

PROLOGUE

*With all the blood that spilled in the mountains,
no, with all the blood that was even spilled in Toniki itself,
Usaic's ultimate work could fit in your hand.*

*Imagine that.
A rock that could fit in your hand.
The Civan Empire would have gone to war over it.
Dawnfire's Queen would have given anything to keep it.
Even the Alchemists of Ameressa would have given anything to study it.*

*We should have been so lucky that they were
the only ones that wished to have the Coldstone for their own.*

*We caught the eyes of a literal legion of lost souls.
Torn from their cursed suffering and made to walk the land,
the dozens of spirits that collectively called themselves "Daringol"
sought to claim it for the sake of feeding on its power.*

They weren't alone.

*Brine-soaked and covered in a horrific shell of toxic ice,
the demon Makolichi wanted the stone to claim power.
To be able to lord over all those he viewed as 'lesser.'
To escape those he had pledged loyalty to.*

JOSHUA E. B. SMITH

I can't blame him for that, at least.

*Then there were the shiriak.
Scavenger demons. Disgusting. Repulsive.
Only they weren't scavenging:
They were searching.*

*We assumed it was for the Coldstone, drawn by its power.
Surely it put off enough of a scent to attract them.
Everything else was, why not those disgusting rodents?*

*And there was the messenger from the Abyss.
A strange little mutant, even by the standards of the pit.
It claimed to serve an interested party that
called himself the Man of the Red Death.*

*If I knew then what I know now?
I would have screamed for every Maiden in the Kingdom.
Every Paladin. Every Knight. Every Mage. Every Templar.*

*All he claimed to want was for the portals
to the other side of the veil to be closed.*

*He lied.
That lie cost us.*

*Yet, there was little we could do to stop it,
or even seek retaliation.
As dangerous and regrettable as it was for us
to catch the eye of the Man of the Red Death and his irritating
Acolyte, it wasn't their actions that did the most damage.*

*That dubious honor befell my student.
It was his choices, his thoughts, his efforts to do the right thing.*

*When it was over, he learned a valuable lesson,
one Hirshma had attempted to teach him:
Magic has a cost. Misusing it will take a toll.*

The rest of us were taught a different lesson.

FAVORITE THINGS

One equally important, and equally hard to learn.

We learned to fear him.

*~Sir Steelhom
Office of Oversight, New Civa*

I. QUESTIONS & UNWELCOME ANSWERS

“Explain this development to me.”

The creature twitched under the gaze of his master. “[What to explain/What to say? Things have happened as they've happened/Things could not have happened otherways.]”

“You know better than to answer me that way, Rishnobia.”

Flinching, the demon quickly ducked its bulbous head. “[Of course/I'm sorry! To answer in true/May not be welcome.]”

His master didn't make a move, but the collar of his robe flicked back and forth of its own volition. “I did not ask if the truth would be welcome. I asked you to explain how it came to be.”

“[Of course/Of course! Explain I will/Do I shall!]”

“Good. Now, begin. I have other tasks to see to; I do not wish to have to delay my efforts in the grand game to step into the middle of this... insignificant dispute.”

Rishnobia bounced up in the air and latched onto the cavern's stone wall. Small fires burned in wrought-iron braziers in the corners of the lair. They cast just enough light to let someone read from the hundreds of old scrolls and musty tomes scattered in the underground library. “[There are passageways open/Far more than one. Yes it's true/Eternity seeps through. You were right/Men did find.]”

Under his cloak, dark red eyes narrowed and focused tightly on the little demon. “Eternity, you said? More than a single breach into the elements around the Mount?”

“[More my master/More and more. It is not just the risen elements/ It is the elements churning below too.]”

The stare didn't change. “An entrance into the old prison as well? That is unexpected. I do not like the unexpected, Rishnobia. Have there

been any undesired departures worth noting?”

“[It feels as such there hasn't/But many insignificant condemned are loose.]”

“No condemned are insignificant in the end. I would decide to explain the developments faster were I you,” the man in the red robe intoned. “Assume that it is in your best interests to do so – my *avored* Acolyte.”

Little bloodshot eyes peered up and went comically wide. “[Yes my master!/Yes whatever asked!]”

The robe flickered again, almost like it was... angry. “Did I say to acknowledge that you will do as I said? I said for you to explain. If I must ask a third time, you will no longer be favored. Tell me why it is that these breaches have been opened – or have you failed to discover that as of yet?”

“[What is it I know/What I am able to say. A wizard sought to make a stone of ice/A piece of Tundrala to exist in this world. Wished to make it so/It would never ever go.]”

“An interesting attempt at manipulating planar energies. Pointless in the long term. A single stone? Objects of power come and go. Wars are fought over them, legends are made, and then they fall into legend and vanish for all time. A potentially worthy effort, but ultimately pointless, I am sure.”

Rishnobia nodded in agreement. “[Will never understand/Interests of men. Too rash/Too thoughtless. Always seeking truths to be more/Always ending broken when they're found.]”

His master drummed his fingers on his desk. “Those that have never experienced humanity have no place to comment on it, Acolyte.”

“[Yes master/Apologies offered!]”

“Accepted.”

“[The entries are known/Some more than others. Mortals are at work searching/Seeking them out to close.]”

“To close? Not to control? There is a very strong difference in this. One is tolerable, the other is not. If they seek to shut them, then my interests in the area are at an end. That is the hope; I have other tasks I wish to set you on of more importance. Yet I cannot until I know that the portals are sealed. It is... unacceptable... if men decide to open permanent entrances into the next world.”

“[Yes, to close/Not to own. Men of the cloth/Men of the sword. A single man of the Gods found it/Guided by a wisp of the Upper Elements. The wisp seeks to protect the wizard's work/The man seeks

to restore balance's true order.]”

The stranger leaned back in a makeshift throne, dark red eyes gazing down at the little beast with unbridled intensity. “A change in pace for sure. I am vaguely amused about the wisp, however. Not typically the brightest of the lot. I daresay the vast majority of even the lowliest pitspawn are brighter and wiser than the vapid dainty beings that flit around in the upper planes.”

Rishnobia twitched under the stare and rubbed its tiny hands together nervously. “[Different this one is/Not truly a wisp. A soul of a wisp placed in the body/Of the wizard's long dead daughter and made more.”

“Necromancy and elemental magic?” he asked with an arched eyebrow. “How intriguing. The two do not often go hand in hand. Manipulating the dead is a much different skill than merely manipulating the world.”

“[Forgive me for saying/But you are wrong.]”

That made him sit up and lean forward, elbows resting on his knees. “Of all things in this world, Rishnobia, *wrong* about the nature of necromancy is *not* a thing that I am now nor will *ever* be.”

With a squeak of fear, the demon all-but curled up on itself. “[Oh I know your knowledge!/Did not mean to imply. My true meaning was to that/Necromancy was not used to bind her!]”

“Necromancy is the *only* thing that can bind a soul,” the dusky-skinned man whispered – although you could have heard it in the next room over as clear as day. “In one form or another, necromancy is the *only* magic that does so.”

“[There is always divine/It was not men.]”

“Divine?” he scoffed. “Do you expect me to believe that those pretentious overseers would care enough about anything below Their vaunted mount to ensoul a body with a wisp?”

Rishnobia nodded quickly. “[The Goddess of Ice has an interest/She is truly not the only one. She is the one that gifted the wizard the wisp's soul/A gift that she has blessed in many ways of power.]”

The observation caught him off guard and made him take a pause. “That is interesting,” he slowly replied. “I have a hard time believing that you are correct, mind you, but I will allow you to entertain the thought for now. You said that there are other Gods that have taken an interest? If I am to believe you, which ones?”

“While He has not sent a minion/There is a creature roaming the woods. Bloated by brine and marked by Zell/The Brineblood has His

magic seeping through.”

“Should I presume that Frosel is where the other breaches are pointing, then?”

Finally able to control his quivering, Rishnobia slightly uncurled himself and looked up at his master. “Yes it is/Those cold shores.”

“Quaint. Is this cretin running loose of any consequence?”

“[Dangerous it is/Claimed several lives. It is not long for this world/It has already fought the priest and lost.]”

The man in red kept his gaze stoic and intent on the nearly-insignificant mote before him. “Lost but not destroyed? It must not be much of a priest.”

“[It is an abogin/Returns again and again],” the demon clarified, twitching ever so slightly.

“Oh, how wonderful. Then for the sake of the priest, I hope that they find the anchor for it soon. Abogin are notoriously irritating to manage.”

“[The priest has found the foci/The abogin knows that it's stolen. There will be a confrontation in a matter of days/It will not end well for Zell's demon at all. Priest has too many allies of the Gods/They all wish it long dead and gone.]”

He turned slightly and flicked his hand at one of the cold torches lining the hall, making it burst back alive out of sheer force of will. “Good. So does it appear that this will all be resolved in the near future? Is there any need for me to leave you there to watch? I have other tasks that you would be suited for.”

“[Resolved it soon will be/How soon is another question. I am still yet unsure how/But the Harlot has lost patience.]”

“The Harlot? What is *Her* involvement in this?”

Rishnobia recognized that tone – and couldn't hide the fear from having it pointed in his direction. “The priest that was sent/His heart belongs to Her. He has already ventured past this world/In his quest to close the gates. The ether around him has trembled/Both from his and Her annoyance. It is an irony to be sure with all that's said/A man deformed as he could ironically catch Her eye.”

Scoffing, the man in red lit another torch with a simple gesture and without more than a passing thought. “Deformed? Love is blind, of course, so they say. What would a deformity of flesh matter to the woman that ignores everything but the contents of the heart?”

“[It is an irony/An irony I said! Love is blind/He is truly half.]”

“Half *what*, Rishinobia?”

“[Half blind/One eye.]”

It was his master's turn to twitch – though it was more of a flinch, like he'd just been slapped. “A half-blind priest of love?” His eyes, those dark, haunting red eyes went ice cold. “What do you mean that he has ventured past this world?”

If Rishnobia picked up on it, he didn't show it. He'd regret that. “[He died/Yet returned.]”

He twitched again, eyes nearly closing. “Died?”

That the demon noticed. “Fought Zell's icy stain twice/The first time not well. His allies eventually pulled him back/A minion of the Harlot aided. They are unaware of Love's true care/Believe that it was just divine providence.”

“You are aware that names have power, yes, *avored* acolyte?”

Balling up and rolling a few feet back, Rishnobia squeaked out a quick reply. “[Of course my lord I do true/It is why I never speak yours!]”

It didn't do any good. The man in red stood up and began a slow march towards his minion, heavy footsteps punctuating every bile-drenched word out of his mouth. “So tell me what name it is that has one eye and holds the favor of the Harlot?”

“[Oh that name!/A simple name. Akaran DeHawk/That name!]”

“Akaran.” The name fell from his lips like a boulder down a mountain, and all other sounds died in the underground chamber. “*He* is this 'simple priest' sent to deal with this task? And he has *died* in his efforts to complete it?”

“[Yes my lord/Watched him do! Felt him return/Met him once! That is the priest that I passed the warning to/I do not think that he took it seriously enough.]”

He growled out his response almost before Rishnobia could finish. “Of course he wouldn't. This changes things. Has the time expired on the warning you gave?”

“[No master the time is not at hand/there are four days and nights that remain.]”

“Unfortunate that my word is bond in matters such as this. However, if Akaran is involved and has already come to suffering once, this cannot be ignored,” he openly seethed. “*He*, of all people, should *not* be allowed to travel from this world to the next and back. That is a recipe for a disaster that I am not yet ready to manage.”

“[This man with one eye?/That priest causes you concern?]”

“Yes. He does.”

“[But why him?/He is weak?]”

“Simply watch, my Acolyte,” he cautioned. “Where he walks, suffering will follow. I have need of that suffering, but I do not need it today. Sadly, I need him alive to inflict it. Oh, and acolyte?”

Rishnobia looked up at him with terrified round eyes. “[Master's question will be answered/Please my lord make your ask.]”

“There are not any *other* Gods poking around this, are there? If my involvement is going to be forced, I do not wish to be surprised by any more *unexpected* interests.”

The demon cringed and tried to hide in the dirt. “[Sadly there is one/Not at all welcome.]”

“Who?” he demanded, the ice in his eyes barely matching the intensity of his voice. “I assume you do not mean just some random preacher spouting gibberish about the nature of the afterlife?”

When Rishnobia told him, the Man of the Red Death didn't even bother to hide the look of revulsion on his face.



Four soldiers trekked through the wilderness, and not a single one of them was happy about it – least of all the one in front. Silvery-haired and brandishing a halberd with a grime-covered blade on the tip, he stood separate but more than equal to the army regulars behind him. He also hadn't quit muttering profanities under his breath with nearly every step.

“Think your student made any headway?” his friend called out from a few yards away.

“The wisp seemed to think so.”

“The wisp just went when he called. If he got done or not is another story entirely,” the other man argued.

Paladin-Commander Steelhom planted the end of his weapon on the ground and looked over his shoulder. “My concern right now is less what he discovered, and more as to what we did.”

One of the other soldiers – a grizzled thug of a man – answered for his boss. “A burned up village and a bunch of the living dead. I thought that's the kind of stuff that people like you dealt with on a regular basis.”

“Mado! Mind yourself,” his fair-haired companion scolded in a hushed whisper. “If the paladin is concerned, then we should be too.”

“Penela is right,” Steelhom answered. “I *am* concerned.”

“Fill me in for why, exactly? I thought you took care of it,” their commander asked with a puzzled look on his face.

The priest just shrugged. “Xandros. We excised the ruins. That's a

non-issue. The *issue* is that there was a breach to Frosel hidden in that frozen graveyard, and it's obvious that Usaic made it. Nor is it any less-obvious that Daringol was given birth in the middle of those burnt-up buildings."

His friend tilted his head slightly to the side. "You think there's more of those gateways, don't you?"

"Think? No. I am certain of it. I am equally as worried about the nature of this village; why one of those corpses carried a crest of the Order of Love, why the placard for the village had a message to Her followers."

Xandros caught up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "You can't do anything to stop the weather from claiming the long-lost."

"No, but too many threads have begun to combine. I think I understand why the Order was sent here," he answered. "The Goddess must have known we would find this."

"Then don't be so worried about what you've found. I mean, if you've got faith in Her, and you think this is why She sent you and your boy, doesn't that mean that everything is going to work out right?"

"Howso?"

He shrugged and looked up at the sky. "If She's got faith enough in the two of you to whisper at your people to send you, then She's got faith you can handle it."

Steelhom coughed and shook his head. "She is a Goddess. She has no need of faith."

"Neither do Queens," his friend argued. "Soldiers like us, we get told what to do by people with more power than us. But, they wouldn't tell us to go do a job if they didn't think we could handle it. How's that any different than what you're thinking?"

"I... suppose not. Do understand that this development is unsettling. This wasn't to be more than just a simple haunting," he sighed with a roll of his shoulders.

"When has a plan you've been involved with ever gone the way it should?"

"Touche."

Behind them, Mado cleared his throat. "I don't like the way you two said that."

"Me either, respectfully, sirs," Penela added.

Their Commander gave a quick bark of laughter with a shiver at the end. "What do you know. Usually takes grunts like you two years to figure that out."

"Be nice," Steelhom chided.

"I am being nice."

"This really is him nice. It's his wife that scares the shit out of me."

"I know he is," Steelhom drolly replied. "As far as Evalia? She should."

Mado shivered (but not from the cold). "She does."

"Listen, speaking of scaring the shit out of us..."

"What is it, Penela?" the paladin asked.

She cleared her throat and looked down at her feet. "You're serious about that... thing... in the cave? That was some kind of gateway into...?"

"A damned soul attempting to cross the veil from the pit into this world? Yes, it was, and yes, that was a gateway into the next. "

"Not... not the next? Not... really? That wasn't really a gateway into the Abyss? It's not real... is it? It's..."

Steelhom stopped and walked over to her, a hand going for her shoulder. "Are you asking if there really is such a place as the Abyss?"

The soldier couldn't look up to face him. "Yeah... yeah, sir, I am."

"There is," he replied. "I would have thought that was evident by now."

"There's knowing..." she started.

Xandros gave a nod and a flicker of a smile. "And then there's knowing. I understand where you're coming from, Penela. First time you've seen anything like that up close and personal. Most people never will."

"Well, not until it's too late," the paladin clarified.

His friend frowned and glanced at him. "Come again?"

"Everyone dies," he said with a shrug. "Most just don't have proof that it exists until it's too late to avoid it, if it's where they're to be."

Penela's face fell a little more. "I just thought it was a place where demons lived... people really...?"

"They really," Steelhom answered – quietly, gently, like speaking to a toddler. "They really do. It's why men like me must do the things that we do."

"Lot to take in," her commander added with another slight frown and tired look in his eyes. "I know. Not dealing with it too well myself."

"You look just fine to me, Commander," Mado replied.

Xandros just shrugged. "I'm paid to look fine. If it's weighing so heavily on you, go spend some time at the shrine when we're back at the village. That goes for both of you. You're relieved of further duties

for the rest of today. Tomorrow as well, if we have a lull. If nothing else, this hike and that miserable night we spent out there have earned you two a respite.”

Penela clutched her hands a little tighter to her chest. “Thank you, sir. I will.”

“Suppose I should too,” Mado grumbled. “What about you, sir?”

Their commander looked around and then heaved his heavy satchel over his shoulder. “I... I am going to hold my wife. That's what I'm going to do.”

“While the three of you try to rectify this development with your existing worldview, I'll attempt to query the villagers,” Steelhom added. “See if anyone knows anything about... any of this.”



At the mouth of an old frozen river, *shiriak* crawled around rocks along the shore. They ducked in and out of fallen logs and dug into snow-covered holes. The slimy little creatures occasionally thrust their noses into the air and took long hard whiffs at the sky.

Others had found a rotted carcass of a long-dead faun. That was where sixteen of the demonic vermin had congregated, all around the sad remnants of the deer. But it wasn't the deer that held their interest.

If Usaic's obscure enchantments weren't so strong, the two priests of Love would have been able to smell its stench in the ether a mile away. Of course, if Usaic's obscure enchantments weren't so strong, it wouldn't have been stuck in the mountains for so long. It was hard to say where it came from, but the *why* was a much easier answer.

A fat hand with bloated and saggy skin reached out and picked up a *shiriak* and pulled it close to its chest. The abomination was easily the height and a half of Akaran, but nearly three times as wide and five times as heavy. It was a grotesque wall of pale-orange, swollen, dripping flesh with a head that had no neck, and short stubby legs that were as thick as trees. It looked nude, but that was anybody's guess; nothing had been able to see if its master had blessed it with genitalia for years.

It held the squirming vermin in front of its face and looked at it with round, bulged-out eyes as it licked cracked lips with a dripping pink tongue. It opened its mouth as if to eat it, then straightened up slightly and pushed the demonkin against a fatty fold on its chest. It squeaked in fear and struggled even harder to no avail.

A toothless, gaping black mouth opened in the middle of the horrid wrinkles. Bile-colored saliva rolled off of its thick tongue. It licked the *shiriak* once as it squirmed, then sucked the rodent inside. It groaned in

a mix of raw hunger and sickness, body churning as it digested the smaller beast. Little memories flashed in its eyes as it sucked on its unwilling snack.

It reached for the next closest *shiriak* before it was finished with the first one. Visions of a girl floating off of the ground, scolding the soldiers she traveled with. A girl with frosty eyes and pale skin, a girl with little crystal scales up and down her arms shining in the light.

{Not the one. Of the cold that stops growth. Not the one.}

The gluttonous monster growled as it stuffed the second *shiriak* into its gut. More pictures raced through its mind once it was safely tucked into the gaping crack. Images of a long waterfall falling down into a city steeped in mud; sights of assorted villagers going about their day, none-the-wiser. One of the images froze on a face – an older woman with soft features, and pale gray-green eyes you could get lost in.

{Refuser of the glory of growth. Not the one.}

It continued to feast on the gathered *shiriak*, stomach swelling with each demon it consumed. Its chest and stomach started to squirm as too many shapes pressed against the underside of its skin. When it opened its mouth to accept the next one, one of them tried to peer up and out of the grotesque chasm, screaming all the way.

With each one it ate, it saw more images and pictures that raced through its mind. It saw a furious woman shouting at her troops with little bursts of black and red fire popping out of her gloves between holding on to her pregnant belly.

{Not the one. Tender of the cyclical, brings high to low to let growth begin in the passing. Not the one.}

It saw another, an old woman standing in front of a gravestone, hands clenched and curses leaving her lips as she rained against her family's foolishness. A little bunny stood right beside her, pressing its head against her leg with each uttered profanity and borderline blasphemy she shouted. ***{Not the one. Servant of the false growth. Profaner of the truth of all life.}***

One last *shiriak* gave it the answers it sought. Visions of shredded twitching bodies laying on cobblestone streets as a pathetic one-eyed man carved his way through shards of toxic ice. ***{Heretic. Hateful. Growth will claim him. Growth claims everyone. Not the one.}***

A demon in a shining coat of frozen brine flung another wave of frozen daggers into the crowd. Blood gushed freely as bodies fell to the ground. It roared through a mouth covered in tentacles, body riddled with rot and twisted bone. The abomination growled in delight as the

image came into complete focus behind its eyes.

{HIM! THE ONE! Pledged to Growth, gave to growth, took from growth! QUIT GROWING! Interrupted cycle of growth to grow cold stop growth not come to growth! That ONE! THAT ONE!}

Rearing up to its full repulsive height, the fat monstrosity heaved forward and spewed several of the smaller demonkin back out of its abdominal maw. It pushed down and defecated two more into the creek, a wave of shit following them into the water.

{THAT ONE! WE MAKE THAT ONE GROW!} It rumbled again as he reached into the stream of shit flowing around its legs. The *shiriak* dove into it, covering themselves and feasting on the sludge.

{Then make others grow. Make others grow for Neph'kor!}