

The Oasis in the Land That Hates

ON THE THIRD DAY of their travel, the priest called attention to the holy word that he knew God would speak. His chin elevated with the banal arrogance of those to whom coincidence is nothing less than cosmic certainty, his proclamation rose above the desert as if grasping for heaven, each word borne upon wings of ivory feathers. It spilled across the sands, that derelict cathedral from which God had long since fled. If it greeted ears beholden to any not within the party of three, no reply was made.

The poet cringed back from his speech, shrinking in her saddle like a beast from a furious flame. The preacher noticed not. He continued on his ramblings, his horse pressing forth to the fore of the group. His hand aloft, finger a challenge to the heavens, his gaze concerned itself not with the path that lay before them. To him, the road was clear, a matter of divine demarcation. To him, his arrival at the journey's end was written in the silent rotation of the stars. To him, the only mystery was the pattern he would sow upon the tapestry of the earth.

Would the world really bare its secrets to a man like that? the poet wondered. She gathered her cloak about her, mercilessly made aware of their inferiority by the priest's pompous declaration of definition. The desert closed in around her, the sands composed of the dust of all those who had fallen upon the bone-white earth. They clawed at her mount's hooves, small spumes of the perished particles spraying through the air with every footfall. Above, the dunes crashed down upon the party like waves frozen in time, paused in their interminable travail, shrieking with still mouths held agape by the removal of that universal order.

The days passed not in the desert. The sun broke from the earth like a corpse revived, its gaze questioning about the dunes with the fury of one bound to torment, before sinking to the sand once

more and melting across the horizon, the night bruising the sky as it shoved forth in the light's wake. All throughout, hate emanated from the earth. Banished was the distinction between one state and another. There was only the endless sea of malice that the party's horses tread upon.

"Do you still fail to see the order written within the number three? The lord blessed us once again with his presence, after much suffering, on such a day. Suffering as we have undergone at the hands of this foul land. It was at that nadir of the people's faith that he returned once more. The *Blessing* will make itself known to us once again. Of this I am certain."

"You seem to be certain of a lot of things, Father," the layman said, his horse sallying forth to alight beside that of the priest.

"What uncertainty could there be in the face of fate?"

"I can't bring myself to believe in any of that."

"Then what *do* you believe in?"

"Hm." The layman raised a hand to his chin, his fingers twining through his beard like serpents through the brush. "Nothing much, really. Just life, I suppose."

"Then it is no mystery why the *Blessing's* touch failed to grace you."

"What makes you call it a blessing, hm?" the poet asked. Her voice rang too loud within the hollow land.

"You feel its pull, the same as I. *That* is the gravity of God. We all yearn for the same thing, but there is a reason why *I* am the one guiding this party."

The poet's jaw drew tight, particles of the dead sand scraping along her teeth like the laughter of the desert. *God damn you. God damn you.* Her thought wandered through the air, an empty spirit unsure towards whom to direct its rage, and faded away, a wisp pulled apart by the noonday sun.

From the dune sea, a vision quivered. Stained by the sun's rage, it rose towards Heaven, its form slowly resolving as the party drew closer. An obelisk of pallid perfection, quintessence lended life by the desert, the three stumbled to its foot in a daze. The priest dropped from his horse, falling to his knees upon the blazing earth. The thing towered above him, its shadow cast about his form until he seemed completely subsumed by its presence. He wept at its feet, tears staining the sand with the oblation of his faith. All the while, the obelisk gazed on. Not once did it regard him.

NIGHT FELL, YET THE land's hatred still coursed through the sands, veins of its malice snaking beneath the sunburnt dunes and up into the clouds. They shrieked at the lone travelers, their fury a million grasping hands hoping to rip the party from their camp and bear them into the sky, shattering their bodies upon the foul earth.

With cloaks gathered, the three resisted the pull of oblivion. The priest reclined against a boulder jutting from the sand, granted the image of a molar by the harsh gales of the desert night. He intoned softly to himself, his eyes tracing across the long-since-faded words of the small black book clasped between his fingers.

Across from him sat the layman and the poet. The cowardly moon cast a dim glow across their faces, stretching long the shadows beneath their brows.

"He will lead us to our deaths," the poet said.

"What makes you say that?"

"All these hollow proclamations. They mean nothing. When you start jumping at shadows, where will you turn when night comes?"

The layman shrugged. "Death'll show its face all the same. Doesn't matter if it's today or tomorrow or a week from now."

"There's a meaning here, and it doesn't lie with him. I won't let death get in the way of this journey."

"Then you're gonna have to try your damndest."

"I intend to." The poet turned from her companion, slouching against the weight of the world.

THREE DAYS PRIOR, THE poet sat within the bar, her back bent with a similar burden. The mug lay before her, froth dripping from the rim before dispersing across the counter, congealing upon the grimy wood. Her fingers gently tickled the side of the glass in a slow rhythm. Her gaze fell, grew dark.

A call from beyond those lurching, aimless walls moved her spirit to action. It daggered through the fugue laid across her being like a mourning veil, dispelling the wretched air within her moldering chest until all within was cast into the light. Some conviction was made known to her. It straightened her spine, tugged at her chest, tore her from her seat until she had grasped for the door without full command of herself.

She emerged into the town square, the sun's cruel light casting the scene into horrid relief. An ivory obelisk had erected itself in the center of the pavilion. Another figure, bent like a crow and clad in ebony robes like folded wings, stood before it, arms wide. He seemed almost to embrace the thing, paused in his act by the immensity of its sanctity. Tears carved paths down his dusty cheeks. Their distance pained him.

A crowd passed through the square, paying the pair no mind. Only one other was called to attention by the priest's ramblings. The man stood in the center of the crowd, flowing about him

like a school of inattentive fish, and caressed his beard. Not once did he tear his gaze from the preacher or his idol's perfection.

“The grace of God has made itself known to us today, my fellows! Yes! Yes, it is true!” The priest's voice quivered as he wept. “He has seen our pain and our struggle and has deigned to gift us with this holiest of offerings! A greater sign of His love has not once brushed this earth for many hundreds of years! Does this not call you to action? Do you not see what so clearly lies before me?”

The poet did.

THEY AWOKE THE NEXT morning to find the priest spilling their water upon the sand at the foot of the obelisk. From the stone upon which he had slept, the ivory pedestal jutted from the earth like a dagger. On his hands and knees, the man gave silent offering to the insatiable pallidity of the beast.

I don't want that thing to watch me sleep. The thought peeled through her mind with the resonance of a gong, calling her skin to shudder before the register of the priest's action impinged upon her. The obelisk gazed at her with absent eyes. No movement was beyond its purview. Her lips drew tight in a snarl. It seemed to laugh at her. It pitied their torment, saw them as ants beneath its holy feet. It would crush them and spill their blood upon the sand so that it might continue to live and feed. It hungered for their life and passion and futile belief in meaning, and, as they passed into the beyond, it would show them that there was none.

The layman collided with the priest's back, dragging the elder to the ground. Still caught within her dream-fugue, the layman brought a dissonance to the scene that stood before the poet's eye. He tethered it to reality in a way that it denied, tearing all rumination back to the

present. He pulled himself from the priest, flagon clasped in his hand, a walking, breathing blasphemy. Droplets of water dripped absently from the rim of the bottle. The stopper swayed in the wind, baring the cool cavern of the empty flagon.

“What have you done?” The layman’s voice scraped across the dunes like a blade upon stone.

The poet brought herself to quivering feet, fists writhing at her sides like serpents beneath the sand. “You bastard.” She gripped the priest’s collar in her hands, brought his back to the stone. Froth dripped from her lips, water squandered upon the sand.

“It must be fed,” the priest spluttered.

“You’ll kill us all!”

“There is always a trade. God will not accept our allegiance without a sacrifice!”

“Where is His voice?! All I hear is the wind!”

“Why do you think I pay homage?”

The poet stiffened.

“Do you think I’m blind to the silence? It hangs around me! I peer into His text, devote my life to His word, call others to my side, and now *this!* I call to the heavens with that very same question! Where is His voice? The wind burdens you not. To me, its howl is the death of all that I hold dear.”

“Then why do you continue?”

“Because I know, I *know*, that the end of this journey will bring me some answer. His voice will ring through my mind once more. Where else can I go?”

The poet stepped back, releasing her hold on the man’s collar. The layman watched her through his thick brows. *He could kill us all. But who am I to deny him his belief?* The poet leveled a finger at the priest, still reclined upon the smooth stone. “You can continue on this

journey. But if you make another move against us, then God will be your only salvation. Do you understand?"

The priest nodded.

She turned to the layman. "Any objection?"

He shook his head. "None. Doesn't matter much to me."

"Good. Then let's go."

THEY PASSED THEIR DAY under the cruel sun, never once pausing in their forward progress. Briefly, they would dismount, walking their horses across the silent dunes as beads of sweat slid down the animal's flanks. The poet gazed upon the waste with disgust. She turned her mind from it, hoping to deny the death that tread upon their heels.

As the sun reached its apex, its spirit called to grandest fury, she turned to the layman. "What led you out here?"

"The call of the pillar. The same as you, I assume."

"And nothing more?"

He shrugged. "It chose me. There must be some meaning in that."

"This seems like a dangerous land to tread on the assumption of meaning."

"You're here too."

"I know what I'm looking for."

"And so do I."

"Then what is it?"

"Movement. Energy."

"You could get that anywhere."

“But nowhere as much as here. Progress is progress, even if I never reach its end.”

“That seems like an unfortunate way to live.”

“That’s how everyone lives.”

“How so?”

The layman sighed. “Life’s defined by a series of goals and obligations that you have to fulfill. Once one’s been completed, you just move on to the next. If you don’t, you’ll be left purposeless, and that’s not a state many can take. So, we move on to the next goal, and the next, and the next, until eventually, one day, we can’t do it anymore. Then we fade away, and the last threads of our final obligation hang in the air for someone else to take up.”

“I don’t plan on living that way.”

“What you *want* doesn’t matter. It’s just fact.”

“No. No. *This* is the end. That’s why I’m out here. This will be the end to my journey. Of that I’m sure.”

The layman snorted. “You poets always pretend that you know what can’t be understood.”

She arched a brow. “Perhaps you’re just denying what’s right in front of your eyes. Perhaps you can’t see it.”

He laughed, a throaty bellow that rose above the sand, unburdened by its malice yet brought low by a far different weight. “You think you’ve tapped into some secret knowledge. All of you do. You look at the world and warp it so that you can tell yourself that you see it through different eyes. So, in that sense, I guess you’re right. I don’t see it. I don’t see what doesn’t exist. *This* is what exists. The sand. The rocks. The sun. I’m painfully aware of what exists. I don’t delude myself into a false belief, even if it would bring me greater joy.”

If he comes in my way, I won't let him stop me. "What meaning is there in a life that denies sight of the beautiful?" If this 'truth' is what he desires, then let him have it. It's no concern of mine. He's chosen his death. There's nothing I can do to stop him now.

"If you see any beauty in this land, then there's nothing I can do to help you."

The poet's lips twitched, shadows dancing about her face as her visage contorted into a rage untold. "We should mount up."

The layman nodded, and said no more.

A DAY CAME AND went, and the obelisk did not greet their gaze. The priest rose to a quiet frenzy, his fingers jolting across the reigns like fissures in glass, small fractures thinly veiled beneath his dark cloak. His preaching had since reached its end. No more did he cast his words upon the empty sands, as if he might appease them with his silence. Tendrils of malice still clawed up the trembling legs of his mount.

There is no making peace with this desert. Words and their absence are all the same in a land that speaks the language of the dead. The poet drew a hand across her brow, her knuckles passing across the cracked skin that lay therein. Her flesh stood in mirror to the desert. She hunched over her saddle, her hands clasped about the horse's mane as beads of sweat rolled from her face. They landed, steaming upon the steed's skin. The animal snorted like a trumpet brought low with the weight of the world, and she sighed alongside it.

The layman rode with a straight back, his face cast into shadow by the wide-brimmed hat perched upon the crest of his head. The edges of his beard turned up into the idea of a smile. The poet considered the impossibility of such an act in a land from which life had fled, and turned her mind to the heat that drove the last remnants of the water from their bodies.

The layman's smile did not disappear. It went not the way of all other things of the desert. The ephemerality of the land failed to drive it from the contours of his face, all effort to banish his strange joy frustrated by the mystery that lay just beyond the man's eyes.

The day passed without much incident, and, as the sun's life began to fade, its form giving way to the horizon and the realm of shadow, the party found themselves settled into the routine torment of the desert. Procedure was enough of a remedy to dull the greatest pain.

The three surmounted a lonely dune, and shrank back from the land that stood before them.

The poet's body twitched at irregular intervals, no command of the mind capable of stilling its fervid spasms. The smile dropped from the layman's face, his hands clawed around the reigns. The priest placed a quivering hand to his hat, then to his chest, as if the sight that stood before him would grasp at his breast and still his heart with a single wrench of its foul talons.

Beneath them, the desert stretched eternal, unmarred by a single rise or fall in the dune sea. The sun's gaze glanced off the sand, painting it the color of blood, like some sanguine offering upon the altars of that land's sneering gods. Every few feet, an ivory obelisk daggered from the sand. Some lurched from the dust as if just born, their ghostly forms hanging in such a manner that their weight should have carried them to the ground. Others rose with spines set straight, their attention turned only to the silent heavens. In some places, two opposing monoliths collided, forming pallid arches that spoke of some strange new land that lay just beyond their gate. Not a single one caught the sun. Even as night began to fall, they glowed with an unknowable light, like that of a predator's eyes in the deep, shrouded forest. Thousands of starving beasts, calling their siren song to the party that found themselves at their mercy. Any beauty that the scene might have posed was lost on the poet. *Some things don't deserve the grace of words. None should have to read of this.*

Faced with the certainty of meaninglessness, the three descended into the pallid sea.

They walked among the obelisks, not once gifting upon them the offering of speech. The poet reached out to one, fingers extended. *Please, mean something. Give me a sign.* Her hand only met smooth, polished stone. A touch like any other. Had prior significance not been attributed to the pale thing, she would have considered it nothing but a natural form of the hateful land. Her jaw tightened. She fought back the urge to pound the monolith with her fists, to unleash her fury upon the hulking slab of nothing that stood before her. But she did not, for she knew that the void within the ivory obelisk would reject her with the totality of absolute ignorance, as if she were a child bringing its feeble might against the solid, unfeeling mass of a mountain. Her hand slipped from the monolith, resting limply by her side. In some dim part of her mind, she thought that the thing had stolen the life from her chest. Words failed her, and she moved on.

“Night’s come,” the layman said, turning to the poet. She knew that he referred not to the darkness rupturing in the sky.

“This must be a sign. The Lord has congratulated my faith with this bounty! This,” he called, arms splayed in majesty, “is a sign!”

“This means nothing, priest. We’ve followed a farce across this entire desert, and now the land’s laughing at us.”

“No, no! This is evidence of our guide’s will. I just need some to translate the message. We’ll be off again, once more under the Lord’s purview.” The priest turned to one of the pillars, ran his eyes across its form, pulled the little black book from a fold of his cloak. Baring its pages to the sky, he began to read, his lips working soundlessly as his gaze twitched between the obelisk and the words inscribed within the book. The poet looked on helplessly as he did so, the layman’s back bent in his saddle.

After a time, the priest shook his head, muttering some inconceivable curse to himself, and scuttled frantically over to another monolith, a small black bug twitching beneath the fury of the sun. He repeated the motions of that farcical waltz long into the night; bathed in darkness, immersing himself within it, he became a creature carved of the shadow itself.

The layman turned to the poet. "What do we do?"

"We have to leave him."

"What?"

"He's just going to keep dancing in the dark. There's nothing we can do for him."

The layman shook his head. "He doesn't deserve to die out here."

"I never said he did. But that doesn't mean we have to die with him."

The layman stepped up to the priest, hand held out in silent communion. He placed his hand upon the man's shoulder. The preacher shrieked, slinking away from the layman's touch like a frightened beast. He fervently clutched the little book to his chest, his cloak billowing in the twilight wind.

The layman's hand fell to his side as the poet stepped up to him. "There's nothing we can do for him," she repeated.

"How did he get like this?"

"He was doomed to it from the beginning."

"What now?"

"We leave, I suppose." She mounted her horse, gazing down upon the layman. He refused to move, choosing instead to try and pierce through the abyss so that he might grant the priest a second chance. The man had slunk into the night once more, only his low mutterings filling the night.

The layman sighed, and pulled himself into the saddle. Favoring the congealing darkness with one last glance, he turned away, and the two rode off through the field. Even after they had long since passed from the land of pallid dominion, the rabid mutterings of the priest still rang through the poet's ears.

We couldn't save him. He was doomed from the beginning. The poet hoped that, through repetition, that lie might become truth.

A DAY HAD PASSED since the pair abandoned the priest, and the two were beginning to die. It was a creeping death, one that wound about their limbs with claws of ice and tore all feeling from their flesh. The poet's toes had become numb to her, and her fingers quivered upon the reigns.

"What do you think of life?" the layman asked.

"That there must be some meaning at the end of this torment."

"Seems unfounded to me."

"I refuse to believe that such suffering could exist without reward. Why would the earth be made that way?"

"It's just a senseless creation. It doesn't exist for you or me or anybody else. It hasn't meant anything and it never will."

"Then why did you go on this journey?"

"Because I could."

The poet snorted. "You chose to risk your life because you *could*?"

"Death'll come for me someday. No reason to keep it waiting."

If death is what he wants, then there's no reason to let him burden me, should the time come.

They rode on in silence. The poet cringed back from the thoughts that rang through her mind. *He wants it. He's said it himself. I don't have to save him. In fact, he'd thank me if I left him to rot.* The image of the priest, huddled against the night's chill, flashed behind her eyes. She thought of him scurrying among the pallid pillars, hoping to divine some meaning from that which lacked any semblance of it. She saw a corpse, flesh picked clean from its bones, resting against one of the obelisks, its ivory claw grasping up towards the silent marker of faith. A vulture sat perched upon the corpse's skull. It reached its beak deep into the thing's eye socket, pulling forth a string of dried, crimson flesh. It gulped the pickings down with a jagged move of its head, and unfurled its ebony cloak, taking flight and rising into the sky until the sun blotted out any memory of the beast. The poet turned her gaze from the vision.

An hour later, the layman fell from his horse. When he struck the ground, the poet thought that the earth itself would consume him, the grasping hands of all those slain upon the sand reaching up from the abyss they had been condemned to so as to ferry him down to their domain. His horse walked on for a time, its weary form still bent under the memory of the man's weight.

The poet gazed down at him, unmoving upon the sand. His chest still rose and fell with breath, but he made no move to rise.

"Are you going to leave?" he asked.

"What?"

"You should. I've had my fill, and now it's my time."

Shouldn't I grant him his last wish? It's his right to die, after all. The image of the empty skull appeared before her once more. *He wants this. He wants this! Why should his life be a burden to me?* The vulture met her eye as it gulped down the strip of crimson flesh. *No. No. No.*

The poet slid from her saddle, twining her arms under the layman's. He struggled feebly against her, but her might easily overcame his. With a last mustering of effort, she heaved him onto the back of her horse. *Why am I doing this?* She mounted before him, driving her heels into the animal's flanks. It raced forth across the sand, leaving the vision of the vulture behind them.

"You shouldn't have done that," the layman mumbled.

"I had to."

It did not take long for the hatred of the desert to lance through the poet's heart. Her vision grew dim, darkness creeping along the edges of her sight. No longer did feeling grace her fingers. Her body seemed to be dissolving, her perception of her own form fading away like mist pierced by the sun.

Something shimmered from the horizon. It grasped up into the air, then fractured into many branching paths, drooping lazily down towards the earth. As its image resolved, verdance shone in the poet's eyes.

A tree rose from the desert.

The poet brought the horse to a gallop once more, desperately reaching for the oasis that lay on the horizon, death grasping at her heels. It took her nearly an hour to reach it, and, once she had, life had almost faded from the group. The layman and the poet fell from the horse onto the soft grass, clawing their way to the pond that lay within the center of the grove. As the poet reared her head to drink, for a brief moment, she met her own gaze, a haggard, abused thing. She lowered her face to the water, lapping hungrily from the mirror to the sky. Life flowed through her form once more, and she sat back, gasping for breath.

The layman and the poet sat in silence for a time, still scrubbing death's touch from their flesh.

“Thank you,” he said.

The poet nodded.

“What now?”

“Already looking to head out?” she gasped.

“Just want to know what our next step is.”

“The next step....” She paused, gazing out to the horizon that hovered just above the foliage.

“Next, we ride.”