

Imagine a world where being gay is not only accepted but expected....

Welcome to Eliantar, a feudal world with magic, fantastical creatures, towering castles, and special powers gifted from the gods! Filled with endless forests and crystal waters, Eliantar was designed to be a paradise.

But evil has found Eliantar. The newly crowned Prince has narrowly survived assassination and a witch with the powers to raise the dead threatens the peaceful kingdom. With his advisors quarreling, the Prince turns to the reclusive hunter Ara Tataman.

Ara, reeling from a tragic past filled with dark memories, has chosen a life of solitude. But when the handsome ruler of the entire world calls upon a lowly hunter, how can he say no? Conflicted by his life of isolation and his growing feelings for the Prince, Ara finds himself thrust into a situation he had not prepared for. Will Ara save Prince Vale and the kingdom of Eliantar from the necromancer or prove that he is not the hero that everyone thinks he is? The stage is set in the Woodland Tombs for the beginning of the end of Eliantar.

The Woodland Tombs of Eliantar

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Book 1-The Woodland Tombs of Eliantar

By

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Prologue

Once Upon a Time there was no Happily Ever After. You see, not all stories from worlds other than ours are glowing tales of princes rescuing princesses from evil dragons and witches and living happily ever after. Not all worlds are beautiful sprawling domains with grassy hills, sparkling streams, and enchanted creatures. Many worlds are black voids where very little life can even exist, and the life that is there is as black and insidious as the realm itself. In worlds like that there can be no happy ending because there was never hope to be found in the beginning.

There are also worlds, however, that are beautiful fairy-tale worlds of splendor that become dark realms of evil over time. These worlds with tales of crumbling majesty are rarely spoken of in nursery rhymes or bed time stories.

Eliantar was one such world, although to have seen it in its glory, one would never suspect the imminent downfall that awaited the celebrated land. What proceeds is the story of Eliantar in its final years. The sad irony was that the waning years for Eliantar, the last decade before its demise, were the best years in the lands long history. However, it is terribly disheartening to begin a story at the end and although Eliantar did not have a Happily Ever After, it of course did have a Once Upon a Time that generations of the world's inhabitants told to their children.

Once upon a time in a universe far away from any known before, a group of elemental gods came together to create a new world. They all agreed that it should be a paradise, one that would outshine all the other worlds that they had created. And so, summoning all of their strength the group of gods created an enormous flat plain in the black void of space.

They realized at once they had made this planet far too large as their intention had been for a small paradise. It was their belief and their experience that when they tried to make a beautiful thing too large, it didn't stay beautiful but rather, ate itself from the inside out.

And so in a fluid movement, most of the planet was consumed with raging waters, leaving a still quite large island in the middle. The edges of the new world were ridged with mountains for containment. Following this, they all agreed that they would each take a day for themselves to bring to this world what they envisioned as paradise.

Thus, the gods and goddesses had successfully created another beautiful world. Most of the gods had chosen a section of land along the perimeter of the world to represent the element they controlled, but there was still something missing. All throughout the middle of the land there was nothing but empty fields. The gods often found newly created worlds that didn't include humans, lacked a certain luster. And so, on that ninth day, humans were brought to rule over the land of Eliantar.

Galaxies away, a much older world was dying. The gods, in their graciousness, took the humans from that world that were good and just and sent them to Eliantar. The people called themselves Elites and brought all of the wonderful things to the world that humans do. Towns were built with libraries and schools, old laws were written again for the new world, and a monarchy was created to uphold the laws, oversee protection from possible threats, and keep the world unified. Arktur the Courageous became the first King of Eliantar and the people rallied behind him as he had bravely settled and established the new domain.

The gods also worked together to pack the lands with lesser creatures. They filled the forests, the lakes, and deserts. There were even rare species that were willing to live on the highest mountains or in the hottest environments. The world was almost finished and they could sense it. Eliantar was nearing the perfect harmony that they had envisioned days ago. The gods were very pleased with themselves until they noticed one small problem.

Eliantar was a very small world. But, then again this is what they had wanted. It seems that gods, especially these gods, were terribly indecisive. And why shouldn't they be? After all, humans were modeled after the gods and they were terribly indecisive creatures. In any case, no matter who was to blame, Eliantar (though a paradise) was far too small.

To add to that fact the realms that the gods had created were, for the most part uninhabitable for humans, which left them even less space. They knew they'd have to figure out a way to make this new planet exist without overpopulating it in a few decades. After hours of discussion they only had one clear alternative.

Homosexuality was a naturally occurring phenomenon in the human race. Even when the gods had tried to find ways around it on other planets, after a few hundred years homosexuals would emerge in the human race at about a one to ten ratio. So, to control the population the gods increased the homosexual demographic and in mere moments, nine out of ten people on Eliantar were homosexual and it would stay this way until the end of the planet's time. Not all of the higher powers were huge supporters of this proposal, but it seemed their hands were tied.

There was one final change made to the Elites of Eliantar. The gods were so thrilled with how well they had done. They had never put so much of themselves into a world before that they held this planet above all others in their minds. To illustrate this, they granted the humans special powers. It was nothing, of course, that could ever compare them with gods, but powers of survival and strength that would aid them along with their superior intelligence. Surely this land would flourish and all would be virtuous. It seemed infallible.

The factor that the gods always managed to forget is that no land is completely good. Something can be made beautiful and superb, but that does not make it invincible to darkness. Sooner or later good and evil must both exist in the same space and then the fight begins to bring balance between the two. As long as both good and evil exist, one cannot survive without the other. Even though worlds that rule with goodness may seem better, it can be rest assured that they also are tinged with hints of evil. If a world has no evil, then there is no cause to be good. Therefore the ones that would be good are corrupted by evil themselves and thus a new group must use the light to stop them. It's a terribly depressing point but an unavoidable one. It was a point that the gods had once again forgotten, for evil did eventually find its way to Eliantar.

It came in the form of Skarsend, the god of death and destruction. Though his role was necessary to maintain the balance of all things, Skarsend was hungry for more than just balance. It was in his nature to crave chaos and he was furious over the beauty that his brothers and sisters had created. Transforming into a scaly, winged monster, he flew across the land terrorizing all and killing whatever he could. The gods rallied as did the Elites under King Arktur. The beast, severely weakened, attempted to return home. He found, however, that he was no longer welcome, for the others had finally grown tired of his maliciousness. He was stripped of what powers they could take and cast back to Eliantar for the Elites to judge as they saw fit.

The monster that was Skarsend was locked away and doomed to spend all of eternity in a place that only few knew of. He swore to return and bring more onslaught than before, but he was paid no mind and left to rot and be forgotten.

The only remnant of Skarsend's memory came in the form of King Arktur's advisor who, with her gift of foresight, was able to see that Skarsend would not remain bound forever. She ranted and warned of the apocalypse he would bring with him when he broke his seal.

There is a light at the end of every tunnel of darkness. You see, as dark and unsettling as it is to read about heroes dying, picturesque lands being ravaged, and evil triumphing one must always remember that this, too, is not forever. Bad things may happen and heroes may fall, but

eventually one day, in one way, death finds everyone. The wicked are not immune to death's cold grip. It is easy to forget that fact...as bad things start to happen.

Towards the end of her life, she asked her friend, the King, to construct a great monument that would serve as a reminder of her warnings. Before the massive cathedral, the seer gave her last prophecy. She told of a great hero who would one day come and challenge Skarsend for the fate of Eliantar. Her words were inscribed on a pedestal, before the cathedral. They served as a beacon of hope for the next 2,000 years.

*When the people have lost all hope and the world turns to black,
A hero will appear from out of the gloom to bring Eliantar back,
He will travel across the land through desert, water, and fire
And crush the Tyrant's plan; destroying his funeral pyre.
He will unite the lords of realms, for only through them will there be
A way to stop the coming doom and set their peoples free.
When this hero is set to come, no one knows what the future brings.
The spell is this: Eyes on the clock, for when the pendulum swings.*

And so...the beginning of the end. Once Upon a Time the land of Eliantar existed quite happily for over two thousand years until the Good Queen died...and there was no happiness ever after.

Chapter 1

His rugged muscles tensed up as he crouched low behind the boulder. With his left arm, he gripped the wooden bow, the sinews in his arm, tight with anticipation. His right arm bulged with muscle as he pulled the string back slowly, very slowly. His eyes never flinched from their target.

He was average height for a man but had an exceptional build from his time living off the land. He had lost his hair at a young age but it worked in his favor. His smooth head only added to his rugged exterior. In fact, at first glance one may have taken him for a menacing individual, if not for his eyes. His eyes were the bluest blue, and they were kind. One glance into the hunter's eyes was like looking into the calm, crystal waters of a lake.

Ara Tataman was beautiful, and yet he maintained his solitude always. It was never the case that Ara had to be alone in the world. Every village he went to, several eligible young men expressed their interest in him. There was even the occasional woman from time to time who would make a pass at receiving attention. No, it was by Ara's choice that he was alone. To him, it was self-preservation to not be hurt and experience loss as he had in the past. To others however, this was a complete waste of good looks.

Such was his attitude, that love and dependence on another person was not only a danger, but also a distraction. He worked hard, harder than most people he came across and he was proud of that. Ara was most proud of himself when he was exhausted from a job well-done. Luckily for him, money was no priority since a job well-done for a hunter usually didn't grant great fortune. A true hunter of Eliantar learned to take what the land offered and use the little money they had for necessities that the gods didn't provide themselves. Most nights he slept under the stars in a clearing or if the weather was bad, would find a big tree to rest under. Occasionally a kind villager would offer him a place to stay, but he rarely accepted. He did not care about having money or supplies to build a permanent residence as he felt more fulfilled roaming the countryside. Some of the animals he caught kept his stomach full. The little clothing that he owned was sewn from dried hides that he had skinned. Though, this was obvious just by looking at him.

Today he wore a sleeveless, form-fitting red vest that he had tanned himself. All the young men had ogled him as he'd passed through their small town that morning with his bow and arrows on his back, watching his powerful chest challenge the confines of its crimson prison. His pants and boots were also hand-made, albeit in brown and were just as tight. The fit of his clothing was less for fashion and more for function. While in the woods of Tacia, the forest realm, Ara could leap through the snarls of trees without getting snagged much easier without looser clothes.

Ara found that the little bit of money he did make from selling meat and pelts, he donated back to the towns that purchased them in the first place. A recent wide-spread epidemic had ravaged Eliantar in the last ten years. The cure for the virus had been discovered but the smaller towns and villages that he'd passed through were too poor to bounce back quickly from their losses. He felt it was of more importance to show generosity and self-sacrifice, than have money. He never told the townspeople the reason why he took an interest in helping to counteract the virus's destruction. That was personal.

Despite the fact that he kept to himself, he did try to put other Elites and creatures ahead of himself. And though this time pained him as much as it had every other time he hunted in the past ten years, he narrowed his gaze and released the arrow from his bowstring.

The dilla fell, dead, and Ara made his way over to it, tossing his bow over his shoulder. The weapon was light, made of the durable silver-neqmi tree found in Tacia. Ara had carved it out himself years ago. The arrows he fired were of the same wood and tipped with molten silver. Silver was a commodity in Eliantar, but Ara had yet to find another way to make his arrows puncture without it. He continued to rub the bow that crossed his chest as he strode to the carcass. Though he abhorred weaponry and violence, his silver bow was the one thing he cherished above all others.

He bent over the dilla and whispered in his deep, gentle voice, "May your death not be in vain. May the gods take your eternal soul and reward you for your nobility. May you know that at the price of your death, so many others shall live on because of your gifts."

Ara was kind. Dillas were not highly regarded or noble. Nor were they recognized as being anything other than slow-moving and stupid. They were native to the desert realm of Errandomn and killed what little vegetation it had. They were fat and low to the ground, weighing a solid 200 pounds which was remarkable considering they were only three feet long. Their meat was worthless as it was tough and gritty. The only value in a dilla was the armored skin that it had. Though not exorbitant, Ara could earn a few coins off the hide and a pelt shop could fashion some cheap body armor.

Taking care not to look in the beady eyes of the creature that rested above its trunk-like nose Ara set in to the deed. When he was done, he clawed at the orange sand around him, digging a shallow, yet respectable, grave. Setting the remains inside, he filled the hole back in and offered a moment of silence in honor of the dilla who had lost his life. Excessive to some, but an important sign nonetheless to Ara Tataman as the sands whirled around him.

Sand. That one word easily summed up the geography of the realm of Errandomn. It was endless amounts of sand. Ara guessed that it was beautiful to Elites who were seeing it for the first time. It was a bold orange, shiny and soft. But to Ara, it reminded him of death. The two suns seemed to show more spite to this realm than to most of the others. They heated the sand to the point of scalding. Even with shoes or boots on, the locals could sense the wrath of this place. When there was a breeze it was a burning wind that seared the land. It was debatable that the night was worse than the scorching days. When the suns had set, a frigid gale pierced the desert. It seemed as though death came in either extreme, so unlike the green fields of Eliantar Proper.

Ara made it a point to stay on the outskirts of the outlying realms that he visited. He did not want to intrude on the various tribes' land. He also knew that the deeper he invaded, the more difficult it was to get out. Though he had never been very deep into Errandomn, he'd heard stories that there was more to this world than orange sand, even though that was all he could see now. Enormous, gaping sinkholes were rumored to litter the ground further out and magnificent,

jagged mountains touched the sky with their tan fingers. The sand gave way to hard, cracked ground where no water ever touched. Ara shuddered.

Perhaps, he thought, the real thing that terrified him about this part of the world was the inhospitable nature of the indigenous species, more so than the environment. Tamalus looked a lot like Elites until you took a second look. They were at least a foot taller and far broader than the average human. They lacked any hair, any speed, and any emotion. They lumbered through their desert world, slowly and silently. Their skin was a deep gray, oily and sinister. Dressed simply in brown sacks and carrying long spears, most Elites dared not approach them. They may have looked like civilized man, but they were far from human. They preferred a life of isolation and the Elites knew that if you were smart you would respect that desire.

Still, he knew he couldn't judge any creature that preferred a life of isolation. After all, it was a life that he himself had chosen. Perhaps that was why this desert realm spooked him, he thought to himself. In a way it actually echoed the man that he had become. How he had changed in the last ten years. He had always taken great pleasure in the simple beauties of the world, until his mother died.

That had been the saddest day of Ara's life and it had changed him forever. He had recently turned 20 and was running through the cobblestone streets of his small town. It was a beautiful, quaint, river settlement near the ocean. Dainty homes lined the roads and there were tiny shops on every corner. No one that lived there was rich, but everyone seemed happy. Children played in the streets with the cheap handmade toys they'd bought from the store. Each alley had a different, wonderful smell. One smelled of freshly baked bread. The next smelled of fish that had been newly cooked. Another would smell of sweets and cakes. It was the only town he'd ever known and the only one he'd ever cared to know. The people would sing and dance and the clock tower in the center of town had a chime that sounded like the call of a million song birds. It may not have been the wealthiest or most polished city in Eliantar, but it was charming nonetheless. He had been so excited that he found a new home of his own to live in within the village and he ran to tell his mother. When he had burst through the door, he found her in bed, the color of a ghost.

The Elites called it the Iniquitous Virus and it had struck once again. The virus had ravaged the land for some time and like all of its previous victims; it attacked with little warning and killed in a matter of months. Like so many other small towns, the potion-cure for the virus was too expensive for the members of Ara's fishing village. His mother, gods bless her, was too proud to ever admit that she wasn't well. She likely ignored the symptoms of listlessness and the aching body pains. She never liked to worry Ara.

And so on that dreadful day, a beautiful woman with a beautiful soul was lost and suddenly Ara became disenchanted with the world of beauty he'd once known. He felt his own soul slip away from him on that, the loneliest of days.

He decided that moment that he couldn't stay, as he had planned, in the small town. It would only remind him of his mother. He selected only the basic necessities and traveled abroad from town to town. He never told a soul that he was leaving. He thought of all of all his friends and neighbors. He couldn't face them now. They had once filled him with joy, but now he only thought of them as shadows of a former life; a life that was not his.

His once-glowing personality darkened even more over the next few months as he realized he possessed no skills to earn money for food. Raised as a fisherman, he found that he was utterly useless once he moved inland. The Elites, for the most part, were far from sympathetic. Since he had nothing to offer, he was quickly cast out of the towns that he passed through. Even villages that were financially stable rejected his presence. No one was generous to someone they viewed as a lazy beggar. On the verge of starving, and not being welcome in towns where money was king, Ara began his training on the art of survival. He began spending most of his time in the forest realm of Tacia to the far west. Here, he had shelter from the elements under the enormous trees and as long as he stayed in the outer edges of the forest, he didn't become something else's prey. Here he bonded with the indigenous tribe of Tacia, the Arbesteers, a shy bird-like humanoid species, who were experts at surviving the forests.

He hid in the trees and watched children come and go, picking plants and berries. From his observance he discovered what was safe to eat. It didn't take long, however, before he desired more. He knew he lacked the skill to work as a woodsman. And so he began to quietly follow adults that would come, deeper into the woods to see how they hunted game. Some were quite skilled, but most were clumsy. Though meat was highly sought after, those that lived in smaller towns couldn't afford the luxury prices of butchers. Therefore, most of the hunters he watched were just farmers who were hoping to catch something on their own. The rich and proud families did not hunt, or at least did not speak of it, but Ara was not too proud. His real luck came when he could view a real hunter, often an employee of a town's butcher shop. But, he had an extra leg up on even these experts. His months living in the woods had taught Ara more than some of these so-called hunters.

Seeing the strengths and weaknesses of the different bows that the hunters used, Ara knew the best tree to craft his frame from and the most flexible leaves to make his strings from. In no time at all, Ara was eating better than he ever had. He was selling meats and pelts of a higher quality to towns than their own hunters did. And though he was now welcomed with open arms and begged to stay, he continued to travel on and never stayed in one place for long. He couldn't bear the thought of ever experiencing loss again. To never care for another Elite meant to never hurt again the way he once had. After seeing how he had been treated when he was down on his luck, he was motivated even more so to never associate with others more than necessary. Elites were self-serving and he would learn to be no different. And so, ten years passed with Ara existing as a vagabond. He was neither happy nor unhappy. He was existing and giving back where he could, which to him, was more than most could say for themselves.

As he approached the small desert village, he looked in the distance and could just make out the green, rolling hills of Eliantar Proper. They looked inviting, much more so than the thatched huts he was walking past. Pulling a blanket aside from one of them, he walked through the entryway of the pelt shop. He ignored the insects that filled the squalid air as he approached the gap-toothed man at the counter, tossing the plated pelt in front of him.

The man didn't respond, or even make eye contact but placed some coins on the counter next to the hide. It was a small amount of money, less than Ara had hoped, but not enough to have a discussion over. He grabbed the small coins and turned back towards the exit.

"Off on the next adventure?" came a knowing voice to his right as he pulled the carpet aside. "I would think that even for you, this kind of life would grow tiresome. Aren't you tired of running, Ara?"

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He had not been called by his given name in years. He avoided introducing himself whenever possible. Ara glared through the shadows and haze but could not make out more than the outline of the man who had spoken.

"Who are you?" Ara hissed. How is it that you know my name?"

The man stepped out into the light. His advanced age put Ara at ease, if only slightly so. He was a tall man but very thin and his age made him look terribly feeble. His mussy hair was completely white as snow and his eyes were the same color. He wore long-flowing, regal, golden robes to cover his sad little body. He chuckled and raised his arms to show he was harmless.

"Where are my manners? My name is Forr Suosor. I mean you no harm. I'm merely passing through town and stopped in here for a bit of shopping. I'm afraid I don't get out to Errandomn very often."

The man's voice had a hint of mischief and Ara doubted that he was merely here to purchase some second-rate pelts. The golden fabric that he wore made it obvious that dilla skin was not in his wardrobe.

"You still haven't told me how you knew my name."

"I have the gift of foresight," Forr scoffed in reply as though Ara should have known.

"But, you're blind," Ara laughed in return.

"Foresight is the ability to see in one's mind the world around oneself as well as the future," Forr said ignoring Ara's rudeness. "Many, upon first meeting me, assume that I am blind.

However, this is far from true. My eyes lost their pallor when my power emerged as a child. For instance, I can plainly see right now that you're looking at me with a degree of superiority because you think that I am so frail that I may collapse. Once again, you are mistaken. I have never felt better. I may have lived a long 80 years, but it is the things that I have seen that have ravaged my physical form and taken the light from my eyes.”

“Well it was a pleasure meeting you,” Ara struggled to be polite as he turned and stepped outside. Older Elites had a tendency to strike up conversation with strangers and Ara never understood why and it made him uncomfortable. Even more so was the fact that this stranger knew he'd run into him. Was he psychic as well? Ara walked faster feeling that, if the man was psychic, putting a bit of distance between them would prevent him from having his thoughts read.

“No need to run from me, dear man. I am not reading your mind or stealing your thoughts. My powers do not allow me into other people's heads. I'm merely trying to make you an offer. Grim is coming you know,” Forr said, after catching up to a very surprised Ara. “It'd be a shame for you to have to weather such a harsh month out in the wilderness with nowhere to call home.”

Grim was the 3rd month of the year and a dangerous time for Elites. Unlike Seed, which was mild for planting or Reap which was warm for harvesting, Grim destroyed life. All of the crops and foods procured through the rest of the year had to be collected and the people had to plan on sealing themselves in their homes for the 25 days. To not do so was foolish. Temperatures dropped far below freezing and snow was relentless and merciless. Even those who had properly planned could be subject to death if their home wasn't properly prepared for the disastrous time. All were thankful that Grim took up such a small time of the year.

“Grim has little effect in Errandomn, old man,” Ara snapped. “It does not get much colder here than it is now and I resent you imposing on me.”

Forr responded, oblivious to Ara's rudeness, “It would still be best if you found a more permanent home to pass that time. I, myself, am on my way home to weather the storm. You know I live in the capital, in Ivory Towers itself. I am Royal Advisor to the Queen, er...or should I say to the throne.”

“How nice for you but why are you following me?”

Forr sighed, “I'm afraid I was here on some rather unfortunate business. As I was on my way back to Ivory Towers and my carriage was going through this...rustic town, I felt the sudden desire to stop and visit the local pelt shop. My gift works that way, you see. I don't always know why I'm compelled to do certain things, but there's always a reason. No sooner had I started to browse and you came through. I could sense you being quite important as you put that hide on the counter and that was when it dawned on me. We're in need of a hunter! I was hoping that I could make you a job offering right now and you would accompany me to Ivory Towers. I know it's sudden, but I'm never wrong about these kinds of things. My carriage is just outside of this small village.”

Ara was annoyed. Obviously this man was speaking the truth about living in the castle. He was presumptuous and bordering on arrogance.

“Your foresight is so sensitive that you felt the need to stop your carriage and step into a poor, dangerous town just because your Queen needs a new hunter? That *is* an impressive gift.”

For a moment Forr looked as though he may cry. He let out a slight gasp and began nervously playing with his hands. He swayed from side to side and seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Ara,” he whispered. “You must know that Queen Jenneka is deceased.”

“I'm afraid I didn't,” he replied without emotion. “I stay off the city paths and away from larger towns. The life and styles of the royal family do not carry much meaning for me and my lifestyle.”

“Well, regardless of that, she has indeed passed. It's that terrible news that brought me to Errandomn to visit the Ambassador. A coronation is being held tomorrow for Queen Jenneka's

son, the Prince. He may be young and inexperienced at ruling a kingdom, but he is next in line. Either way, I repeat my offer that you please accompany me back.”

“Perhaps you didn't hear me,” Ara said slowly, careful not to be too terribly rude. It was obvious that Forr had been close with the Queen and even though Ara was not interested in the offer, he wasn't so cruel as to intentionally hurt others' feelings. “I stay away from larger towns. I prefer solitude. In 30 years, I've never even been to visit one of the larger cities in Eliantar. This has not been by coincidence. I've been a drifter and will always be a drifter. I don't think a move to Castle Village would be in my best interest.”

“What exactly do you have against Castle Village or any other large town for that matter? You know, Ara, most Elites would kill at the chance to live within Castle Village.”

“I suppose I'm not like most Elites.”

They stood there staring at each other for a moment in silence. The sand burned their feet, even through their shoes. A breeze had picked up and was whipping wisps of sand through the air around them. Ara, finally having had enough, turned to walk away.

“You can't resent those that have made out better in this world than you have, Ara. Bitterness will not make you a better person.”

“Neither will wealth!” Ara barked. “My mother died for no better reason other than that she didn't have money! I resent your offer and I resent that people jump at the chance to leave their humble backgrounds for fame and fortune.”

Forr sighed and shook his head, staring at the sand beneath him. Ara felt bad for a moment. All he wanted was to be left alone and he had conveyed that, at the cost of the old man's feelings.

“Well that's fine then, Ara.” he grumbled as he turned away. “I had foreseen you coming with me, which is why I was being so persistent. But, I suppose I could've been mistaken. I'm sorry if I wasted your time. Good luck to you in your travels.”

“Shouldn't you have seen that I would say no? And shouldn't you have seen that your Queen was going to die?”

He had asked this as delicately as he could. The point, he thought, was to prove that Forr legitimately could've been mistaken about Ara traveling with him. But, in spite of how nicely he had said it, the look on Forr's face made him regret it.

“I...may not see things as clearly now as I did in my youth.

Ara watched the man's gold robes whip around him as he crossed through the town. For as old as he was, he certainly could move quickly when he wanted to. Then he looked beyond Forr and saw the carriage that awaited him. Even from this distance he could see the intricate white frame with golden accents. The wheels glittered their silver and gold in the hot sun. The door to the carriage was a peaceful blue, the color of a clean, cool lake.

Ara looked from the carriage to the desert village that surrounded him. It may as well have been a mirage. The desert looked dry and dead. The carriage looked like an escape into a cool paradise. It was true he had always rejected a more comfortable life, but one had never slapped him in the face like this before. Would it be so wrong to attempt to live a different life?

Flanked on either side of the door was a member of the Royal Guard, the Queen's army. They were handsome and imposing, both menacing and enticing at the same time. Their silver chest armor matched the wealth of the carriage they escorted. Their bare arms were like tree trunks, flexed and ready. Ara found himself slowly approaching the transport. The guards leered at him and whispered crude things to each other. Though Ara couldn't hear what they were saying, their eyes gave them away.

Ara ignored them and called out, “Forr, wait!” Forr turned from the door slowly and looked the young man in the eyes. “I'll give it a try. If you'll still have me, I'll give city life a try.”

Chapter 2

The ride was awkward to be sure and Ara was sorry that he agreed to go on this adventure. He was thrilled that the carriage was being pulled by stallions rather than regular horses. The ride would be hours rather than days. He had admired their beauty when he'd boarded. They were so like horses, yet bigger and far more muscular, bred for extreme speed.

He sat in the back of the carriage, facing forwards. To his right sat a guard who had not introduced himself yet with every bump they hit, managed to rub Ara's thigh with his hand. Across from them sat Forr, who somehow was oblivious to the guard's daring grabs, constantly brushing sand off of himself. Next to Forr sat the remaining guard whose eyes never left Ara's and looked to be thinking about more than just the job that he was currently being paid to do. Ara tried to ignore the guards and concentrate on what Forr was saying, but that was just another kind of uncomfortable flattery that he was not interested in.

"I saw the skin that you slapped on that man's counter, Ara. The castle will be just thrilled to have you. You don't just get lucky with a shot like that, you need to have skill. Skill seems to be a rare commodity these days. That's why when I have the notion I absolutely must heed my ability's suggestions.

"And you'll be paid very well to work for Ivory Towers. The amount of money that you'll earn will make you wonder why you ever wasted your time in small villages like that one. Honestly, it should be outlawed to offer so little for the hard work that you did."

"It's all a small town like that can afford," Ara grunted, looking out the carriage window. The sand was gone and now endless green grasses whipped past him, as the carriage rolled at top speed. Forr was kind, Ara decided. He meant well but he didn't seem to grasp that small towns weren't poor out of choice. They could survive. They just couldn't thrive like Castle Village or other larger cities could. Still, he hoped that his remark would make Forr uncomfortable enough to cease speaking. His hopes were dashed.

"Ah back to Eliantar Proper! Thank goodness," he sighed with relief. "I daresay it will be good to feel the cool breeze again. Although, I suppose you became accustomed to the heat and sand."

"I suppose so," he answered, finally deciding to give in to conversation. "That's not where I hail from originally, though. I hunted in Tacia for several years and just slowly made my way North. Eventually the forest gave way to the desert, but I kept going. No reason not to press on since Errandomn is where all of the textile smiths are. I assumed I could sell more hides there although, the game was more plentiful in the forest."

"Oh, so where are you from then?" Forr asked, his eyes lighting up and Ara knew he had said too much.

"What brought you to Errandomn?" Ara ignored the question. Forr smiled back, wise to Ara's hesitation, but respectful of it nonetheless.

"Well, as I said, Queen Jenneka has unfortunately passed on. I sent heralds out to the other Ambassadors and came to Errandomn personally. The Ambassadors will want to be there for her son's coronation."

"And the Ambassadors are the Queen's enforcers, correct?"

"Hardly! Ambassadors serve as governors of the five outlying realms. Eleetha II the Solemn created the posts in the year 286 after solidifying treaties with the outlying realms' tribes. At the time, and of course many times since, there have been conflicts between the Elites who work in the realms and the tribes. Thankfully now, we seem to cohabitate peacefully. The Ambassadors are there to maintain the peace more than anything. They make sure that the tribes are treated fairly. However, due to their existence, it's rare that a person like me, from the castle, travels to the outlying realms.

"Unlike you my friend, I am not much of a wanderer or explorer. In particular I find the sands and heat of Errandomn to be overwhelming, but times being what they are..." he trailed off.

"I rather like visiting new places. There are always new people to meet."

“Strange, I didn't take you for one who craved to meet a wide variety of Elites.” The look on Ara's face told Forr that it was time to change the subject. “Do you know the story of how Errandomn came to be?”

“Came to be? I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Ara, really!” Forr gasped in disbelief. “I'm talking about the legend of when the gods first came to Eliantar and formed it from nothing.”

“I'm not a religious man,” he replied, simply.

“Religious or not, it's a story that all Elites should know. Most children know the tale by heart!”

“Fine!” Ara was exasperated. “It's not like we'll be out of this carriage anytime soon and you have the need to speak for whatever reason, so *please* go on.”

Forr remained seemingly unaware of Ara's rudeness. This only caused the hunter more annoyance.

“I don't think that I'd mentioned earlier that aside from my duties as Royal Advisor, I am also the Royal Historian. It's really quite an honor. Most rulers had these positions filled by two different Elites, but Queen Jenneka always held me in high regard, gods rest her soul.”

“And what does a Royal Historian do?” Ara asked, looking out the window, uninterested.

“Well they keep historical documents and texts and relay them to whoever in the castle asks for them. They write the history that happens around them during their lifetimes so that future generations may study them as well. Lastly, they tell stories like the one you are about to *thoroughly* enjoy.”

Forr was incorrigible and despite Ara's best attempts, he liked it. His years of tough living made him appreciate any Elite or intelligent creature that wasn't able to be swayed. He may not have appreciated conversation much, but he was enjoying this banter. He decided that he may not want to hear a history lesson, but that he'd put Forr through enough.

“Let's hear it then, this story of yours. Let us hear of gods and magic and all things coming from no things,” he smiled, but not in a cruel way.

Forr mumbled softly about not having time to tell the whole creation tale and young people having no respect for elders. But, after that he launched into his story and barely stopped for a breath. Clearly, he was in his element. The guards, looking as though they had heard this story before, leaned their heads back and nodded off to sleep.

“Shortly after our world was created the gods and goddesses each decided to make their own personal mark on Eliantar. When Duna arrived, the goddess of land and rocks, she appeared as a radiant maiden with golden hair. She surveyed the land and knew right away what the world needed.

“Closing her eyes, the goddess balled up her hands into tight fists and bending forward punched the ground as hard as she could. The entire planet rippled at first and then suddenly hills burst forth from the ground. The grassy plains became uneven in a splendid way. At certain points on the planet, the goddess conjured enormous mountains to rise out of nothingness.

“Turning to the Northwest corner of the world, bordering right above where the forests of Tacia ended, she concentrated all of her strength on what kind of world was her vision of perfection.

“She brushed at the soft skin of her arms and golden flakes flew off by the millions, filling the entire region of the world with golden deserts. She then plunged her arms through the air as if punching it. Massive, dark caves and enormous subterranean sinkholes scattered her realm. When she balled her fists, mounds of boulders fell from the sky, littering all of her land.

“She was thrilled with what she had done thinking to herself that surely this was flawlessness. She called her kingdom Errandomn and filled it with mass quantities of dillas. Their armored skin would serve to protect them from their harsh environment as well as from predators that the other gods might think up.

“She gazed upon her land and realized it looked sad and a bit lonely. It wasn't just the sorrow that the desert creates. Something was missing. Such a dead place needed more life than the armored dillas.

“Though it was unusual for one god alone to create a new sentient species, she knew she couldn’t wait for her siblings’ permission to help her create an intelligent desert species that could thrive in this harsh environment.

“Humans were one of the gods’ favorite creations. They were fashioned after the gods themselves, but with significantly less power and slightly less intelligence. More than anything the gods viewed the humans as highly entertaining because unlike the gods who had mastered how to live in a state of utopia, humans seemed to feel the need to create doom for themselves and those around them wherever they went. This may have been due to receiving less intelligence than that of the gods. But, whatever the reason, humans became a favorite on most of the new worlds that were created. In this setting though, it was unlikely that humans would flourish.

“It was only a short while later that she prepared to ascend back to the heavens and she smiled at the clan of Tamalus she had created. She had opted to create a new species that shared certain human characteristics.

“The Tamalus were exceptionally human-like. Standing upright at an impressive height exceeding that of a human by a foot or two, at first glance one could mistake a Tamalu for a human. The most obvious difference was that the Tamalus had a very inhuman skin color. To get close to a Tamalu one could see a dark gray pallor with black eyes. To further distinguish the two species, the goddess made the Tamalus nocturnal scavengers as opposed to the daylight hunters that humans were. She made them fiercely independent and created them to be loners from other species. To present them with a more regal look she presented each one with a long staff that they should carry with them wherever they went. As she rose through the sky she looked to see the slow-moving Tamalus making their way to respective caves, waiting to emerge when the day had completely ended.

“And so, that’s how that sandy bane came to be!” snapped Forr brushing sand out of his hair and off of his robes. “It may have been paradise to Duna, but it’s a nightmare to me.”

Ara looked out the window and saw endless, rolling fields of emerald grass. He could understand why so many preferred this kind of view versus the dry sand or dark forests. Off in the distance he could see fields of vegetables. No, they weren’t vegetables. Even from this far away he could make out their long, thin stalks and their radiant, yellow heads.

“Sunflowers!” Forr exclaimed. “How exciting, we’re almost home! Queen Wonjj the Elder planted hundreds of fields around Castle Village during her reign. She wasn’t geographically-inclined and always wanted to know when she was close to returning home. They were her favorite flower.”

“They were my mother’s favorite too.”

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?” Forr asked.

Ara didn’t answer. His mind had already taken him back ten years. He could still see the plain wooden table in the center of their first floor room. In the middle was a small blue urn that would reflect beams of sapphire light when the suns would shine through the windows. There were always fresh sunflowers poking out the top of that sky-colored vase. His mother worked so hard at the local market each day, but always found the time to stop on her walk home and pick fresh sunflowers.

When she’d passed away, Ara went out to the small garden behind their house and ripped the yellow heads from the ground for hours, tears stinging his eyes. When he’d picked every single one in his mother’s patch and his hands were red and raw, he brought them in and arranged them on the bed around her. She looked so peaceful lying there in her simple white dress, surrounded by sunshine. He couldn’t be sure if he’d stood there for moments or hours, but that image of her was his last and most powerful.

To see them in excess ten years later, Ara could not decide if this vision was peaceful to him or haunting. Either way he couldn’t tear his eyes away and didn’t even notice as the carriage began to slow.

“Well, we’ve arrived,” Forr was positively beaming. “You may exit the carriage once we’ve stopped, Ara. Welcome to Castle Village!”

“I thought you were taking me to Ivory Towers.”

“We're having Prince Vale's coronation today. Security will be intense and to be honest, I am late for arrival. I won't have the time to get you through. This should give you some time to get your bearings together. You may attend the coronation with the other citizens who have come today or you can wander the village and get acclimated to where you'll be working.

“Close the drawbridge!” he bellowed out the window.

At once Ara heard the heavy clanking of metal chains being cranked through gears. Craning his head out the window he could see an enormous wooden drawbridge being lifted against white stone walls.

“We do normally leave it open at all hours, but no one is paying a visit to Castle Village today as all the businesses are closed and anyone who was coming for the coronation would be where they're supposed to be already. All citizens who have come in are within the castle courtyard. History is being written today, my friend. I don't envy the Royal Guard today, they no doubt have their hands filled inspecting every citizen who shows up for this but, I digress.

“When you step out of the carriage, you'll of course be in Castle Village. If you head North, through town, you'll come to a bridge. Cross over that bridge if you so desire. The gate there will be open and you'll be in Ivory Tower's courtyard. Please take your time and look around and feel free to join the Elites at the coronation, if you'd like. I think I already said that. Forgive me, I'm flustered. I do hate being late. I'll be back for you once everything has settled down, later today.”

Ara stepped out of the carriage and before he could turn back the door slammed shut behind him and the carriage took off through the town.

Turning back toward the charming village market Ara was surprised to see it completely barren of life. Every single building's doors were barricaded shut with heavy metal locks.

The castle village was grand indeed, just as the stories had led him to believe, and yet there was not a soul to be found. He began to walk forward on the pebbled streets, passing several abandoned vendors' carts filled to their brims with fabrics, fruits, vegetables, and grains of every variety. Even the stores that lined the streets had their windows and doors shut. Ara had often heard tales of ghost villages and he imagined that this is exactly what one would look like.

The citizens' houses also looked deserted, but magnificent. They were all made of different rich stone and had solid sloped roofs on them. Though fairly simple in style, they were grand in size and none seemed to be in any stage of disrepair or neglect. He could have fit four of his old shack in one of these homes.

Beyond the Elites' homes he could see some more shops on the next street. All the buildings in Castle Village must be grand, he thought. They were noticeably larger and cleaner looking than they were in every other town he'd been in. This caused a conflict within him, for as soothing as it was on the eyes, his conscience told him it was wrong to stay here.

Off in the distance he could make out the sounds of a great commotion. It sounded like a grand party. That would be the Prince's coronation. He turned away from the market and decided he'd best head North down the cobblestone streets.

As he did so, he saw the grandest thing that he'd ever laid eyes upon. A gigantic white castle rose just ahead up into the sky. It seemed nearly as high as the clouds but, of course, that was ridiculous. It had pallid steeples and towers by the dozens and hundreds of ornate windows covering every inch. It was truly beautiful, Ara decided. And yet, it was another testament to the ostentation and perhaps greed that seemed to plague the Elites. It must be nice that some people were born with more money than others. Maybe if his mother had been born to wealth, she'd still be alive today. Ara was willing to bet that no one in Ivory Towers succumbed to the Iniquitous Virus.

Crossing through the large town as quickly as he could, he noticed the quaint bridge ahead that Forr had told him about. The buildings became sparse on either side of him as he began to ascend the path. Another great white wall loomed before him that must've wrapped around the entire castle courtyard, cutting it off from the rest of Castle Village. An open iron gate at the end

of the bridge was his only point of entry. Four guards stood poised at the entrance eyeing him up as he approached.

“Name, please,” stated the one nearest him.

“Ara Tataman.”

“Weaponry is not permitted beyond this gate, sir. I’ll need you to leave your bow and arrows with us.”

“I’m not going to hurt anyone. I’m a hunter.”

“It does not matter, sir. Weapons of any kind are not allowed in the castle’s courtyard.”

“Do you actually expect that any Elite would hurt the Prince in the middle of an enormous gathering?”

“Sir, I am merely following the law. Queen Jenneka may have been quite popular but assassination attempts in our lands history are not unheard of. I’ve been lucky enough to have not lived through any of the wars in Eliantar’s past and I’d like to keep it that way. Now, please hand over your weapons.”

Not amused, but not wanting to cause a fight with four armed guards, Ara quickly handed over his weapons and continued on. He stepped into the sprawling, green courtyard that was filled with thousands and thousands of Elites. All had their heads tilted upwards to a large balcony. Ara didn’t have to ask to know that the crowd was waiting for the Prince to step out onto the balcony in a grand entrance of pretension and make his speech.

It upset Ara that such a large castle was necessary for anyone to live in. Here he was feeling that he made a statement about minimal possessions and before him laid the epitome of money ill spent. Ara had already decided that he wouldn’t like the Prince and wasn’t interested in what he had to say. He still wasn’t even sure that he was interested in the job offer that he’d accepted, but it was too late to leave at least for the moment, so Ara looked onward with the rest of the crowd waiting for the Prince to emerge.

He found a spot along the courtyard wall and looked up as the Prince stepped onto the giant balcony five stories up. He was handsome, Ara thought, very handsome. He was slightly younger than him; from here he appeared to be about 25. He looked exactly as a young prince of a world should look. He was tall and athletic looking with straight, shoulder length black hair and deep, serious blue eyes. Ara chuckled to himself at what the young Prince was wearing but also recognized that the Prince probably wasn’t thrilled to be wearing it either, as he was standing there very rigidly. It looked terribly ridiculous. He wore a long white shirt and white pants. A long sleeveless powder blue robe was put over top. It was completely open in the front but touched the ground at his back. A high collar came up in the back, higher than the Prince’s slim, silver crown that he wore. It looked like he was wearing a gown. Tradition was tawdry! Though, he still looked very handsome. But, handsome or not, it annoyed Ara to see an outfit that cost more than some peoples’ homes.

“When my mother was alive,” began Prince Vale. “She loved nothing more than being a gentle, fair ruler. It is my goal to accomplish this same deed.”

The crowd went wild. Ara surveyed the fact that they seemed much taken with the dead Queen and were looking forward to the same rule of her son. Staring back up, Ara noticed Forr in his golden robes standing near the prince. He also looked thrilled to be working for someone so benevolent. The man standing to his right however did not look thrilled. Ara assumed this to be the Prince’s bodyguard, judging by his clothes. The wild-haired man in his ridiculous, silver suit of armor was rapidly eyeing the crowd, his eyes darting as fast as they could. To notice this from so far below, he must be worried about something Ara surmised.

“Much like my mother,” continued Vale, “I want to give back to the citizens of Eliantar. I want to be able to provide work, money, shelter, and food to those who cannot provide it for themselves. But, I don’t want it to end there. Charity and respect are not just for those of us that are Elites. I want to stretch my hand out to the others who are in an impoverished condition, the Arbestees of Tacia, Vintens of Steedo, Fonnes of Quale, Tamalus of Errandomn, and the Lexerros of Fornar.”

The crowd went silent and this infuriated Ara. The problem with Elites was that being human; they thought themselves better than other creatures, even if these creatures were just as intelligent as they. He was thrilled that a monarch, one who had life handed to him on a wretched silver platter, would care so much about the “lesser” beings.

Elites had always had a tense relationship with the outlying realms’ tribes of indigenous species. Though they were civilized and able to thrive on their own and it was the Elites who depended on them for their resources, the land had bloody history of bad interactions between the two. Multiple treaties had been passed over the years granting the tribes equal rights, but Ara knew that many Elites still looked down at any being that wasn’t human.

It was at this moment that Ara decided that perhaps not every wealthy person was a complete waste. Maybe there were some who did not let their money blind them to true important issues.

Or was it just that Ara was trying to explain away how handsome he found the Prince? Aside from his physical attractiveness, Vale appeared mature and kind-hearted. Then again, this was a political speech. Who was to say how much truth was behind it. Either way, despite his best efforts, Ara found he was anxious to hear more.

Vale pushed on, “We will not repeat old mistakes and rekindle old wars with the tribes that we share this world with. Protecting other forms of life may not be the most popular choice to many Elites, but we must remember also that they are the keepers of our forests, our lakes, and our mines. Without them we cannot survive and it would be unjust and unfit of me to allow them to try and survive without us.”

At this the crowd began whooping and screaming once more. Ara was impressed that the Prince was smart enough to find a way to make this crowd realize the importance of helping others. He couldn’t stop the grin that was spreading across his face.

“And so it is with great pride,” Vale hollered with a hint of sadness in his voice, “that I accept the title of Crown Prince of Eliantar.”

The crowd cheered louder and louder as Vale looked down gesturing and smiling. Ara was lost in the trance of the exciting event and of the handsome Prince. The Prince looked from left to right waving and waving to the crowd. It was like Ara was living in slow motion. He watched the scene go on for some time. He watched the Prince smile and laugh with his advisor. He watched the advisor guide the Prince over to the right side of the balcony and the bodyguard start to follow. He watched as the streak of an arrow shot through the sky striking the balcony and everyone screamed.

From the ground, Ara could hear shouts of “He’s dead!”, “Someone help us, he’s dead!” First he saw Forr and then Prince Vale. The arrow had struck the bodyguard, in the spot that Vale had been standing mere moments before.

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