast directly into the minds of the populace. A simple, innocent title; all references to the Reapers preferably removed; and not an incriminating document in sight.

All that remained now was to reap the documentary from Dye's mind, and keep it presentable for a large audience...

Liv and Luk knelt by Dye. Liv took his right hand, and Luk his left, and they joined their remaining hands. They'd been through the instructions several times... Luk was to reap it, Liv was to ensure it was a clean reap. Vurc was to be the first viewer. He stood back and watched.

'We work for the cause,' he decided to say.

'We live for the cause,' Liv said.

There was a pause. "We'll die for the cause," would've been Dye's statement. Not to keep picking on him, or anything morbid like that, but this was how they were named.

After allowing the sentence to be unsaid in time, Luk finished: 'We're searching for the cause.'

Then he spoke again: 'It was in the last days of that great age, when the Kingdom and Aisorbma faced each other across their forested border...'

'It's working,' Vurc murmured. Luk stopped saying the words, now that he had the beginning of the first episode; he just reaped. His mouth still moved at times. Liv clutched his fingers tighter when Lidhamedocafi died, and when Mirella zrey Tabitha was assaulted; Luk could add great depths of emotion to a reaping, but there were limits to the length that could be preserved in a recording. They had to get to the end.

Vurc kept back, and felt a swell of pride at this significant moment: the quest coming to fruition. He looked around the room again, admiring the effort that went into keeping these archives in pristine condition for three-quarters of a century.

There were cabinets where many documents had been written and filed, describing how and where and when each record had been found. There were racks of old weapons, and armour, and tools, and plates, each of them a priceless relic from

centuries past. There were bookshelves containing volumes recording themes of the centuries, and folders containing documents waiting to be recorded and sorted and placed efficiently where it could be found.

Vurc had been careful to make sure this folder had been put back the way they had found it, because Luk had wanted to be very untidy when they entered this treasure trove. They had researched it carefully, because they had needed to piece together a framework of events while constructing Dye's narration. One document, it seemed, had never seen the light of day. It was a door to a whole other realm of possibilities.

It was a letter written by Galomanisula, haltingly written in the Kingdom dialect with the assistance of the exiled prince, hoping for peace.

To his Honoured Majesty the King of the Gentle Peoples of the Kingdom,

First, may I offer to thee mine sincerest thanks for the kind wording of thy letter. That it exists at all, much less was delivered to me by two of thine own countrymen, fills me with great hope that we can work together towards mutual peace.

That this letter did not arrive, as I had hoped, in the hands of my trusted Ranger, I attribute to those who hear the bards speak of glory and heroism against terrible odds and do not think of the death counts which make those odds so terrible. It is not easy to teach the young about death when there are no new bodies each day, and the old have no knowledge of peace to teach them, but we have lasted thirty long years so far, and I mean us to last another thirty, and another, until the old wars are forgotten.

I too had given considerable thought to our dilemma, in terms of decisive action. Thine first option, the cessation of the consumption of rice pudding, will not be successful unless both countries cease together. It is, I agree, the first, main cause of discrimination between our peoples.

Vurc smiled at these words. In his time, the people were discriminated by whether they liked their custard runny or lumpy.

Thine suggestion of greater integration of our nations is far more appealing to mine mind. However, I cannot see how either option will resolve our current crisis.

It is therefore mine decision to request that I might be able to visit you at thine Castle, at thine earliest convenience, to collaborate our thoughts and more firmly implant in the minds of both our peoples our single-mindedness to find a peaceful solution.

I trust thine pigeon Alfonso will find me wherever I am; the rising tensions between our peoples require mine continual presence, and I can barely take a moment's rest to enjoy what peace exists at the moment.

Tarry well, and good health,

Galomanisula, the Prime Minister of Aisorbma.

Vurc's abilities were limited, but he could feel in the last drops of ink on the paper the interruption of the traitor who slew the Prime Minister at that time.

What might life be like now, had that war not taken place, and Galomanisula continued his work to bring peace to a nation which did not want it?

Who knew?

'This was,' said Luk, 'this was...'

'This was the story of the last Great Age,' said Liv.

'Narrator...' they said together, 'Dyeoferihopa,' another pause, 'signing off.'

Vurc approached them then. 'You did it,' he said. 'You did it.'

He helped them both climb to their feet, and they smiled a little, recognising their own achievement. Then they shared with him the complete vision of the documentary.

'This will make a difference,' he assured them afterwards.

Together they carried Dyeoferihopa's body from the Cave, shielding their eyes as they moved into the dawning sunlight blinding them from the horizon. They buried Dyeoferihopa some fifty yards from the Cave, and committed his soul to the heavens.

Vurc watched the sun rise. Today was going to be a good day, he decided. A day of hope, when things would get better for them all.

The three mounted their horses, and, with Liv leading Dye's by the reins, began to make their way to the north, to spread the news.

It would be a day to remember. A day to feel alive. A day of light.

Thus ends the Saga of Next to the Custard

Written by Ross O'Brien and Matthew Walton

Thanks to Shazz and the editors of the H2G2 Post for their endless patience.... The story finally got told.

## In Memoriam

Endam ar Berrito	Raiding Party
Danovarilani	Responses to Pain
Tarek ir Teriss	Royal Patronage
Tekowariaura	Reports and Portents
Lidhamedocafi	Running near the Precipice
Erica del Erica	Risks to Plans
Tesorilivesa	A Ranger's Plight
Dutozabitiya	Rough Play
Shaat'ka, aka Sandresk	Risks to Practices
Gunorelitara	Receiving the Parchment
Caira iwl Srindra	Riding over the Precipice
Finogiliseru	Rise of the Python
Teril gu Srandar	The Road to Perdition
Bemosolinata	Rest in Peace
Samfr de Samfr	The Rewards of Patriotism
Remolor ir Ati	Rituals of Preparation
Timit fre Dasain	Revelations Profound
Silomeniteda	Regular Passings
Arbus iw Canica	Regular Passings
Ricataka gu Hildar	Regular Passings
Rech ar Nemidir	Regular Passings
Telis de Telis	Regular Passings
Reglan ar Crestis	Regular Passings
Cirolaminana	Regular Passings
Vitix ar Gerrind	Rising Pressures
Bitokatiwopa	Rising Pressures
ArDOSilitidu	Rising Pressures
Terovaniceti	Reaper's Path
Kadocasitari	Reaper's Path
Dunofetilipe	Retreat and Panic
Vinofetilipe	Retreat and Panic
Dushkama del Rayma	The Resolve of Psychics
Mirella zrey Tabitha	The Resolve of Psychics
Terid gu Dagda	Rene Ponit
Senodenilapa	Rene Ponit
Benipelicora	Rene Ponit
Milosarituva	Rene Ponit
Rabit de Turson	Rene Ponit
Dutips ar Talpa	Revolt of the Peasants
Astomus de Getal	Revolt of the Peasants
Mitosipilitz	Revolt of the Peasants
Medofesipanu	A Reliance on Promises
Tidor iw Vatenus	A Reliance on Promises
Torosanifeya	The Rise of Powers
Legodatiperi	Ride of the Patriots
Tidocaziwena	Rally Point
Gillian del Freya	Royal Pretenses
Manus iw Elbirt	Return of the Prince
Arit fre Togr	The Realisation of Prophecy
Sazogenirica	The Realisation of Prohpecs
Fyendodas	Riposte and Parry
Rekowarilara	The Restoration of Peace
Warolanimasa	The Restoration of Peace
The Narrator, Dyeoferihopa	The Remains of the Preservers