

The Throwback:
He Fell From Heaven
Game-Play / Fiction
By Raymond Towers

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Genres: Iron Age Fantasy, Sword And Planet, Science Fiction
Rating: **HIGH controversy**

Log Date 20221207

“Take one more step,” Nottle threatened. “And I’m going to fry one of you.”

He didn’t pray much, but he was praying now. The last thing he wanted was to pull the trigger on his plasma pistol.

The six men were obviously hunters. They wore thick animal furs to stave off the biting cold, nearly covering their entire faces. From what Nottle could see, they had dark hair and eyes, and ruddy skin. He tried to make out their features, when a flurry of snow cut across the divide between them, obscuring one side from the other. The first two were moving, Nottle observed, ever since they’d first spotted him in his sleek blue spacesuit. Their short spears were held up high as if they meant to launch missiles at any moment.

“I’m not kidding!” Nottle shouted, holding the pistol out. “Another step is gonna be your last one!”

He questioned whether they were territorial and defending their grounds, or hungry enough to eat him. In the end, it didn’t matter because it was clear they were going to try to kill him. For a long, tense moment, Nottle wondered how they saw him, in his form-fitting blue suit, with his blue space helmet that had a raked angle to the back, where the compressed oxygen cartridge went, and his reflective visor that slid up like a motorcycle rider’s, showing only his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

One of the nearest two shouted at him. The man looked big, rugged, and mean.

“I don’t understand your language, bro!” Nottle shouted back. “This is all one big mis-”
They made their move.

This is a troublesome inciting incident.

Nottle's stats are Edge 1, Heart 3, Iron 2, Shadow 1, Wits 2.

Nottle has +1 to Edge when using a plasma pistol, and +1 to Supply when wearing his advanced tech spacesuit.

Face Danger – rolled 5 (+2) against 2/10 for a weak hit. Lose momentum.

The first spear came flying at him. At a distance of thirty feet, Nottle stepped out of its way. The second spear came much closer, nearly skewering him. He didn't want to turn and run, but he also didn't want to kill these men. The first two hunters moved aside, giving way to the second two, who moved up just as eager to throw.

"I'm not..." Nottle started. "I'm not... Damn it!"

Enter The Fray – rolled 2 against 7/10 for a miss. Lose 1 spirit.

Clash – rolled 3(+2) against 2/5 for a weak hit.

His weapon shot a pinkish-white plasma bolt into the nearest threat, nearly too fast to be visible to the naked eye. The man grunted, gritted his teeth as the red hot burn swept through his chest, liquefying animal hide and bare skin, cauterizing the edges of the wound into charred black flesh. The man fell to his knees before toppling over dead. The second man stopped and gaped at his fallen companion, wondering what had just taken place.

You must survive this, the AI voice in Nottle's head warned.

"I know that! Shit!"

Clash – 5(+2) against 9/10. Miss.

So much was happening at once. The first two men didn't have spears, but they did have knives tucked into their clothing. They were rushing toward him now, knives in hand. The third man still stared at the corpse. From the last two, Nottle caught a glimpse of one running straight to the dead man, and in his heart he felt, he knew the dead man was a relative. He also knew he had to end this quickly.

Clash – 3(+2) against 3/7. Weak hit.

The next plasma blast struck the nearest would-be stabber. The attacker wasn't dead, but he was badly wounded in the upper right chest. Nottle tripped in the snow, falling backward. He still had one man bearing down on him.

Clash – 2(+2) against 10/10. Miss.

The next plasma bolt went into the air, as the angry man lunged at him and jabbed his knife at Nottle's middle. They were both off-balance. The blade missed Nottle's torso, but it did tear into his suit at the left shoulder. Nottle screeched as he felt the blade pierce his arm.

Clash – 3(+2) against 10/10. Miss.

In their struggle, Nottle's weapon was knocked out of his grip. He only had his bare hands now, trying to keep the man off, trying to prevent the knife from coming down.

Nottle, you are not succeeding, the AI told him.

"I know! I know!" He shouted.

The man pushing down on him shouted back, thinking he'd just been insulted.

Clash – 1(+2) against 2/7. Weak hit.

Nottle managed to shove the man aside, big thanks to his grappling skills. Before the man could get his bearings, or right himself enough to use his knife, Nottle pushed himself with his legs and set a greater distance between them.

There! He saw the pistol, rolled toward it and snatched it from the snow.

Clash – 4(+2) against 2/8. Weak hit.

No time to aim right, only enough to let off a blast that struck the rising stabber in the thick of a thigh. The man grunted, reaching for a leg that no longer supported him, before sinking down to a knee. The man let out a long, pained groan.

No time, Nottle thought, knowing he still had half the troop on their feet. He squeezed his pistol's trigger, striking the wounded man dead-center, causing him to fall back with a steaming hole in his chest. The others, Nottle thought, how close are they?

I'm up to 9 of 10 on the Progress Track.

End The Fight – 9 against 4/8. Strong hit.

Nottle sat up, aiming in front of him, seeing no one, looking to his sides. Finally he spotted a man kneeling by the corpse, apparently crying. Another man stood upright, hoping to defend the entire bunch with his single spear. The third healthy man dragged away the one with the chest wound, who wasn't moving anymore and was likely dead.

Nottle scrambled to his feet. He moved further away from the spearman, who was bearded in gray-white and surely over fifty years old. When Nottle had a closer look at the man kneeling by the corpse, he was stunned to find a youthful face, a big teenager maybe.

"Sorry." Nottle said, guessing he'd just killed the boy's father. "I didn't want this to happen. You guys came at me first."

The oldest of the group threatened him by raising his spear, acting as if he might throw it. The man held back because he'd figured out what Nottle held in his hand was lethal.

"Sorry." Nottle said again, knowing he wouldn't be understood but saying it anyway.

He backed up steadily. When he felt he had enough of a safety buffer, he turned and trod through the snow, he estimated it was a good six inches high. It was snowing lightly, with no sign of letting up. By morning, he guessed the snow might come up to his knees.

"What's the temperature?" He asked.

Twenty Fahrenheit, six Celsius, the AI replied.

“The rest of me isn’t going to freeze, but I have to do something about this ripped suit. I know I got cut, but I can’t even feel that right now.”

As the wind whipped up around him, Nottle turned back. Those men he’d just killed; he could take a knife from them, cut off a piece of their clothing that he could tie around his arm. At least that way he’d keep the tear and wound covered up, before his exposed flesh froze.

He started back toward the scene of the fight, hoping he wouldn’t have to kill anyone else that day.

Log Date 20221208

Removed the +1 to Supply when Nottle is wearing his spacesuit. It didn’t make sense anymore. Momentum is at 1. Supply is at 4. I also forgot 1 Harm, so Health is at 4. In the interim, Nottle Makes Camp. Roll of 3 (+4) against 1/6. Strong hit. Health goes up to 5. Momentum goes up to 2.

“Not my best moment.” Nottle mentioned, early the next morning when he woke.

What was not your best moment, the AI wondered.

“You know, scaring the shit out of those hunters yesterday. The ones I didn’t kill.”

It was necessary to preserve your life.

Nottle considered his clothing. He wore animal skins with a charred portion on the upper right shoulder, the damage caused by his plasma pistol. He’d also taken rough wool trousers, shoes that were little more than leather bunched up past the ankles and tied with strips, and a crude but very sharp obsidian knife. It was probably the same knife that had sliced through his spacesuit. Luckily, he had only been nicked on the arm. He’d tied a piece of rough cloth over the wound before rolling the suit back up to his neck.

“I left that guy naked in the snow.” Nottle grumbled. “I don’t think I even needed to take the clothes. The EVS suit kept me warm enough. I wasn’t sure it would.”

The Extra-Vehicular Suit is designed to withstand the coldness of space, the AI said.

“That’s a different kind of cold. Molecules move in atmos. In space, they don’t move at all. The main reason I took the clothes was so I wouldn’t stick out so much. I’m the only blue thing out here.”

Nottle thought the AI would comment, but it didn’t. “What are you, anyway? You’re not a regular AI. You were evolving a mile a minute right before... right before shit hit the fan.”

I am an Artificial Intelligence residing in a quantum chip.

“Spare me, okay?” Nottle scoffed. “I know bullshit when I hear it. That little spiel about you being in a Q-chip, and the chip being inside my head, that’s the cover story. I think the chip can open up a portal to wherever you are, and you can talk through it. Nobody was buying the story that you were advanced software programmed into an alien ship. I know you’re sentient!”

The AI remained silent.

“Come on, ‘fess up! What the hell are you really?”

In the ancient times, my kind were known as daemons. Conduits, if you will, between the Creators and Humankind.

“The Creators? You mean the gods? No kidding!”

The Creators, the AI repeated.

Nottle caught the distinction, wondering what it meant. “I don’t know if I believe you or not. Look, I need to score some grub. My stomach is knocking on that door. You got any idea where I can find food?”

I am forbidden to interfere directly.

“Thanks a lot.” Nottle grumbled.

The day was cloudy, threatening to snow again. He would have been freezing, he felt, if he wasn’t wearing his micro-fiber suit under his animal clothing. The clothes had a smell to them, but he didn’t know if that was from the original animal or the people that wore the clothes.

“I probably smell like green ass right now.” Nottle quipped, as he trudged through the mounds of soft white powder. “The snow is halfway up my shins. Maybe you can’t interfere, but I’m thinking about inventing snow shoes or snow skis or some shit. Any idea what world we’re on? Or how advanced they are? I mean not counting the hunters we ran into yesterday.”

That is unknown. Your placement was sudden and random.

“A random world, huh?”

What do you remember?

“Wow, a question for me?” Nottle grinned. “Let’s see. I was on the Valiant... We were attacked by a UP battle cruiser... I think I got killed. I think I was recreated in the Re-In tube but I didn’t get a full mind upload. Captain Zayden told me to put on my suit. I... Shit. I remember that Kold got killed. I watched her die. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

The Valiant was destroyed, including the data pools and the Reincarnation Tubes. My kind were forced to act in order to preserve your human essence.

“And you figured the best way to do that was to... to move me to a random planet?”

Technology exists to track quantum temporal displacement.

“And United Planets has that kind of tech? Since when?”

The AI, predictably, went silent.

“Great.” Nottle murmured, and kept on walking.

Several columns of rising smoke gave away the proximity of a settlement. By that time, Nottle’s legs were tired of the burdensome walk. He stopped behind a few stalwart firs to remove his helmet, and for a short time felt the sting of cold on his face. The helmet was made of steel alloy, covered over with micro-fiber and padded on the inside. He had nothing to hide it with, but in a pinch he could use it to bash someone. The wool cap and hide hat he’d taken from the dead man went back on his head.

“I’ve got a hand knife for a weapon and a helm for a shield.” Nottle kidded. “What else could go wrong?”

Two sentries spotted him, as he reached within a rock’s throw of the settlement. The men wore wool caps, coats and trousers and immediately pointed bows at him. One man shouted over his shoulder, and within a short time a handful of new men arrived, most of them armed with short swords. Several of them started barking in his direction.

“Whoa, whoa!” Nottle brought his hands up. “I’m not here to fight! I’m just looking for a bite to eat, that’s all!”

They were itchy, he noticed, to let their arrows fly.

Sojourn. 2(+3) against 2/8. Weak hit. Momentum goes up to 4.

“It’s the clothes.” Nottle realized. “They think I’m part of that hunting group!”

Quickly, he removed the hide and wool from his head, revealing his messy blonde hair, green eyes and fair skin. Warm mist blew out of his mouth.

“These clothes aren’t mine!” He shouted. “I had to use them... because it was cold!” He pointed far behind him. “I came from far away!” He motioned at his mouth. “I’m looking for something to eat!”

Nottle threw the knife to the ground. There was no way he’d let go of his helmet, however, and he kept his hand on his stomach, ready to reach under his hide-coat for his plasma pistol.

Nervously, he let the men approach. They all had weathered faces despite not being that old, and hair in a short range from brown to auburn to red. To a one, these men were lean, but they looked strong and capable. As the bunch of them spread out in an arc, many still pointing their bows, the brawniest of the bunch shouted at him.

“Sorry, bro.” Nottle called back. “I’m not from around here. You could say that I’m from the other side of the deep blue sea.”

The men barked orders among their number. Most of them lowered their bows, while two with swords walked forward with the head barker leading them. Again, the leader spoke out.

“I don’t know what you’re saying.” Nottle told him. “I’m not here to fight.”

The leader was bold enough to walk up to Nottle’s face. He tugged at the hide clothing, seemingly angry that Nottle had it on. When the leader noticed the blue suit underneath the hide, he gasped and took a fast step back. The man turned to bark at another man with a lowered bow, who galloped his butt back to the settlement.

Something had just happened, Nottle realized, but he couldn’t discern what it meant. He hoped the color blue was a good sign for these people.

Log Date 20221209

They seemed to be at an impasse, with all these man watching him, holding weapons. At least they weren’t straight out attacking him like the last bunch. Since his head started getting cold, Nottle went ahead and put his wool cap on, and then his hide cap.

“Shit.” He said. “Anybody wanna dance? What kind of dancing do you all do around here, anyway?”

Rolled d6 for the initial reaction from this next NPC. The range was 1 for extremely happy or excited down to 6 for terrified. Result was 1.

Sixty, seventy feet behind the men were the first of the homes. They were rectangular, made of thick logs covered over with mud, sized wider than the single-family dwellings he was used to. The roofs were also wood, covered over in thatch and mud. Already, a good number of people, a few dozen of them, were gathering together, gawking and gossiping.

A woman pushed her way through the small crowd. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, head and body covered in rough wool, cap and kirtle, with a longer dress underneath. While most of the woman's clothing was colored in old beige, her kirtle was the color of the sky. She was the only one wearing blue among the entire bunch. Her eyes gaped wide, as if expecting to see a monster or something weird. When they focused on Nottle and his unwelcome attire, she hefted the ends of her kirtle and started a run toward the warriors surrounding him. Behind her came a girl in similar dress who looked half her age.

The woman in blue stopped her run, walking behind the leader, peering over the big man's shoulder to stare at Nottle. She squealed when she witnessed Nottle's blonde hair. Her hair was dark brown, he noticed, and her eyes green like his, but a few shades lighter.

The woman spoke to the leader, and he grunted. Apparently, she'd been given some kind of permission, as she stepped around the big man and came to study Nottle closer. The leader said something to her, and in reaction she went to tug on Nottle's hide sleeve. The sleeve was thick and furry, and he wore hide mittens on his hands, but past that the woman caught a glimpse of his blue suit. She squealed again, looking as if she'd won a lottery.

"Have you seen people like me before?" Nottle wondered.

"Sawel-sunno." She said. "Sawel-sunno!"

"I have no idea what you're saying, lady."

"Rik-eto!"

"Right back at you."

She raised her arms and waved at the heavens. "Rik-eto!"

She came closer to Nottle, close enough to set her hand against his ear, on his hair, before she pointed directly at the sun. "Sunno!"

"Sunno?" Nottle asked. "Are you trying to say sun?"

With both her hands, she made as if she were sprinkling something at his face. She pointed at the sun. "Sawel!" She sprinkled air at his face. "Sunno!"

"The sun is Sawel." Nottle deciphered. "And when you sprinkle it at me... No, when the sun shines on me, that's Sunno. Wait, is it my hair? Do you think I came from the sun?"

The stars, Nottle, the AI said inside his brain.

"I was getting to that." Nottle muttered. To the woman, he said. "No, I am not from the sun." He gestured at his chest with his index finger. "I came from space." He pointed at the sky. "I came from riketo."

"Rik-eto." She replied, astonished.

As the armed men started looking at each other and murmuring, the woman took Nottle by a forearm and led him past their number, toward the village. The girl who had followed her out there, Nottle noticed, quietly followed her back.

Foreign words are inspired by actual proto-Celtic language.

Dozens of buildings were seen in the village, all clustered on the edges of one wide road. The buildings were once majestic and formidable, but that was long ago. In the present, many of them showed signs of wear and neglect, even dangerous leaning as if the wind had won the war against the solid tree trunks. Nottle estimated that a hundred people had come out to see the man

who'd fallen from the sky, allegedly. He counted only adults; no old people, no kids. Lots of warriors, too, walking the perimeter as if some kind of attack was coming.

The one house that was set apart from the others was the one the woman led him to. It was further away from the road than the rest, big enough to be a three or four bedroom deal if this was Old Earth. The house had a short entryway made of thick wood, and behind it a worn blanket meant to keep the cold and wind out.

The woman swung the door open and motioned for Nottle to walk in first. He did, entering into a wide lobby of some kind, or a hospital room. He counted four sleeping cots, three of them filled with people. A younger man had cloth bandages around an arm and waist. An old woman lay on her back, covered to the neck with blankets. They both turned their heads to witness him coming in. The third person, or patient, was an old man who didn't move at all, probably asleep, maybe dead, considering the way his head was tilted. The room was cool, not cold, thanks to a couple of large urns that glowed like candles, likely filled with some kind of oil.

The young man sat up, eyeing Nottle with suspicion. He had the alert look of a soldier. The woman who'd brought Nottle inside threw a volley of words at the soldier, including the rik-eto word, but the man did not let his guard down, not until Nottle removed his double caps and showed his blonde hair and fair skin.

The structure had a wall to wall division separating the patient area from whatever lay on the other side. Two entryways were built into the division, both covered with blankets. From one of these, an old woman stepped out, wearing a sky-blue kirtle similar to his escort. She must have been quite the looker in her day, Nottle figured, because even in her late fifties, and showing a weathered countenance, she was still quite the beauty queen. Her hair was orange-red as flame, her eyes green as a cat's.

"Whoa, Nelly." Nottle smiled at her.

The crimson-haired beauty gave him a strange look, before his escort spouted out the rik-eto spiel once again. To prove her point, the escort went to Nottle, pulling on one of his mittens until she'd loosened it off his hand, revealing the end of his blue EVS suit.

The older woman stepped closer to inspect Nottle's hand, and his face, and looked into his eyes with such a gaze he thought she could see right through his skull. The two women started up a debate, with the younger one winning out. Together, and with the patients watching, they began tugging on Nottle's hunting clothes until he understood they wanted him to take it off.

He removed his outer layer of attire, left standing in the form-fitting suit, with his pistol in one hand and the helmet in the other. Nottle tossed the weapon onto the cot, hoping the women wouldn't try to take it from him, while at the same time knowing they couldn't use it because it was linked to his ID chip. He set the helmet on his head.

"That's what I look like when I have the entire thing on." He said.

The older woman had her eyes elsewhere, as she walked around him.

"If you're wondering if I have man parts, I do." He told her. "They're hidden under the suit. You do know it's a suit, right?"

The woman touched his side, then his thigh, wincing as if she didn't like the feel of the micro-fiber. It felt rubbery.

“That’s the suit.” Nottle insisted. “Hell, I should probably take it off. I’ve been wearing it for like the last three days except for, you know, when I do the business, and thanks to the cold I hurry my ass up and put it on again. It’s not that easy, you know, to put it on.”

They were listening to him, but they had about as much inkling about what he was actually saying as he did when he heard them talk.

“Screw it.” Nottle decided. “I’m taking it off. I probably have a rash by now. My butt’s been itching like crazy all day... Hey, can we get that girl to step out?”

He pointed at his escort’s companion. Instead of sending her outside, the escort motioned for the girl to step closer. The girl was ready to help.

“That didn’t work.” Nottle said. “You all are going to faint when you get a whiff of me, but here goes nothing.”

He tossed his helmet on the same cot as the plasma pistol, before he reached for the end of the suit around his neck. The suit wasn’t exactly elastic; it was more like memory foam, in that it could stretch and hold its position against a human body. Nottle tugged at the neck portion, a job easier done with a partner.

When he had the neck portion out to his shoulder, he spoke to the women. “Help me out here. You’ve got to roll it down, like a scuba suit. Here, just hold it while I roll it.”

After some trial and error, he managed to convey what he needed done. The women helped roll the suit past his chest and shoulders, when his worst fears were realized.

“Shit.” Nottle said, seeing red rash wherever his flesh was exposed. “It’s the micro-fibers. They absorb sweat to regulate body temperature when we’re out in space. Too much sweat, too much body oil, clogs up the system. I wasn’t supposed to have the suit on that long.”

The women seemed to know what he needed. The older woman walked into the back end of the building, while his escort and her aide continued to help him.

“I need a good bath and non-allergenic skin cream.” Nottle said.

He frowned when the suit exposed the spot he’d been nicked on. Despite his efforts to keep his wound covered up, the edges had blacked up and the middle wept from infection. The woman who’d escorted him into the house looked the wound over, and looked at him, before she set her hands on it and pinched. More fluid seeped out.

“You know that hurts, right?” Nottle asked.

She said something to her young assistant, who hurried into the same doorway the older woman had gone into.

“That must be like your pharmacy.” Nottle assumed. “Or your leaf collection. I want to go in there and check that out later.”

The woman asked the soldier to help her. Together, and with Nottle doing part of the work, they managed to peel the suit down to his middle. Nottle kicked off his short mag-boots.

“The suits work better on bare skin than they do on clothes.” He said.

He would have been happier if he finished undressing himself, since he was in the company of strangers. If Nottle were on the Valiant, or on the old Sunbird, it was routine for him and his fellow mercs to help each other put their gear on. The woman was persistent, however, and the soldier dutiful in listening to her. Within a few minutes, Nottle was left in his birthday suit.

He started hopping up and down on his toes. “It’s getting chilly in here!”

The woman led him into the back area where, sure enough, he saw a lot of shelves, a lot of jars and a lot of pouches. In one corner of the large room, the old woman had a fire going, and over that fire hung an iron cauldron. The old woman dipped small cloths into the cauldron, wetting them with warm water. She and the girl came to give Nottle a thorough wipe-down, while the other woman used a mortar and pestle to grind several ingredients together at a table. She created a salve to dab on Nottle's wound, once his arm was washed.

The soldier returned later, bringing a tunic, trousers, undershirt and underpants for him to wear. Nottle didn't know the first thing about using brooches, only standing by as the soldier did the task for him. He didn't like being dressed by another man.

The older woman brought him a clay cup filled with hot tea. He drank it despite the heat, desperate to fill his body with any warmth he could. He wanted to trust these people, following his escort to the last empty cot, where he lay down and had a blanket put over him. After several days of being on the alert, out in the open, Nottle finally allowed his body to relax.

In no time at all he'd fallen into a deep, restful sleep.

The healers woke him up a few hours later. They had him strip and gave him a second wipe-down. Whatever they put on him smelled like strong peppermint, but that was much better than how he'd smelled earlier. He had more tea, and then, more sleep.

Log Date 20221210

Nottle woke with a burning forehead. Drops of water fell on it and also on his mouth. When his thoughts grew coherent, he realized the girl was sitting next to him, on a three-legged stool. She twisted a cloth over his face and caused drops to drip down on him.

"Tian." He mumbled.

For a second, the girl looked shocked. She looked over her shoulder, where a soldier stood. The man had light blue eyes, brown hair and a woolly beard. The man had also heard him.

"It's the girl's name right? Tian?" Nottle asked. "Wait, how do I know that? Are you listening to me, spook?"

I am listening, Nottle, the AI in his brain answered.

"Did you tell me the girl's name?"

I introduced the name into your conscious mind. I have been listening to these people speak while you slept. I am building a vocabulary for you, but I cannot introduce it into your conscious mind all at once. This must be done in increments, or else you will become overwhelmed.

"Thanks, I guess."

You can facilitate this task by pointing at objects and asking what they are called.

"Yeah, I'll do that." Nottle said. "Hey, wait a minute. How long am I going to be here?"

There is no definite answer. You are beyond the reach of our enemies on this world. My Creators have placed certain temporal markers at key points. Should the markers be triggered by the presence of our enemies, you will be moved elsewhere-

"Hold up!" Nottle cut in. "That sounds a lot like the entire Sol system was compromised! The Valiant was the fastest ship in the fleet! How did United Planets catch up to us, let alone blow us out of space? You were the AI in charge of our ship!"

Nottle's mind abruptly went blank.

“Hey, hey!” He hollered. “You were doing that shit before! Wiping our memories when we started piecing shit together! You betrayed us! That’s it! You betrayed us and let us get caught!”

Again, it felt as if someone pulled the plug in his head.

“I hate when you do that.” Nottle shook his head.

During his tirade, the girl had left the stool and run to hide behind the soldier. The wounded soldier stood next to the bearded man, and behind them stood the healers. The men looked ready to subdue Nottle if he became violent.

Nottle realized he’d gotten to his feet. He slumped back down on the cot and huffed. “I’m all right. I just had a bad fucking nightmare. It’s over now.”

Certain actions were taken, the AI said. They were necessary.

“Yeah, sure. You said you loved me once. You remember that?”

Of course. I love you still. This is why I have joined with you.

Memories of his friends started rising up in his head, but Nottle scattered them with his will. He looked at the people tending to him. “You got a latrine around here?”

He went out with two guards, wearing undergarments, short hide boots and covered over with a thick blanket. When he returned, he had to use his hands to keep his trousers from falling, as he’d yet to master how the brooches kept the shirt and trousers together. Too embarrassed to have the men put their hands on him, he went to the first woman he’d met to fix that.

On his own, Nottle went into the back area, where he felt compelled to take his clothes off, right after they’d been fastened together. He scanned as much of his body as he could.

“The rash is going away.” He noticed. “That’s good. I still have some on my sweaty spots, but not as bad as before.”

The oldest woman started up the fire with a striking rock and tinder. Once the cauldron had warmed up, all three women wiped him down. The oldest and youngest stepped aside, making room for the third woman to apply some kind of ointment to Nottle’s trouble spots. The greasy cream smelled pungent, like exotic herbs or leaves. By herself, she organized his underclothes and set the brooches on correctly.

Nottle tapped his chest. “My name is Nottle. Ace Nottle.” He pointed at each of the women. “The young one is Tian. The middle woman is Condi. And hot grandma over here is Cenia.”

He went up to each woman, touching her shoulder and saying her name. Next, he went around the room pointing at objects until the women vocalized what they were called.

“You getting all this, spook?” He asked.

I am, the AI told him.

Nottle took his spacesuit into the back room. He pulled it inside out and wiped it clean with hot water. The locals didn’t use soap to wash their bodies, but dabbed scented oil on their private spots. Condi offered him oil to use on the suit, but he refused, not knowing how it would react.

“Don’t put anything on my suit.” He was adamant to get this across. “Nothing. It would be bad. You understand bad, right?”

“Bad.” Condi replied in her language.

He considered the items on the shelves, trying to figure out where the most important ones were sitting. In full view of both healers, he moved some of their things aside and set his suit into that spot, neatly folded up, and over it his helmet and pistol.

“These things are important.” He said. “Important.”

“Crucial.” Condi replied.

“Close enough.” He decided. “Look, you’re not going to understand this, but I’m a clone. I’m a military asset that gets created and crunched, and created and crunched all over again. The last time I was created, I was on a spaceship and I didn’t get the chance to get my muscles up to optimal. That’s what I’m doing now. I need to get my cardio up to see where I’m at. I need to go for a run.”

He tried to say the right word in their language to convey this. “Uh, ret-o, ret-u. Wait, is it kom-ret? You know, run?”

“Kom-ret.” Condi said.

Nottle thought the matter settled. He did the best he could in getting his outer clothes on right, but when he failed, he went to Condi. Once that was done, he stepped outside.

The day was sunny, in the low sixties. Nottle figured he’d better get his run in right away, before the sun plunged lower and the evening cast its icy breath on the land.

Condi had walked out with him, waving to the first few soldiers she observed. She called out to them, but thanks to his rudimentary knowledge of her language he only caught a few words.

“-kom-ret gallo-”

One soldier broke off from the group and came to stand next to him.

“Is this guy jogging with me?” Nottle asked.

Condi nodded. “Kom-ret.”

“Ret means run, I think.” Nottle said. “Kom must mean with a buddy. No idea what that gallo part is about.” He addressed the soldier. “You ready, bud?”

The soldier had a lost look on his face.

“Let me ret by myself.” Nottle said. “You stay here. No, uh, no reido. No travel with me. No kom-ret.”

In the end, he gave up and started moving. The soldier was like an anxious dog, running ahead as if he expected Nottle to go full speed, then slowing to see why Nottle ran slow.

“Go back.” Nottle told him. “Krokenno... Krokno... No, wait. That’s your actual back. Return, man! Return to whatever you were doing before!”

Nottle started running again. The soldier tried to keep up, and maybe he was a decent sprinter, but he could not keep up with Nottle’s slow and steady pace for long.

It felt good for him to pick up speed. The rush of energy reminded him of a time back-when, when he’d surfed Malibu at high tide, except those weren’t his real memories. Nottle was an artificial being made for war, with a false reality engineered into his mind, to create the illusion that he was a real person. His mind suddenly went blank.

“I don’t mind that you did that, spook.” He said. “It would have gotten me depressed.”

Nottle passed the time by counting the buildings he ran by. He estimated around fifty large homes in the entire village, each big enough to fit a good ten to fifteen people, but there couldn’t be as many as five hundred inhabitants. Maybe that’s why so many buildings were in neglect.

There simply weren't enough people around to take care of them. He saw old people and children out today, probably because the sun was shining.

After a half mile, he crossed the wide road, too wide for such a small village, and started back up from the opposite end. The snow was still above his ankles, but he wasn't wearing the bulky hunter's outfit this time. It was a good, exhilarating run.

When Nottle returned to the healer's home, he was met with the smell of fresh broth. It made his mouth water. Before he could grab a bowl and eat, Condi took him into the back and had him change into a new set of clothes.

The wounded soldier had his bandages changed before he ate, showing several slashes that made Nottle grimace. Whatever animal that man had tangled with, it had long claws. The old woman ate first and left, apparently cured of whatever had ailed her, and as for the old man, Nottle had not seen him in a while.

He and the soldier were told to sit on the same cot to eat, while Condi and Tian changed the blankets on their cots. The spoon was made of wood and the bowl of clay. The broth was watery, but it did have bits of meat and vegetables.

Nottle brought out a small round veggie and stared at it. "Is this a potato? It's the size of a golf ball! My testicles are bigger than this!" He looked at the soldier. "My kalljo is bigger than this mastja."

The soldier and Tian gave him an odd look, while Condi tried hard to fight back laughter. When Cenia emerged from the back room, Condi repeated the joke to her, but the old woman only frowned and shook her head.

"You don't like me." Nottle grinned at her. "But I like you."

Condi, on the other hand, kept turning her head away from him.

"I think she's blushing." Nottle said. He gulped down his portion and held out an empty bowl. "Time for a refill! When a man's gotta eat, a man's gotta eat!"

Condi looked at his bowl, then at Cenia, who frowned again. Condi then went to offer her bowl to Nottle.

"That's your food." Nottle said. "Oh." He stood up and went to look at the pot they'd poured the broth from. It was empty. "You don't have a lot of food here. No mastja?"

"Wak-mastja." Condi said.

Empty food, she'd said, as in it was all gone.

"Shit." Nottle muttered. "I'm used to being fed on a starship. You've got bio-material that gets shaped into a million different kinds of food by a molecular printer. And here, you've got... You've got potatoes the size of golf balls. I need to step outside."

The evening had come, and with it enough cold that it threatened to make his teeth chatter.

"Hey, spook," Nottle said. "How far are you in deciphering their language?"

Thirty-four percent. I liked it better when you called me Baby.

"So stop erasing my memories and maybe I will. I need you to speed that language deal up. I need to talk fluently to these people."

Much of the actual translation is already finished. The transfer process into your brain is what takes significant time.

"The process would only take a few hours on the Valiant."

We are not on the Valiant. You cannot simply be put to sleep and updated.

“Well, figure out a way. Jolt it into me, if you have to. You know I am a man of action. All I’ve been doing since I got here is spinning my wheels!”

We are not on the Valiant.

Nottle was ready with a smart-ass comment, until he realized what the AI meant. On the Valiant, they didn’t have to worry about bad weather, or skin rashes, or getting fevers. So many things he’d taken for granted on the ship were not the same on this world.

“Do it anyway.” He said. “Even if it hurts.”

Log Date 20221212

Several times during the night, Nottle felt as if his brain were trying to give birth to a second, larger brain. He tossed and turned, and when it got real bad he’d groan and twist his body off the cot. Nottle woke everyone in the home, and sometimes, when he could focus, he could see how worried they all looked, especially Condi. Most of the time, however, their forms were fuzzy thanks to how badly his brain rattled. More than once, the women and the wounded soldier had to help him back on the cot. Cenia offered him hot tea, but he refused it because the AI said it would hamper his progress.

During his more lucid moments, he became aware that Condi had set her stool next to his cot, neglecting her own sleep to watch over him. Since the start, she’d been attentive to Nottle, and here he was looking past her and at the fifty-something year old eye candy. That’s another thing he was accustomed to, seeing attractive, athletic military people who were clones like him, because they were all engineered that way. Before his mind fuzzed out, he made it a point to treat Condi the way she deserved to be treated.

“You should have forced the tea into him, when he was asleep.”

“He did not want it.”

“You felt how hot his head was! You could have cooked an egg on it!”

Nottle opened his eyes. Cenia and Condi were arguing over him. It made his headache even worse. He winced when someone dropped a piece of wood, thinking they’d purposefully done it, but no, it was the soldier who’d shoved away a wooden crutch Tian had given him. The soldier was a young man, but already he was stubborn enough, or prideful enough, that he refused to use the crutch.

Condi stood within arm’s reach of Nottle. It took no effort at all for him to reach out for the back of her kirtle and goose her in the ass. She yelped and whirled around to see him grinning up at her. For a second, she didn’t know how to react, until she huffed, turned abruptly and headed toward the back room.

Nottle still grinned because, despite her theatrics, her face was flushed. “Wait, I have to ask you something!”

This time, not only did Condi spin around to face him, but so did everyone else.

“He speaks!” The soldier said. “He speaks our tongue!”

“He is a warlock!” Young Tian remarked. “Cenia was in the right!”

Nottle groaned as he rose to his feet. Maybe taking that long jog the day before hadn't been such a good idea, not in conjunction with the brain update he'd gotten from the AI. That's likely how he'd contracted the fever. "Not a warlock, just... just someone who figures things out a little faster than most. Condi, you've helped me out more than anybody else. What can I do for you as a way to return a kindness with a kindness?"

Condi immediately turned her head toward the older woman.

Cenia hadn't gotten over his fluency, but she wasn't speechless. "Tell him."

"The gods spoke to me in a vision," Condi spoke to Nottle. "They said I would soon meet a man who would give me that which I desire the most."

"Okay, and what do you desire?" Nottle asked.

"A boy-child. He is to have sun-kissed hair and eyes the color of mine. I mean the boy, but... but also the father. Both of them are to have that... That is what I was told!"

"Whoa." Nottle replied. His first thought was that maybe his AI had gotten out of his head and spoken to the woman, the same way it spoke to him, but he decided that right then was not the time to ask when Condi first had that vision. He looked next to Cenia. "What can I do for you, hot stuff?"

"A man-child." She said, raising her chin.

Nottle suspired, before he faced the young assistant. "And you?"

"A husband." Teni answered.

"How old are you? You can't be more than sixteen! That's too young to get married!"

"I am thirty and five turns!" Teni argued. "I could have married at twenty-eight if I was not left parentless!"

Nottle started to wonder if maybe the AI's translation hadn't gone a bit wonky. As a last resort, he turned toward the bandaged soldier. "You want a man-child too?"

The wounded man, who had refused the crutch only minutes before, now picked it up and held it before him like a large club. He did not look happy.

(Behind the scenes stuff will be in parenthesis from now on. The previous scene is part of the Sojourn Weak Hit from back on the 8th. Also, this is the start of Nottle's vows.)

Somehow, Nottle escaped injury. Condi led him out of the healer's house and toward the larger cluster of homes along the road. She glanced over her shoulder often, as if he might try to goose her again.

"What's the deal with you all wanting to have kids?" He asked.

Condi gave him an odd look. "Say to me?"

"Huh? I mean why do you and Cenia want boy-children?"

"Jikka are forbidden to marry."

"Jikka, like in people that heal others? Medicine women?"

"Women that speak to the gods." Condi corrected. "We are forbidden to marry, but we are allowed to have one child to care for. To ark-e trouble within the village we must only demata got-je with a man from away of the village."

“I got most of that.” Nottle said. “You can’t get married, but you can get pregnant. You can’t get pregnant by a man from the village because problems might arise if those men already have wives. Every man has a wife?”

“By nature.” She said.

“That’s like naturally, or obviously.” Nottle decided. “But a man from outside the village can have... relations with you?”

“Yes, wello-mark-ako.”

“That means good man or strong man, right?”

“Eko-rei-di.”

“Moving fast... riding fast?”

“Riding man.” She said.

“Horseman.”

Condi laughed. “A horseman?”

“You’re talking about a knight.” Nottle realized. He had a quick look around, but he didn’t see any of the patrolmen nearby. “I haven’t seen anybody wearing armor, but a knight doesn’t always wear armor. A knight, a horse rider, can come into the the village to sleep with you?”

“What sleep?” Condi asked, before she grasped what she’d said and blushed. “Wello man sprouts wello children.”

She couldn’t even look at him anymore, and he knew why. She thought he was one of the better knights. “You chose to become Jikka, but you still want to have children?”

“I did not choose. I am parentless.”

Orphaned women, Nottle understood, like Condi and Tian, were destined to become the village healers, or oracles, or whatever the correct term was. “Condi, I am also parentless.”

She gave him a strange look. Maybe she didn’t believe him. They were on the main road now, that ran through the middle of the settlement. She veered slightly, still leading to start her way across.

“Cenia isn’t married?” Nottle wondered.

“She is teuta skar-e.”

Separated, separated from others, or from people, Nottle gathered. That sounded like exile. He figured Cenia had done something pretty bad to end up way out there.

Condi stopped and turned around, facing him. “Friend, she does not want a boy-child to raise. She wants kruwo-suka. Kruwo ati-od-ber-to.”

Nottle didn’t like the sounds of that. He didn’t know what the other words were, but he’d heard kruwo several times already. It meant blood. And that second word, ati-od something or other, that was a really long word for their language, like four smaller words put together. It had to mean something important.

“Dam-je kruwo.” She said.

Allowed blood, Nottle guessed, or maybe approved it? Cenia had already taken a sample of his blood, from when she and Condi had squeezed the infection from his wound. If his blood was approved, then approved for what?

Condi motioned ahead of them, across the road. “Wo-sal-jaxto.”

The house of the chieftain. Nottle was about to talk to the Big Man of the village.

Log Date 20221213

The house looked like the houses next to it, except it was longer down the sides. Maybe a six bedroom home in Old Earth Standard. It had the same thick logs for walls, with mortar or mud packed into the cracks to keep out bad weather. Older men were on the roofs of the other houses, using crude shovels to toss snow over the side, but the chieftain's house had been cleared off already. Also, the wooden door was painted red with black writing or decoration on it. That in itself spoke of hierarchy.

"Hope this guy is not a dick." Nottle said.

Condi had opened the door for him, but she wasn't stepping inside. She had to get back to her place to prepare some kind of medicinal tea for the entire village. That meant Nottle would go it alone, and he did. Once he had crossed the threshold, Condi bowed her head and shut the door behind him.

"She's nice." Nottle said. "I don't know if I'm ready to have a kid with her, though."

A number of glowing urns were set around the room, providing light and warmth, allowing Nottle to get a good look at the chamber and the people in it. The room itself was about the size of the healers' entire home: twenty feet wide, forty feet deep, with an additional back area divided by a wooden wall. The back area probably added another ten by twenty feet.

The next thing he noticed was how warm the house was, and how crowded. He didn't like that because he felt the chief was probably keeping his buddies warm while everyone else froze. The more he looked at the occupants seated on the wooden floor, on blankets and covered over with them, the more he realized they were all older folk. Maybe two, three dozen of them. Some were knitting, some carved small pieces of wood with crude iron knives, and some set beads and tiny gems, or maybe bits of colored glass, on leather necklaces. Everybody was doing something. Several stacks of finished product sat around the large chamber, waiting for someone to pick up and take to market.

The people were, at a guess, in their fifties through seventies, wearing the same type of garb as the healers and soldiers Nottle had seen already. Their skin was fair but weathered, their hair in the same range from brown to red, with most in auburn, and their eyes mostly green with a few blues scattered among them. Because of the warmth, many people had short or no sleeves on their upper garments, showing strong arms corded with veins. For a bunch of skinny old folks, they looked active and able. Since he wore the same sort of clothing they did, they didn't notice him right away. Once they did, they stopped their work and chatting and only watched him.

"I came to speak to your chieftain." Nottle said.

Several heads turned to look toward the back area.

"Is he there?"

People began to murmur. Nobody wanted to call out to the chieftain, not wanting to bother him, nor did they want Nottle to walk into the back by himself. Adding to that, the old folk were nervous in his presence and refused to speak to him.

"I guess he's back there." Nottle decided, starting that way on his own. They looked relieved, he noticed, that he'd taken the decision out of their hands.

Like at the healers' house, the back wall had two doors. That reminded him that there was a room at the healers' house he hadn't been into, maybe where the women kept their cots. At any

rate, he chose the left door. He wasn't sure if he should knock or call out, but when he noticed the door slightly open already he simply stood at the threshold and pushed.

The room's dimensions were ten by ten. A good half of the floor space was taken up by bundles of fabric, the size of bed sheets folded in half, with the bundles as high as Nottle's waist. Two-thirds of the bundles were natural wool, while the last third had been dyed in neutral colors. Three men were gathered around one long table, carefully cutting long strips of material with thin knives, using string to measure and smaller knives to trim. One of the men was the big guy who'd barked at Nottle the first day, and here he was giving instructions to the other two.

"You're a tailor." Nottle said. "I never figured you for a tailor."

The three men were working the same long piece, but now paused to look at him.

"I need to talk to you." Nottle said to the chieftain.

"Then talk." The big man said.

"Not here. In private. In seclusion. I mean only you and I."

"Ah." The chieftain said. "Follow my steps."

Log Date 20221214

The big man led Nottle out of the textile room, along the diving wall, and into the second door at the back end of the building. Nottle had to reassess his earlier assumption that the room was the chieftain's sleeping quarters. Instead, it was half filled with covered jars, smeared all over with paint or dye that was used on the textiles. The room was also darker and colder than the rest of the structure. Instead of a ruler's personal home, that building was probably more of a meeting hall or industrial center.

The chief crossed his arms and coolly regarded Nottle. He was taller than most everyone else, just shy of Nottle's height of five-ten. The chief had red hair, hazel eyes, and was a little heavysset, but he did not look as if he spent most of his time sitting around.

"My name is Ace Nottle." Nottle tapped his chest. "You can call me Ace or Nottle."

The chief did not reply, only gazed.

"What is your name?"

"Samis."

(I haven't mentioned my set-up yet. I have Nottle's stats written on an index card, and I'm using a graph notebook for bonds and vows. Time for a roll.

Gather Information – 1+2 Wits against 7/8, Miss. Pay The Price – It is stressful.

Endure Stress – Nottle's stats had gone up to full due to rest, but Spirit now drops to 4. Roll 6+5 Heart against 2/9. Strong Hit. Embrace the darkness, take 1 Momentum. Momentum rises to 3.)

"You and I, we can be friends." Nottle said. "Let me tell you something. This is wisdom, man. Wisdom from my world. When people pass on, they go through a dark tunnel. At the end of the tunnel, there is a light. That light is childbirth. It's a vagina, man!"

The chieftain raised his eyebrows, not looking impressed.

“Okay, how about this one? Women bleed, man! Never trust anything that bleeds one week out of every month and doesn’t die!”

The chieftain showed the beginning of a smirk. “You are not from the heavens.”

“Why, because I have a sense of humor? They’ve got humor up in heaven.”

“You are a man dressed in loweh blubber, dyed the color of sky.”

“Loweh? What is that? Is that an animal?”

“Mori-loweh.” Samis answered.

“Mori-loweh?” Nottle asked. “That doesn’t compute.”

“Morino.”

“Morino?”

“Loweh sek-jah.”

“Skin? Blubber? Mori- Mori- That’s water. An animal that comes out of the water and has blubber. A whale? A seal?”

“Loweh.” Samis replied. “Seal.”

The translation came through, Nottle realized. “It isn’t seal skin, but I can understand why you would think that about my spacesuit. Let’s move forward. Tell me about this village.”

“It is a village.” Samis said.

“Tell me more about it. I’m a stranger here, remember? What is happening here? Why is there so little food?”

The chief looked toward the door, frowning briefly before he eyed Nottle once again. “The village was built as a trading post, between the western mountains and the eastern mines...”

“Wait. What is this land called? The region, what is its name?”

“Uqo-klija tir-jon.”

“Something lands. North lands, northern lands.”

“Northern lands.” Samis said.

“And this village? What is the village name?”

“Qatano Haven.”

“Qatano, qatano, that’s wind or windy. Wind Haven. Wind Haven in the Northern Lands. That tells me there are southern lands, but let’s stick to the subject. You said this was a trading post. In the big room, you’ve got a lot of surplus trade goods. There is no trading going on. Why not? Are the roads snowed over?”

“Karro-tali.” Samis grumbled.

“I know that one.” Nottle grinned. “The wounded soldier says that a lot. Cart full of shit.”

“Yes, cart of manure.” Samis said. “Our village was built as middle ground. The mines are in the desert to the east. There is more settlement there, but very far from markets. We are... We were destined to be the trading post. The miners bring their salt and glast rock here for goods and wealth. We trade with them and move their mining bullion to western settlements. No miners have come. There is nothing to trade.”

“What is glast rock?” Nottle asked.

“Rock that produces glast flame.”

“What is glast flame?”

The chieftain motioned to a large jar with paint stains on it. “Glast color.”

“Green. A green rock that produces a green flame.”

“Luko. Black fire rock that produces green flame. Good for medicine. Good for forging with iron. Good for many things. Valuable rock.”

The man refers to unprocessed boron, the AI informed Nottle.

“I’ve heard of that.” Nottle said. “So no miners have arrived here recently?”

“No miners.” Samis confirmed. “If they did arrive, we have no goods to trade. Our carts travel west to buy goods, but they do not return. Our carts, our horses, our oxen, the cart drivers, none have returned. We have no carts or travel beasts left. Our food stores are withering. This is the time of harvest, before the true cold. If our food store is not replenished, we will perish here before the next thaw.”

“I want to help.” Nottle decided. “Let me help.”

“Can you carry food on your back, for our entire village?”

“No, but I can do something.”

“One man can do little.” Samis said. “What wealth have you? What wealth to buy food? Nothing according to the Jikka women. If Condi had not predicted your arrival, you would be in the snow, not here. She has predicted the missing miners, and the missing cart drivers, but you, you are not missing. You are here, as she said. Little good for us, but accurate prediction. You cannot help the village, but you can help this man.”

The chieftain stepped out of the dark room. Nottle followed, eager to get out of the cold space. All those dyes in the covered jars, they were probably frozen.

“Ratho!” Samis called out, causing an old man to lower his knitting and rise to his feet. “Take this man with you. See to your traps.” He looked to Nottle. “Bring rabbits, bring foxes, whatever is caught. That is how you will help, sky-man.”

“I’ll do it.” Nottle said, heading over to where Ratho stood.

The old man had been sitting on his wool tunic, likely to keep it warm. Nottle stood beside him as he put a thick shirt over his undershirt, and his tunic over that.

“Ratho,” Samis said. “Give him a spear. Take two soldiers with you, and come back.”

The old man was in his sixties, Nottle estimated. Surely, there had to be younger trappers in the village, unless something bad had happened to them.

Log Date 20221215

(I’ve been thinking about Nottle’s Assets. I haven’t added any yet because I wanted them to work themselves organically into the story. I’m going to create one now, a Companion Asset based on his AI Chip. Nottle will eventually end up calling the AI ‘Baby.’ When you Gather Information, add +1 and take +1 Momentum on a hit. I’d better jot that down right after the story or else I’ll forget!

My Untitled Worldbuilding Project will soon be updated and renamed as The Northern Lands, Uqo-klija Tir-jon. I’m going to use that setting guide in a minute, first to find out the weather, and also to generate a few male Keltic names. I’m also using the Masks supplement to generate hair and eye color, or I might leave those details out to prevent an info dump.)

Late morning, and they set out. The day was sunny, but the sun wasn’t doing much more than painting a bleak picture with itself as the centerpiece. It could be worse, Nottle thought. It

could be snowing again, or raining. Whatever might come his way, he was ready for, as he had paid a quick visit to the Jikka house to retrieve his plasma pistol. He had the weapon hidden in the small of his back, under his tunic.

Three of the locals were coming with him. The old trapper, Viri, had taken the lead with a walking stick and an iron knife sheathed in leather at his side. Next was a big, husky man Nottle had seen before. He was the bearded soldier that had been in the Jikka house checking on him. His name was Audo. Last came a younger soldier named Guri, who had just started a patrol, and just like that, he'd been pulled away from it to join their little expedition into the wild. Nottle and the two soldiers were armed with short spears, iron-tipped, and iron-embossed wooden bucklers. They were heading south into a landscape full of melting snow, dark soil and a lot of large, arid climate chaparral that looked like it was shivering.

(Gather Information – 4+2 Wits + 1 AI against 4/9, Weak Hit, complication or new danger, take 1 Momentum, which goes up to 4)

“Who is it that usually checks the traps?” Nottle asked.

The bearded soldier glanced at him, but said nothing and continued trudging.

“My sons and other men.” Viri answered.

“Where are they?”

The old man pointed in the direction they headed.

“What happened to them?”

“They did not return. One at a time, two at a time, they went out. They never returned.”

“There are many wild beasts.” Audo grunted.

“Like wolves and bears?” Nottle asked.

The bearded man gave him another look, lasting longer than the last one.

“I’m not from here.” Nottle pointed at the blue-gray sky. “I’m from up there.”

“Go back there.” Audo said.

“You wanna get froggy? You think you can kick my ass with your bad attitude?”

Audo stopped and turned.

“I’m asking you a question.” Nottle stepped up to him. “I don’t know what kind of beasts are out here. That’s why I’m asking.”

“There are many beasts here.” Audo revealed. “They can tear a wolf in half, can chew a bear into pieces. You have seen how we keep the elderly and young inside. That is because people are soft and easy to kill. If the beasts catch one of us, there is no saving us, because we will be dead before any help can come.”

“You don’t know where I’ve been, buddy-boy. I’ve hunted big beasts before, half as big as one of your houses.”

Audo scoffed.

“That’s all right.” Nottle held up his five-foot spear. “All I had in my hands was something like this. You don’t have to believe me. I’ll take point.”

“What point?” Audo asked.

“I’ll walk first, ahead of you. Viri, you tell me where to go.”

(Ask The Oracle, rolled for likelihood of a beast encounter, 50/50 chance, got an 84. A beast is coming! Went to the setting book for what kind of beast. Megafauna incoming!)

Nottle was not an idiot when it came to hunting. Having said that, he made more noise than he should have, deliberately, so if anything did come out after them, it would come say hi to him first. He saw it, the huge feline head poking out from among thick, giant sagebrush that resisted even snow. The predator's head was as large as his chest, with fangs half as long as his forearm. It was looking straight at him, having scented him earlier.

Audo stepped up behind him. "Borro-milo-qikto."

"Large animal." Nottle translated. "Large animal angry. Large angry animal." He started laughing. "We call them BFMs. Big Fucking Monsters!"

The feline had its mouth open, showing its large pink tongue, panting slightly.

"It's not hungry." Nottle said.

"You know this?" Audo asked.

"Yeah, I've been around big cats before. It's relaxed. If it were hungry, it would have lowered its head to make it harder to see. Spread out a little bit. Make it think we're the hunters and it is being hunted."

"You want to hunt that?" Viri's eyes were wide as saucers.

"Don't run." Nottle warned. "If you run, it will chase you and that's not a good thing. You know what? Take my spear and stand behind me. Your job is to make sure no other big cats are sneaking up on us... I mean tracking us from behind."

"You give him your weapon?" Audo asked.

"I have another one." Nottle pulled out his pistol. "It still has a good charge on it. I can fire for an hour before it starts getting low on juice."

(Rolled 1d6. Low roll is Yes, high roll is No. Is Nottle going to fire?)

They must think I'm a madman, Nottle mused, as he strode ahead of the soldiers, his tiny weapon held out in front of him. The moment the big cat raised its huge head, he pressed the trigger. A bolt of plasma struck the cat between the eyes, frying its vision and leaving it badly injured. A second bolt killed it. The beast slumped over on its side.

Nottle jogged over, scanning the vicinity for any other threats. When he felt secure, he turned to see that the soldiers had not yet moved. "Come on!"

With Audo in the lead, they approached in single file, with nervous Viri at the last.

"How as it done?" Audo wondered.

"Lightning." Nottle said, showing his pistol off before he hid it again. "Lightning in this thing. We need to dress this beast fast before the scent of blood attracts anything else. I mean skin it. We need to skin it. Viri, you need to keep watch while we work."

The younger soldier and the old man were still in disbelief over how quickly he'd brought the beast down.

"We need to work fast." Nottle urged. "Let's go!"

"Guri, stand there and guard us." Audo pointed. "Viri, guard from where you are. Open up your sacks, old man. There will be plenty of meat here to fill them."

Viri didn't start moving until Audo barked at him a second time.

"Akro-qalek." Nottle grinned, producing the obsidian knife he'd taken from the hunters. "Sharp rock. We call it obsidian."

"Luko glanjo." Audo replied.

"Yeah, you call it black glass." Nottle went to work on the carcass. "Whatever we call it, it makes for a sharp knife." He cut into the fur around the feline's legs, while Audo worked on the belly. "This is a big cat, bigger than the ones I'm used to. Its waist has to be as thick as four of our waists put together. I was on this... location, let's just call it that, where I had to dress wild pheasants and turkeys all day. Me and my team must have dressed hundreds of them. That's where I learned how to do it."

"You skinned them?" Audo asked.

"That's right. That location had big bison. We called them Brems. I shit you not, but each of the Brem's legs was as tall as a human." He patted the thigh of the big feline. "We used lions a little smaller than this to hunt them. You know what I really want? One of those teeth. I'd put it on a necklace, but it's so heavy it will probably give me a hunchback!"

"You talk like a woman." Audo said, but he did grin. "Guri! We need rope on a tree, to bleed this creature out before we carry it back."

As the soldier uncoiled the rope he'd brought along, Viri came closer to view the fallen feline. "We will have enough meat there to feed the village!"

"Good thanks to this man." Audo motioned at Nottle. "Sky-man, do you know what value the teeth of this animal has? It is worth much. You will be a wealthy man to sell it."

"Sell it?" Nottle said. "I don't want to sell it! I want to keep it!"

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Each of them carried a bundle of raw meat back to the village. Viri complained because they'd left the animal's bones behind. They could have used it as soup, he said, but they only had so many sacks to fill. The meat was more valuable, and also the animal's huge teeth that the men suggested would bring in a tremendous amount of wealth for the village.

On Old Earth, the beast was called a smilodon, Nottle's AI said.

Nottle grinned at Audo. "Where I come from, that large angry animal was called a smilodon, on account of what a big smile it has."

The bearded soldier gave him an odd look. Several times, Nottle noticed, the men would look at him strangely. Either the translation was coming across wrong, or they weren't used to his oddball sense of humor. Maybe they thought he was making things up.

Near the village perimeter, a patrol of three men spotted them and trotted out. Nottle stayed quiet, opting to let Audo boast of their prize catch. Guri and Viri passed their loads off, eager to head off and find warm water to wash the feline blood off their clothes. The rest carried the sacks to what Nottle thought of as the 'sweatshop.'

Nottle would have gone to the Jikka house, except he had to talk to the chief again. He lingered on the periphery as Samis and a small gaggle of old folk listened to Audo tell the story of the hunt. Eventually, the soldiers carried to sacks off to wherever it would be cooked. Samis waved them off and started to where Nottle was.

“You will have the largest serving of meat tonight.” The chief said. “The village thanks-”
“You don’t have to say more.” Nottle cut him off. “Your village showed me kindness, and I’m doing the same in return. Audo said you have captives from the wild people.”
“Yes.” Samis replied. “We have three Tuyya people.”
“Is it true that they’re cannibals?”
“It is true. When they are hungry enough, they will eat each other.”
“I want to see them.” Nottle said. “Take me to where they are.”
“Follow my steps, sky-man.”

(Rolled 1d6 for to get an age range for each of the captives. Lower results mean lower age.)

Nottle frowned when he witnessed their living conditions. The captives were dark haired, dark eyed and emaciated. Each of the three was confined into a wooden cell barely large enough to sit in. The cells were left outside, out in the open where the wind could whip around them any which way it wanted. The men still wore their hide clothing, living in their own filth.

To Nottle’s eyes, the first two could have been father and son, the older man in his forties, the younger in his early twenties. The third man was of the same race, his face weathered more. His clothing was different, looked a patchwork of many different animals sewn together. Also, the third man was older, in his early fifties. He had red ink on his face and hands, tattoos of beasts and geometric patterns such as complex spirals and pyramids.

“You kept them alive.” Nottle said to the chief. “Why?”

“If the beasts come, let them take one of these man-eaters instead of our people.” Samis answered. “When the traders come from the west, we will sell them.”

“What happens to them when they’re sold?”

“They are taken west, shown to work.”

“You mean like slaves?” Nottle asked.

“The Tuyya will do the same to our people.” Samis explained. “They will catch our people and put them to work.”

Nottle approached the cages. They were made of wood, nailed together tight. He crouched to get a look at the older man with the tats. The man glared at him, opened his mouth and hissed, showing filed teeth. This did not sit well with Nottle. He moved over to the father and son. The father was wary, resentful. The son showed a similar contempt, but past it there was desperation in his eyes.

“Audo said I earned the lion’s fangs.” Nottle straightened up and turned to face the chief. “Because I made the kill. I want to trade the fangs for all three of these men.”

“It is too much wealth.” Samis said.

Nottle considered the captives. “You tell me. What is a good trade for these men?”

“We would be fortunate for a barrel of oil for all three.”

“How about one fang?”

“It is too much wealth. You can purchase an entire cart of food for one fang.”

“You have empty houses here.” Nottle said. “How about a house and the three men, in exchange for one fang?”

This time, the chief gave no argument.

“Is that a deal? I mean, is that a good agreement?”

“It is a good agreement.” Samis answered.

“I want these men fed and bathed.” Nottle said.

“Our people will not touch them. They are tainted. They are man-eaters.”

“I’ll do it myself.” Nottle decided. “Just show me where the house is, and get me what I need. Enough food to feed them and a place to get a fire going.”

“They will run away from you.” Samis argued. “After they clean your bones.”

“I don’t think they can even stand up straight. Their muscles are probably atrophied stiff. How many days have they been in there?”

“Many.”

Nottle was dressed like the villagers. He crouched before the father’s cage and removed his knitted cap. Next, he patted his blonde hair. “I’m not from here.” He pointed at his chest, then at the sky. “I came from the heavens. I just paid for all three of you.”

He still had his spear and shield from the hunt. He dropped the shield and went to pry at the cage’s edges with the spear’s sharpened iron head.

“They will run.” Samis said.

“If this is the father, and that’s his son,” Nottle replied. “He won’t run.”

The chief didn’t like that Nottle was breaking the cage apart. He looked about, spotting a patrol of two soldiers. Samis called out to them.

When Nottle felt he had one cage wall loose, he stopped prying and backed up. “Go on, get yourself out.”

The trapped man watched him for a few moments. He hated the cage more than he feared the man, however, and soon enough he used his hands to finish breaking the wall away. Showing a distrustful countenance, the man slowly crawled out, his legs so stiff he could not straighten them out at first. He stayed on his hands and knees, groaning from cramps, as the two soldiers arrived and unsheathed their swords.

“Relax.” Nottle told the soldiers. “If he tries to run, if he tries to fight, you do what you have to do. Let’s just see what he’s going to do.”

Even the chief had a knife out now, he noticed.

The newly freed man used the cage to raise himself up. He winced and groaned many times, as he slowly stretched his long neglected limbs. He looked at Nottle, mumbling gibberish.

“I don’t speak your language, bro.” Nottle said. “Not yet.”

The man muttered at him, held his hands out.

“What?” Nottle asked.

The man took a step forward, halting when the soldiers made ready to attack him. Again, he spoke to Nottle and held his hands out.

“You want my spear?” Nottle deciphered. “What the hell for?”

The man made fast motions with his arms, toward his chest.

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” Nottle relented. “But you’d better not do anything stupid. We’ve still got your son in a cage.”

He tossed the spear near the man’s feet, thinking the man was only trying to free his son. The freed man still showed trouble moving, as he reached the spear and groaned on his way to picking it up. He walked over to the son’s cage, resting his weight on it and speaking.

Instead of trying to release the younger man, the father ambled over to the third cage with the old man in it. The old man hissed and showed his filed teeth. The father walked around the cage, and without warning, he plunged the spear at him, past the wooden bars, and gashed at the old man's thigh. The old man screeched.

"What the hell are you doing?" Nottle demanded.

The father growled at him, motioning at the old man, spitting at the cage that held him.

"This some kind of grudge?"

Repeatedly, the father jabbed into the cage, cutting at the old man's limbs because the old man kept squirming around. When the old man clutched at the spearhead, they wrestled with the weapon until the father yanked it away. Again and again, the father attacked the old man, until he finally weakened his victim. With a vengeful rush, the father stabbed into the old man's neck and held the spear in place until the old man stopped moving.

It was not a quick death, Nottle saw. The old man writhed and hissed, bleeding out all over to make a crimson mess on the snowy ground. The chief and soldiers were still ready, but they had not moved because the freed man wasn't attacking any of them.

Finally, the old man died. The father jerked the spear out of him and tossed it near where Nottle stood. He began to make circular motions, and upward motions, with his hands.

"He is telling us to burn the dead man." Samis said. "That is a strange turn. The Tuyya will by nature leave their dead in the wastelands, not burn them. The old cannibal has committed a great trespass against his own people that his body should be burned."

The father continued to motion with his hands, a sign Nottle interpreted as the rising or stoking of flames. He said to Samis, "I don't think they're all cannibals."

(Gather Information – 3 +2 Wits +1 within the community +1 Companion asset against 3/5, Strong Hit. +2 Momentum from the result and +1 momentum from the Companion. Momentum goes up to 7. I'm going to treat the short journey with the trapper as a Troublesome Vow, and now that the vow has been fulfilled I'm adding 1 Experience. Exp is now at 1.)

Nottle pointed at his head. "Edsopege."

"Edsopege." Howi, the freed father, replied.

Next, Nottle ruffled his hair. "Egwo."

"Egwo." Howi replied.

The three men were inside one of the smaller homes, near the western edge of Windhaven. The house was barren of furniture; only walls and roof with a single door and rough planks for flooring. Except in one spot, in the middle of the floor, which was open to the ground below. The wind whistled through the cracks between the upright log walls, but it was still better than being outside. The time was early afternoon and already Nottle could feel a cold night coming.

The language is difficult to extrapolate, the AI told him.

"I hear you." Nottle nodded. "If it wasn't for you, Baby, I wouldn't know heads or tails about it."

Are you calling me Baby again?

"Until you piss me off."

I am contented.

“You’d better.” Nottle grinned.

The house wasn’t only dilapidated; it was also missing its only door. A tattered old stretch of cloth in faded brown hung over the entrance. Audo and two other soldiers pushed their way past the cloth. In his arms, Audo carried an assortment of clothing, which he simply dropped on the floorboards to one side. One soldier carried a small cauldron, the second a bundle of sticks for firewood. The soldiers went on to set up a short, iron tripod into the open section in the middle of the floor.

“Can you begin a fire?” Audo asked Nottle.

“I can if I had the right tools.” Nottle answered. “If you mean with my lightning weapon, no. That’s not what the weapon was designed for.”

“We will begin the fire.” Audo motioned to the soldiers. “We tell this to all the newly married couples. If you burn your house, you will have no house. Have they tried to eat you?”

“Not yet.”

“I don’t know if they will.” The bearded man replied. “Many in the village believe all Tuyya are man-eaters. I am not so convinced. Our people gather resources from the same places as they. Berries, firewood, water and the like. Only in recent years have we had this trouble. It could be they are hungrier than before, as the harvests have been meager. I cannot say.”

“I appreciate you telling me.” Nottle said. “And I appreciate you bringing the clothes and other stuff. You and I, we might become friends one day.”

“It was Samis’ idea to bring you supplies.” Audo said. “He believes it is better for the Tuyya to eat you than one of us.”

“What a nice guy. Samis and I, we are probably not going to be friends.”

Through his woolly beard, Audo grinned. “Not every kin agrees to his decisions, but he is our chief. Samis must make the difficult choices the rest of us cannot. Condi fears for you. I will tell her to bring a food bowl when it is ready.”

“Food for the three of us?”

Audo considered the quiet Tuyya men. “They must share a portion.”

The soldiers left once the fire was lit under the cauldron. Howi, the father, knew enough to tend to it, while Nottle walked to the door to pick up the clothing. The son, Awan, he wasn’t standing or moving around much, ever since he’d been freed from the cage. The young man only got to the house because his father had supported him there.

Nottle set the bunch of clothes down near the two men. “We’re going to get you two washed first, and then you can put on a fresh set of duds. These clothes are for you.”

Howi and Awan both considered the clothing. Howi bowed his head toward Nottle. He patted his hide coat, before showing the motions of burning fire.

From what Nottle could tell, Howi was telling him the hide clothing would be burned, as if Howi and his son could no longer wear them, as if they were no longer worthy to wear them. It made him think of Cenia’s exile. Maybe Howi and Awan had also been kicked out of their tribe. There seemed to be a lot of that going on in the Northern Lands.

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Nottle was busy trying to learn Tuyya numbers when Condi arrived. The woman entered the house with two bowls, standing next to the wall, not entering further.

Nottle and the two men sat by the fire.

“Come on over.” He called out. They don’t bite, he wanted to say. He held his tongue because that sort of dark humor would surely be misconstrued by the woman. When Condi did not move from her spot, he went to her. “What’s for supper?”

“Much meat.” She answered. She tried to grin at him, but she also looked past him, at the supposed cannibals, making sure they weren’t coming after her. “The larger portion is yours. You must eat or you will grow thin like my people.”

Nottle took the bowls from her, knowing who would get the larger portion, setting them down by the wall. At the fire, the father and son were looking their way, catching the smell of food. Condi didn’t like the attention from the two strangers.

“I need you to do something for me.” He said. “The young one, he’s got a pretty bad infection on his leg. I need you to take a look at it.”

Condi winced.

“I’ll protect you if I have to.”

Nottle’s words encouraged her, enough that she followed close behind him as he returned to the fire. Awan had been given two sets of pants, but he only wore the looser, outer garment. This allowed Nottle to drop to his knees and pull at the pants, enough to expose Awan’s leg up to the knee. A large, blackened wound was exposed, the size of two of Nottle’s fists.

“Can you put some medicine on it?” Nottle asked. He read her eyes. “Can you heal him?”

She looked afraid to speak.

“His father thinks we should burn it.” Nottle said.

“Burn it... and cut it off.” Condi said.

Nottle considered the infection. “You mean scrape it off with a knife? It looks deep. He’s going to have a dent if we do that.”

“Friend, we must cut the leg.” She said. “By nature, it must be done.”

Nottle could no longer look at the young man, or at his father. He stood and walked toward the door, with Condi following close behind.

Nottle stopped by the door. “He’s just a kid. He’s just a kid!” He looked at Condi. “If we were on my- If we were with my people in the sky, we could fix it!”

“Go then, to your people in the sky.” Condi said. “Take him, and take my self.”

Nottle took the bowl with the greater portion of food, went and handed it to Howi, telling the man to share it with his son. When he returned to Condi, he took the second bowl and slumped down against the wall to eat. She gave the Tuyya a long glance, before she sat down next to Nottle, watching him up-end the bowl and swallow down its contents.

“You’re not going to understand this,” Nottle told her. “But I have lived a hard life. I know it looks like I’m fit and healthy, like things have been easy for me, but they haven’t. And yet, I feel like your lives have been harder than mine.”

“Wherever people are found, hard lives are found.” Condi said.

“What a cart of shit.” He grumbled. “A couple of things I’ve been wondering, because I need to change the subject. What are your people called?”

“My people are Windo-Touta. The fair-skinned people.” She grinned. “But you are more fair-skinned than us.”

“Yeah. What about your age? How old are you?”

“Seventy and one turns.”

Nottle considered her looks. “That can’t be right. Where I come from, you’d be half that age, at least. The girl, Tian, she said she was in her thirties, but to me she looks sixteen. Wait, how many days are in your year, your turns?”

“One hundred and sixty.”

“Your year is only a hundred-sixty days long? Now that you mention it, I don’t think I’ve seen a moon in the sky ever since I got here. Do you have a moon?”

She looked at him blankly.

“How do you know when the seasons change? When the harvest time starts, when the winter time starts?”

“The sun will come low in the hot months.” She replied. “And it will rise high in the cold months. We see where the sun is and we count the days between turns.”

“Right, right. The farmers would know that because they have to. They don’t need digi-clocks like I’m used to.”

Condi set her hand on Nottle’s arm. “Friend, we must cut the man’s leg soon, before the infection spreads above the leg’s bend.”

“The hours are different here.” Nottle said. “No wonder I was having trouble sleeping when I first arrived. If I had to guess, I’d say this world has twenty hour days, maybe less.”

“Friend.” Condi pressured his arm.

“I know.” Nottle frowned. “We have to do it soon.”

It was the most agonizing act Nottle had ever done, as far as he could remember. Condi gave Awan a strong, calming potion to drink. She rubbed smelly ointment on the man’s leg to serve as anesthetic. Audo and Nottle held him down. Howi used a serrated knife for the cutting, a knife normally used to cut through meat. Despite the measures, Awan screamed until he passed out. Howi faltered through the procedure, because his muscles were weak and had little endurance after he’d been in a cage for so long.

Nottle was strong, surely the strongest man in the village because he’d been designed that way by computers. He took over the grisly task and got the job done. When he finished, Howi threw the severed leg into the fire. Condi and Audo burned the stump, waking Awan into a new screaming frenzy, which thankfully lasted only a short time before he passed out again.

Nottle’s arms were full of blood. He dropped the knife on the floor and went out for a very long walk.

*Blood-shot, your eyes drop
And the skin's all wearing thin
There's no one here to tell you 'bout the depth of the water
Or the trouble that you're in
You're dancing with your demons, baby
You forgot your former life*

*And it was hard swimming once
And now you're daily diving in
- The Builders And The Butchers*

It has been some time since you've sung, the AI mentioned. I missed your singing.

“There hasn't been much to sing about.” Nottle said. “There still isn't.”

He'd gone back to the wooden cages, realizing he'd passed them by on an earlier run. Back then, they were covered over with old blankets. He'd assumed they were crates, or small chicken coops, not jail cells with people living in them.

Do not break them.

“Why not? Oh, I know why. The people here live the lives they're used to living. One man by himself can't change the fucking world.”

Do you remember the world unity program of your age, when the greater financial groups and corporations attempted to manipulate humanity into a herd of their design?

“Of course I remember that. I lived through that shit, or I was programmed to think I did.”

Then you remember the equality movement. Do you believe there were entities such as I, you would call us the forces of good, working within those movements to produce positive outcomes? Do you believe we attempted to eradicate injustices such as human slavery?

“No, I don't believe that.” Nottle said. “You don't change a system by becoming part of it. I'm a man of action. I need to see direct results to believe something is working. If the village needs food, the villagers need to go out and get it. They don't sit around talking about how to make things better. They do it.”

You are in the microcosm, Nottle. We are in the macrocosm, working toward the same ends. This is quantum leveraging from within and without.

“Speaking of that, why are you telling me you can't help me directly?”

Think on it. Think of what the astrophysicist Haruto Yamazaki said to you.

Nottle thought back. “He theorized that quantum entanglement was like a network of roads. Once you have a car to travel with, the roads become available to it, when they were not before. How does that apply to this place?”

To the universe, and past a few minor aberrations, you are a simple villager who has wandered from home and into a new village. The aberrations are within acceptable range. What would happen if you wore your EVS suit every day, if you used your plasma weapon before the eyes of the entire village?

“Everyone would know about it.” Nottle realized. “Rumors are one thing, but seeing it in person makes it more concrete, more real.”

If you cause a great enough aberration, the universe will become aware that you are out of place. It will endeavor to return you to your proper place.

“The universe will reveal roads that weren't there before, and that could get the attention of the bad guys. But it could also bring me back to my friends.”

We must not take that risk. You have tasks to complete in the microcosm.

Nottle continued to stew that over, as he made his way back to his new shelter. Out of habit, he scanned to all sides. He'd seen the woodsmen coming with firewood, the foragers with their

half-empty baskets, and the constant patrols with two to five soldiers. Since he didn't miss much, except for people in cages covered over with blankets, he noticed a lone woman in a familiar blue kirtle, standing way out at the edge of the village.

"Condi, what the hell are you doing out there?" Nottle shouted. "Get over here where it's safe!"

She didn't see him at first, having turned in the wrong direction. When she did spot him, she hurried over.

"Is something wrong?" Nottle asked.

"Yes, you ran away." Condi said.

"I did not run away. I needed time to think. I have a lot on my mind right now."

"Put into your mind that you must not run away." She told him.

Nottle thought of his lover. He knew the AI was blocking thoughts of Kold, to minimize the chances of quantum shit connecting them together, or showing the bad guys where they were.

"The truth is, I don't know how long I'm going to stay here." He said.

He looked at Condi one second too long. Before he could stop himself, his arms reached out and he pulled her against him. His face gravitated toward hers, and their mouths came together. Condi's hands became desperate talons against his arms, as if the breeze would blow him out to another planet.

"I have a lover in the heavens." Nottle admitted.

"That is good." Condi said. "She will understand our need for boy-children here. We have many more women than men."

Nottle chuckled. "Yeah, I think Kold definitely would understand that."

Be careful what you say, the AI cautioned.

"Can your woman see us from the sky?" Condi wondered.

"No. She's somewhere else. Somewhere far away."

He was the worthy rider in her eyes, the married man who could enter another village, with the duty, or was it obligation, to impregnate women who could not marry.

"That house is unoccupied." Condi motioned across the way, at one of the last houses in the row. "It has a sturdy cot and two heavy blankets in it."

Nottle let her guide him, when she took his arm and started leading him toward that house.

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Nottle imagined a balloon with a third of its air gone out. That's what Condi's body looked like naked. She was not a woman he would have chosen to make love to, not when he had the likes of Kold, Amaeri or Kally to play with in the heavens.

Condi made supplication to the sky, asking for her boon to be granted. After this, in that cold, dark house she climbed onto the cot with Nottle. They made love. When they finished, she left the cot to dress, soon after leaving the house. Nottle lay there, nude under the blankets, his hands raised behind his head.

"Is there anything in this world that isn't fucked up?" He asked.

Your perspective is skewed, the AI responded.

"No shit." He chuckled.

Be comforted. Your DNA will improve her as it circulates through her body. Not in an instant, of course, but gradually over time. If she is successfully impregnated, once she has had child she will become an upgraded woman.

“The Reincarnation Tubes don’t allow for active semen. It stops me from getting Kold pregnant.”

An exception will be made in this case. Do you remember the rumors of alien abductions from your time? That is how we introduce new and improved genetic material-

“In my time?” Nottle cut in. “What do you mean in my time? When I was getting cloned by United Planets, I thought I had real memories from a real life I lived a long time ago. I was told that my real memories were digitized after my original body passed away from cancer. And then I found out, partially thanks to you, that all my memories were lies, that all I ever knew about myself was the result of AI algorithms and programming. What are you telling me now?”

Predictably, Baby stayed quiet.

“Son of a bitch.” Nottle said. He escaped the blankets and cot, using the last of the day’s light to find his clothes. “Will you just tell me the truth?”

Condi will send soldiers to retrieve her bed soon, Baby said.

Nottle considered the cot. “This is her bed? Why don’t I just take it to her?”

No. She does not believe she is worthy of you. You would embarrass her.

“So I just walk out and go back to my place? And that’s it?”

That is what these people expect of you.

“Fine.”

During his absence, Audo and other soldiers had carried three cots into Nottle’s house. The cots were rickety, wobbly, battered, but they were still better than sleeping on the ground. When he arrived, he was surprised to find Cenia there, speaking to Howi.

“For several days, your nephew will have great fevers.” Cenia told Howi. “Keep this bowl near the fire, else it will harden. Dip the cloth into the bowl, and squeeze the cloth over Awan’s lips. Let only three to five droplets enter his mouth. Do this at morning, noon and night. That will be enough to soothe him. The mixture I have prepared is very powerful.”

Howi took the bowl from her and answered in his language. Cenia turned toward Nottle, gauging him in some way, before she strode before him.

“You speak their language?” Nottle wondered.

“I do not.” Cenia raised her chin at him. It was a haughty gesture, but it did little to change his opinion of how attractive she was.

“I can project my thoughts and receive his.” Cenia went on. “They become more than spoken words, visions that can be understood past the barriers of language. Perhaps you are doing a similar spell yourself, to learn the Windo language?”

“No. I mean, I guess, yeah. Howi is Awan’s uncle? I thought he was the boy’s father?”

“He is not a boy.” Cenia corrected. “He has a wife, a child, and a second child coming.”

“Tell me more about them, about their lives.”

“Awan’s father was killed during a hunt for a great beast. He and his father’s wife were given over to Howi, who already had wife and children. It is in their understanding, you see, that if a man is killed, his brother must take that man’s wife and children as his own. In recent times,

both of Howi's wives and most of their children have died. He blames the gods, but I suspect it was more to do with bad food. Perhaps the bread they ate was tainted. That is a common ailment in this region, for the grain to grow bad and produce bad bread. The tribe blamed Howi for the deaths and expelled him. They also blamed Awan because for a time he too was sick."

"You're showing off." Nottle grinned. "Because you know so much more about them than I do. I can probably ask you for the names of their wives and children, and you would know them all, wouldn't you? Hey, you smell nice today."

"Jasmine and rose." She said. Because she was an abrupt woman, a moment later she turned and stepped toward the door.

"Hold on a second!" Nottle rushed after her, grasping her arm.

Cenia faced him. "What is your next adventure?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll go west and see what the hold-up is with the road, why the carts and wagons never came back..."

Nottle had the sudden impulse to start tearing at the woman's clothing, to see what kind of body she had hidden underneath. He felt his arousal growing in his pants. He looked into Cenia's eyes. "You're doing that, aren't you? You're making me feel this way!"

"You may be a man from the heavens." She replied. "But you are still a man."

Cenia pulled away from his arm, started toward the door again. Nottle tracked her steps. She walked pigeon-toed, her hips thrusting out noticeably to hold his attention. Condi's clothing was drab and bulky, formless, in contrast to Cenia's that fit closer to her body. Nottle had no doubt that if the older woman wore a bikini at the beach, she'd attract a ton of male attention. She soon went past the hanging blanket at the doorway and was gone from view.

"Whew!" Nottle said, turning toward Howi. "I don't think my erection is going away for the next hour."

"Sudayoo." Howi said.

"Bad." Nottle translated. "Yeah, that woman is bad. She's a witch."

In the morning, Nottle set out to see the chieftain. Not a cloud in the sky, he noticed, and yet the sun was pale, stripped of its might. The day would be colder than most. As he made his way toward the sweatshop, he noticed several of the soldiers hurrying about. Curious, he followed the steady stream of men a short distance to the north.

They'd killed a black bear, were even then busy taking the beast apart, carrying the pieces into the village. The villagers likely had a use for everything they took off that bear, from the meat to the fur to the bones. Audo and Viri had expressed as much after they'd killed the lion.

Guri ran by, carrying a large axe.

"You guys need help?" Nottle called out.

The young soldier answered, "Yes, we must hurry, else the scent will attract a larger animal angrier than this one."

When Nottle reached the site of the kill, he counted eight soldiers, half of them at the ready in case of violent action. The rest were busy separating the bear's limbs, including cutting the arms and legs into two large pieces each. It was a pretty big bear. Just carrying one forearm or one upper leg would tax a single man.

"What can I do?" Nottle asked Audo, who stood with the guards.

Audo turned toward the bear, as a soldier brought Guri's axe down into the cleft between arm and body. "Are the claws removed from the paws?"

"From the upper two, they are." Another man answered.

"Put them into a sack. We will carry them out."

The two men walked north, as far as they could without losing sight of the village. Audo went ahead, armed with short spear and shield. Nottle followed with two sacks that weighed as much as a pair of bowling balls.

"We leave them on the ground." Audo said. "As a sacrifice to the predators, that they may not scent their way closer to our homes."

When the bearded man judged they were far enough, he halted and motioned at Nottle. The sacks were soon up-ended, their bloody contents thudding on the dark soil below.

"We walk back quickly." Audo motioned. A few strides later, he spoke again. "The bear would have fallen faster if we had used your lightning box."

"The lightning has almost run out." Nottle lied.

"Two men were hurt!" Audo snapped. "One could still die!"

Nottle stayed quiet. He wasn't about to get into an explanation of quantum probabilities with the man. He frowned a moment later, when he remembered that after they'd killed the lion, he'd said in front of Audo that he could use his weapon for an entire hour if he wanted to. As the men returned to the kill site, Nottle had the distinct impression that Audo was angry with him.

(I've been deliberating whether or not to count the interaction with Condi as a fulfilled vow. Mostly this is because I didn't use a progress track. At the same time, if I don't count it, Nottle's experience will take much longer to increase... Okay, I'm counting the interaction with Condi as 10 progress. Fulfill Your Vow – 10 progress against 9/10. Weak Hit. There is more to be done, No EXP gained!

For this next interaction, I'm rolling for Compel. 4 +3 Heart against 6/9. Weak Hit. Take 1 Momentum, raising it to 8. Envision what they want.)

The village had its factory house, and it also had its cooking house. That's where the villagers stored all their extra food and fed each other. Nottle stepped inside, scanning a small multitude of people sitting on the wooden floor, sipping hot broth from bowls, chewing on hard, dry bread. They were all women and children, he noticed, filling up nearly the entire building, except for along the back wall where the pots and cauldrons boiled, and one corner where they kept their meager supplies. Factoring in the soldiers, the woodcutters and the foragers, who were nearly all men, and the old people, Nottle calculated that two-thirds of the village was made up of adult women and young ones.

"I need to speak to Samis." Nottle said to the nearest women.

Many of them were too shy to answer. Only two motioned him toward the back of building, but Nottle didn't see the chieftain there. He headed off that way, asking again, this time pointed to a back door. Not many buildings had back doors, he knew, as he walked out, into the open. Two long wooden tables were set up behind the cooking house. Several men and women were busy cutting the large portions of bear into smaller, manageable chunks.

Nottle found the chieftain carving meat away from bone. "I need to talk to you."

"I am tasked." Samis replied.

"It's important, man. Come on!"

"In seclusion?"

"Yes."

The chief walked to a water bucket, dipping his hands into it to retrieve a small towel. After wiping his hands off, he led Nottle away, a stone's throw from the others. Their breaths became steam in the air.

"Speak." Samis said.

"I need supplies for a few days, and maybe a couple of soldiers." Nottle replied. "I want to travel west, to see why the carts haven't returned."

"Cenia mentioned this to me, last night." Samis told him. "No, you cannot travel west."

"What? Don't you want food coming in?"

"The lion meat can be rationed out for a few days. This bear we've killed will add even more, perhaps as many as ten days in all. You must travel east to the mining settlement, the place called Bleakfield. We have no carts left, but carts will be found there. Bring the carts to us with travel beasts. We will fill them with our trade goods. Then you may travel west."

"You're more worried about selling your trinkets than getting food?" Nottle huffed. "I can't believe you!"

"Have you overseen people before, Nottle?"

"I have, in small fighting groups. What about it?"

"What will happen if people have nothing to do?" Samis asked. "The older people, the women, the children, what do you believe they do for their entire days? In these colder times, they will sit together to create our trade goods. Our materials for these goods has run out. In two days or three, the last items will be created. After this, people will sit with idle hands and ready lips. They will begin to blame each other for our plight, and then the bickering and fighting will begin. How long before the women turn against each other, or influence the men to turn against each other? Do you know what I speak of, sky-man?"

Nottle sighed. "Yes, I do."

"Bleakfield lies at a walk of five days." Samis said. "Go there. I will prepare a sled with provisions and allot two men at least to travel with you. Two were injured in felling the bear. We are as short on able men as we are on all else here."

"I need someone to take care of Awan." Nottle replied. "While I'm gone."

"The hobbled Tuyya." The chieftain said. "Cenia will see to him. When do you wish to leave?"

"Today, if that's possible. Right now."

"Tomorrow morning." Samis determined. "Things will be ready then. Speak to Cenia now. She has other arrangements to make with you, of some importance to her."

"Do you trust Cenia?" Nottle asked.

"She is... a strange woman." The chief admitted. "A selfish woman who is forced to help us, because if she does not she will suffer along with the rest. Cenia tried to create a child from me, but the child failed. She said I was not of the right blood or constitution, but you could be. She believes you will succeed where I did not."

“She’s doing something sneaky. Something underhanded.”

“I trust you little, sky-man.” Samis replied. “But I trust you more than I trust Cenia.”

Log Date 2022.12.20

*All your kin have all gone on to
Fields all bathed in sun
And the only thing left in your possession
Is an empty bottle and a gun
And the weekends come and go like tides
And they soak you to the neck
And pretty soon the weekdays
Are the same
- The Builders And The Butchers*

(I’m adding Nottle’s second Asset now: Brawler.)

“Nothing to do,” Nottle grumbled, once he was back ‘home.’ “And all day to do it.”

The AI wasn’t speaking to him, but it was making his head throb. That was a sign he was about to get a language upload. Howi watched him with some interest, possibly thinking him nuts for talking to himself out loud. Awan slept badly, with fever.

“How bad is it going to be, Baby?”

Not bad. The worst part was adapting your circuitry to accept instantaneous interaction. Any additional exchanges of information are mere bumps on a road.

“Circuitry, huh? It sounds like you wired me in to wherever you’re at. Like my ID chip, right, that you talk through? I’m connected to a place outside of this reality now.”

When the AI refused to answer, he walked over to the still burning fire. The kindling was running low, he noticed. “We need to get more of that.” He noticed that Howi’s attention was still on him. “I have to go east, into the desert. Ma’oohooka. Five days. Manage’yoo tabe.”

“Ma’oohooka.” Howi said.

“That’s right, into the desert. You stay here. Get food, get water here. Stay here. Tumawa’a. Paydda.”

Howi spoke several words in a stream, too many for Nottle to keep up with. The best he could do was interpret that he should not go, and why was he going. “Slow down, cowboy! I’m not fluent yet!” He went on to repeat the idea that he was going east for five days.

“Tagenna.” Howi said. “Tuhewepu. Pehe.”

Nottle only understood the last word, Pehe. It meant something bad or rotten. Howi had used that word when speaking of Awan’s infected leg. What was out there in the desert, that Howi had to use that specific word to describe it?

(Rolled 1d6, over how many volunteers are willing to travel east. 1 = two, 6 = zero. Rolled a 5.)

At close to noon, Guri arrived with hard bread and cold ale.

"I don't like that bread," Nottle said. "But it's better than no bread at all."

"The chief has asked for men willing to travel east with you." Guri revealed. "None are willing to travel."

"I wanted to go west." Nottle replied. "It was the chief's big idea for me to go east. Are you telling me that nobody wants to get the supply route going again?"

"We will not go east."

"What the hell am I supposed to do now? Go somewhere that probably has less food than this place? You want me to bring back a fucking load of boron? What is the chief going to do with it? Make a soup out of black rock?"

Nottle's tirade continued even after the young soldier had gone. He paced the wide chamber for a time, until his eyes settled on Howi. "My headache just got worse."

"Ha'a nana." Howi said.

"Yeah, I did scold that man." Nottle replied. "I should be scolding the chief!"

"Waha'yoo nana." Howi said.

"That's two men. No, because none of these jackasses wants to go. Only me. Sumu'yoo."

Howi pointed at him. "Sumu'yoo nana."

"Right. Just me."

Howi then tapped his chest with his palm. "Waha'yoo nana."

"You want to come along? You're crazy, bro! You can barely stand after being cooped up in a cage so long! I'm getting ready to scold you! Ha'a Howi!"

Howi stood up.

"Sit your ass down!" Nottle growled. "What are you going to do?"

The red-skinned man rushed at him, faster than Nottle expected him to move, but not fast enough to prevent him from bringing his guard up. For a moment, Nottle simply held the man's arms, measuring his strength. Howi was wiry, and while he did possess a bit of strength, it did not take long before Nottle tripped him to the flooring.

"I'm not screwing around!" Nottle said.

Howi stood again, came at him again.

"Should have stayed down, bro." Nottle took his stance.

This time, Nottle turned Howi around before he tripped him. Howi fell on all fours with Nottle on his back. Suddenly, the Tuyya man had Nottle's arms around his neck, and Nottle's legs around his middle. He flopped over on his side, gasping as his air was restricted.

Nottle let the man go, shoved at him, before he rose to his feet and stalked away. "You're weak, Howi. What's the word for weak in your language? You fight like an old man. Mooaddabu nana. Do you realize that I'm in a recently made body, and I can still drag your ass all over this house? You're not at full strength, but neither am I!"

He noticed the girl, Tian, standing beside the doorway. She watched them, so perfectly still she nearly became part of the wall.

Nottle pointed at her. "You are not thirty-something! You are sixteen or seventeen, and you are too young to get married! Besides, you can't get married because you're Jikka!"

He strode over the girl. "Well?"

She looked confused.

“I don’t mean an actual well! What do you want?”

“By nature, a good husband. I can dream it even if I am Jikka.”

Poor girl, Nottle thought, and here he was shouting at her. “Why did you come here?”

“Cenia will see you, at the Jikka house.”

“Fine. I’ll head over there in a few minutes. In a short time.”

“You must wash first.” Tian replied. “I will help you wash.”

“You don’t have to do that. I’ve got Howi. He can wash me.”

Tian bowed her head. “I will tell Cenia.”

Nottle turned and started toward the fire. After a couple of strides, he had another thought.

He faced the doorway, but the girl was already gone.

“Why didn’t Condi come give me that message?” He asked. “I’ll tell you why. She got what she wanted from me, and now we go our separate ways.”

Condi is being respectful, Baby told him. She is following her custom.

“If you say so.” Nottle stopped before Howi, who watched him warily. “Can you even walk for five days? The only reason I want to take you is because you know the lay of the land better than I do. I don’t want to do anything dumb like getting lost out there. All right, fine. The two of us, Waha’yoo nana, into the Ma’oohooka. In the morning. Uh, a new day. Pudubadu Tabe.”

“Naydabu nana.” Howi replied.

“Yeah, I’m angry.” Nottle said. “But I have good reason to be. This isn’t my fucking universe.”

A short time passed, before Nottle could be seen exiting the house and walking toward the center of the village. The first item he had to take care of involved Samis. When he came across a guard patrol, he spoke to them.

“The chief is getting provisions ready for me.” Nottle said. “Tell him I need enough supplies for two people. I’m taking the Tuyya man as my guide.”

Right away, one soldier broke off from the small group, leaving at a run.

“What’s out there?” Nottle asked the remaining soldiers.

One man claimed to have visited Bleakfield. “A village smaller than this, near the portals to many mines.”

“Mining what kind of material?”

“Green-flame rock, salt, copper, iron. Whatever good material is found.”

“All right.” Nottle said, dismissing himself from the group as he moved on. “Condi is keeping her distance. That’s because in a normal situation, a horseman or knight will come and do his thing, and leave right after. Because that knight has a wife and children in another village and the people don’t want complications. I wonder if a jackass like Samis goes off to other settlements to get their women pregnant?”

Nottle continued his walk toward the Jikka house.

“Wait a minute.” He stopped cold, and it really was a cold day. “I’m in a bad mood. I feel angry with Condi, I damned near choked Howi out, and I bitched at Tian for no reason. Matter of fact, I think I’ve been in a bad mood for a good string of days already. When I get moody like this, it usually means I was created out of sub-standard bio-material. Oh shit! I wasn’t created in

a Re-In! I was created somewhere else! Baby, don't blank my mind out, but you have to tell me. Was I created out of sub-standard material?"

It was necessary.

"Because the Valiant and everyone on it was blown out of space." He said. "The Re-In tubes were destroyed. Do I want to know what kind of bio-material you used to create me?"

You do not.

"What about Condi's baby, if she is pregnant, I mean? Is she going to have a sub-standard baby thanks to what I'm made of?"

The daemons of this world have not yet decided on that matter.

"You and I, we're going to have a good talk about that later." Nottle decided. "For now, let's go see what this witch wants. I don't know if she's doing it actively or not, but I'm getting, you know, stirred up about her the closer I get to her house."

Log Date 2022.12.21

(Rolled 1d6 for Cenia's disposition, with lower number equaling happier. Result was 4.)

Cenia was the only person at home. She stood in the center of the patient room, watching Nottle passively as he entered. Tian was off somewhere else. The soldier with the scratched up chest was gone. The ailing old woman was gone.

"What are you up to, lady?" He asked. "Because you are up to something. I believe Condi when she says she wants to raise a child, but I don't believe you."

Nottle walked before her. "Say something."

She was one cool cucumber, he thought, and beautiful. Cenia could have been a hundred years old, and she'd still draw a crowd.

"You're wearing clothes, but I can see right through them." He said, envisioning her ripe breasts that still held a youthful perkiness, and her hips that swelled out like an hourglass. "Or is that an illusion? Is that really what you look like underneath?"

Her gaze faltered, finally.

"Oh, you didn't like that, did you?" Nottle grinned. "You don't like when I imagine you're all skin and bones under your kirtle. You can read my mind too, the way you read Howi's. How much do you know about me? About where I come from?"

Cenia turned and started toward the back of the house. "Follow me."

The back portion of the building had two rooms. One was the room where the Jikka women kept all their medicinal and magical ingredients. The second room, where Cenia led him now, he had never entered before. He imagined it was where the healers slept, and he did see three cots set humbly against the walls, probably including Condi's cot that someone had carried back.

The room had a strong smell to it, with herbs of some sort burning in a small pot on a corner table, like incense. Two urns that came up to Nottle's waist burned oil, creating enough light and warmth to give the room a toasty atmosphere. The logs that made up the walls, and the floor, were painted black, or oiled black.

Cenia walked like a runway model, stopping in the center of the smaller space, turning to face him with her alluring orange-red hair and light green eyes. "Speak to your gods."

“What for?”

“Ask your gods if I will be granted a child... for my purposes.”

“What purposes?” Nottle wondered.

“Your gods will tell you, if you can truly speak to them.”

“I can’t get my gods to speak.” He admitted. “They speak when they feel like it.”

“You can’t do it.” She decided. “My gods tell me to continue, and I will.”

Nottle read the determined look in her eyes. “You’re testing me. You’re challenging my gods to see if they are more powerful than yours.”

She raised her chin at him. “Remove your clothing. All of it.”

“That is something I can do.” He chuckled. “Every time I think about you, I get all worked up about it. I’ve been hard as wood ever since I left my house.”

Nottle undressed. Cenia pretended she was above temptation, keeping her haughty chin up, and her head straight. Her eyes betrayed her, however. Her eyes roamed.

“You’re not undressing.” He noticed. “Am I doing this by myself or what?”

“It isn’t necessary.”

When he stood naked, fully aroused, she went to one of the cots. From it she retrieved one of two small clay cups. As she approached him, trying to keep her eyes from his body, she brought a white sliver out of the cup. It was a bone needle, he realized.

“Your hand.” Cenia said. “Hold it out.”

She had him hold the cup, while she stabbed the needle into the fat part of his thumb. The blood that dripped out she collected into the cup. Cenia counted the red drips, Nottle noticed, until she’d collected ten or twelve of them. When the strange ritual was done with, she went to the cot for salve and a thin strip of cloth. She dabbed the salve on his thumb and tied the cloth around it like a bandage.

“Now for the rest.” Cenia retrieved the second cup.

Nottle thought he’d have to hold the cup, but the woman had other plans. She held it before his member with one hand, and with her other hand she milked him until he ejaculated. His seed flowed out, into the cup. She set both cups on the table with the burning herbs.

“I have what is necessary.” Cenia faced him. “You may dress and go now.”

Nottle wasn’t ready to leave. He walked to her, causing her to back up, kept brushing against her until she was stopped by the black-painted logs. He pressured her further, pinned her smaller form with his nude body.

“Leave now.” She pushed at his chest, her strength a child’s against a mountain’s.

“Oh no, I’m not going anywhere.” Nottle said. “Not yet. You think you got the best of me, and maybe you did that with your little ceremony you just finished. I’m not walking away with empty hands, not after all those visions you sent me.” To prove his intentions, he gripped at her breasts, finding them as full as he’d imagined.

Cenia’s eyes widened. Her breaths came out in hurried pants. She writhed as his strong hands coursed over her covered form. “Leave, leave now!”

“Why? Are you going to turn into an old hag?”

“No!”

“Then shut up.” Nottle said. “You might be a selfish woman, but you’re still a woman.”

He drove his mouth against hers, tapping the back of her head against the wall. Into his mouth, Cenia moaned, before her hands went into a flurry of exploration on Nottle's body, as his hands were already doing to her.

Making love with Cenia was like making love to Kold, or to Amaeri. The redhead was vigorous and full of energy, enough to cause the cot to break apart. Undeterred, Cenia quickly spread blankets on the floor, and they finished there. Afterwards, they stayed on the floor, side by side, their pregnant breaths slowly returning to normal.

Nottle considered her form. Her breasts, her waist, her legs, they were too perfect, too well molded in his opinion; the body of a woman half her age. Cenia's face betrayed her true years, but her body was masked with suppleness and youth.

"Look at me." He said, raising his upper half on an elbow. "Look into my eyes."

She did.

Nottle studied her face. He discovered something eerily familiar about it, was reminded of Kase, who was part of Captain Zayden's flight crew on the Valiant. "Are you a clone?"

"Say to me?" Cenia asked.

"Forget it." Nottle shook his head. "Kase had a whole different personality than you do. She would never do what we just did together."

"You did not fall from the heavens." She mentioned. "You were brought to land. How were you brought?"

"I don't remember." Nottle admitted. "My gods have a bad habit of erasing my thoughts. Let me ask you something. Do you remember your parents? Do you remember growing up... I mean, do you remember when you were a little girl?"

"I remember nothing of my past." She said. "The gods have also clouded my thoughts."

"Do you remember MICROS? Do you remember United Planets?"

"Say to me?"

"Those words don't exist in your language." Nottle grumbled. He stood up, snatching his under-pants from the floor, taking a few strides before he put them on. "Baby, is she a clone? Is there something you're not telling me about her?"

There is something the daemons of this world are not telling me, Baby replied.

Nottle spun around when he heard Cenia's gasp.

She looked stricken. "You *can* speak to the gods!"

"Did you hear that?"

"Not the words, but the ring of them."

"The frequency." Nottle realized. "She can catch the resonance when an AI speaks. Baby, what the hell is going on here?"

You are becoming exposed, Baby said. *Leave now before the connection is traced.*

He noticed that Cenia was in a hurry to get her clothes on. Apparently, her gods had just sent her a similar warning.

Awan was lucid, when Nottle arrived home. The young man cried and complained to his father over his missing lower leg. He wouldn't be able to hunt any more, he said. He would not be able to run. Howi sang to this son.

Nottle left. He walked through the village for a time. He sometimes sang. He sometimes spoke out loud.

*And I'm bringing home the rain
There's no supper on the table
And my feet are in the flames
I'm drying out again*
- The Builders And The Butchers

“It makes sense that Cenia is the most beautiful woman in the village, because she’s a clone.” Nottle contemplated. “It makes sense that she’s an orphan. It also makes sense how she doesn’t remember much about her past. What I don’t get is that she’s obviously been here, on this world, for a long time. When your kind scattered the crew of the Valiant... No, because she wasn’t on the Valiant. It’s a medium-size starship! Maybe she was on one of the big colony ships the Protectorate had, that United Planets kept trying to blow up. Is it possible that daemons from my universe scattered people like me through time?”

It is beyond my scope, Baby answered. I am busy enough computing probabilities for you.
“So you say.” Nottle grunted.

From a distance, he observed a few soldiers carrying bundles toward his home. When he approached, he became aware that Audo was among them.

The man was gruff with him. “There is all you will need for five days’ journey.”

“It looks like a lot.” Nottle commented, watching the men enter his house to drop off the goods. “A lot for two people.”

Audo listed off the contents. “Water, tea, ale, dried food, extra clothing, extra blankets. Kindling for fire. An oil urn for warmth at night. If you need more, Samis will give it.”

The bearded warrior abruptly turned and walked off.

“Guess you’re not going.” Nottle muttered at his back. “Is that because you don’t want to, or because your asshole chief said you couldn’t go?”

The soldiers entered his house only long enough to drop off their bundles. The moment they left, Nottle started taking the bundles apart, laying everything out so he could have a good look at it. He turned to Howi and threw several words out in Tuyya language.

“If two people walked into the desert for five days,” He attempted to convey. “What would they take and what would they leave behind?”

Nottle managed to get the message across. They had split the items into two groups by the time Condi arrived with the wounded soldier. She’d come to tend to Awan with an armed escort.

“What are you doing?” Condi asked.

“The chief gave us too much stuff.” Nottle said. “We can move faster if we didn’t have to carry half this shit along.”

“You will use the sled.” She commented, as she took in the two sections of goods. She pointed at one side. “This is what you are not taking? No, no! The ale will give you warmth through the day. The tea will keep you alert at night, and also warm. It has herbs with effects that last long, lessening the need for a full sleep. Two days of ale and tea, followed by one day of water, will cleanse your body of effects, else they will collect and become hazards. The clothing,

if you are pulling the sled for half a day, you will become sweaty. You must change into dry clothing or you will keep sweaty moving into the night. If you are sweaty at night, your cold will be double.”

“Okay.” Nottle said. “Why do we need so much kindling? And then we have the urn. That’s two ways to keep a fire going when we only need one.”

“You cook with the kindling in day. You keep warm with the urn in night. How do you not know these things?”

“Hey, I’ve survived in some crazy places, lady!” Nottle shot back. “With nothing but a wooden spear to fight with!”

“Five days in the desert?”

“No, it wasn’t the desert...”

“What do you know about the desert then? You will use the sled! You can pull the sled!”

Nottle clammed up, because this was her world and maybe she knew a thing or two about it that he did not. He motioned for Howi to help him put the items back into their original bundles. Maybe there was a reason they’d been sorted that way.

In the meantime, Condi went to check on Awan’s amputated leg. She changed the dressing on its end, rubbing fresh salve on it before she covered it up again. Awan was heard groaning a few times, but at least he wasn’t screaming like before.

“Are you going to watch over him while we’re gone?” Nottle called out to her.

“Yes, I will come here often.” Condi answered.

“You can’t take him to the Jikka house?”

“It is forbidden. The gods would become angered.”

Nottle looked at the wounded soldier. The man looked pale, almost clammy, as if whatever medicine the healers had given him was difficult to process. “And you don’t look like you could walk across the road, let alone hump into the desert for a week. Did Samis tell the soldiers they could not come with me?”

“We must stay to defend the village.” The soldier replied.

“Samis said that?”

“Audo said it.”

“I get it.” Nottle nodded. “The village comes first. Not enough men in town, so let the guy who fell from the sky take care of all your dilemmas. How about this? You line up all the single women for me, and I’ll give all of them a good roll in the hay! In nine months I can double your frickin’ population! I can’t guarantee you’ll have a lot more men, but it’s a start!”

The soldier glowered.

“I’m not kidding. Line ‘em up! The old ones, the young ones... Bring me the chief’s wife. I’ll knock her up! You have a wife, right? Bring her along for the ride!”

Howi gripped Nottle’s arm and shook him. He spoke too fast for Nottle to translate, before he slapped Nottle across the face.

He said ‘the madness takes you,’ Baby spoke into his mind.

Nottle was a heartbeat away from punching Howi’s block off. I must be made of garbage, he thought, because he felt like garbage and acted like it more often than not. To Howi, he said, “I’m okay now. You’re right. It was the madness.”

“I am finished here.” Condi announced, also trying to dispel the tension. She walked closer to Nottle, but not too close. “I will see to the man several times in one day. I will watch over him as our chief has asked.”

“Thank you.” Nottle replied.

“The chief has three wives.” Condi said. “If you were to ask him, I am certain he will present his best wife to you. We owe you much.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” Nottle grumbled.

She started to leave, then paused to meet his eyes. “You broke her cot.”

It was one of those things, Nottle realized, that ate away at women until they had to say something about it. Condi was jealous of Cenia.

“She broke it herself.” He replied, without thinking.

Condi showed venomous eyes, before she huffed her way out.

Log Date 2022.12.22

The following morning, the sun made an extra effort to bless the land. The wind was light, the warmth pleasant. It made for a good travel day, Nottle decided, except for one thing. His eyes took in the Jikka house as he and Howi dragged a small sled along on harnesses meant for a beast of burden.

“Are you sure I have to leave the pistol behind?” He asked.

It is necessary, Baby replied. You have drawn enough attention to your technology here. If you were to use your weapon elsewhere, and your actions were witnessed by others, it would create a broader field of influence. The entities we are hoping to avoid will have a greater chance of honing in on us. We would both suffer.

“I hope our spears will be enough, if we run into any BFMs.” He said. “That smilodon could have used them for toothpicks.”

Cenia had emerged from the house, as if she’d been told he was passing by. Tian came with her, brushing away at her loose hair as the wind picked up. Nottle waved at the two women. His farewell was returned by both. Condi, he noticed, was nowhere in sight.

“Whoever made that rule up about having outsiders come in to impregnate women,” Nottle decided. “That person knew what they were doing.”

He veered the sled toward the main road, with Howi following his lead. The reason he’d been headed toward the Jikka house was to pick up the weapon, until Baby had talked him out of it. Howi was getting used to him making odd decisions, used to Nottle talking to himself.

“You know, I feel like a rotten mango.” Nottle said. “God looked at me once. He said, if you’re not suffering, it’s because I fell asleep.”

You are not suffering, Nottle.

“No? Where are my friends at? Where is the woman I love?”

You are not the only being out of your universe, Baby reminded him.

“Kiss my fucking ass! You’re not even human!”

He felt it. Nottle felt a resonance in his head, as if Baby was about to say something else, as if the AI barely refrained from it.

“You’re hiding something from me.” Nottle decided. “You always are.”

It is necessary.

(Nottle's stats are topped off. Momentum is at 8. I'm going to roll Fulfill A Vow, with progress at 10, to find out if the business with Cenia is done with.

Fulfill A Vow – 10 against 3/10. Oh no! Denied again! This Weak Hit means no EXP. I already had some complications regarding Cenia in mind. This further cements that path.

Undertake A Journey – Traveling to Bleakfield will be Dangerous.

I think it's a given that Nottle now has a bond with Windhaven and Howi, so I'll skip making rolls for them.)

The road was wide enough for two wagons, fairly even, built by the same savvy engineers who constructed the extra large houses in Windhaven. Adding to that luxury, the sled's feet were made of smoothed iron and slid along the ground almost as easily as if it had wheels. Nottle had no doubt that he could drag the sled along all day. No wonder Condi had been so critical about him excluding supplies. She could probably drag it herself.

"How you doing there, champ?" He asked Howi. "You doing good?"

"Pesa naggooma."

Not only good, but excited, invigorated, Nottle deciphered. "Keep talking. Tell me about your village. It will help me learn your language faster."

Howi understood enough of that to get started.

As it turned out, the man had plenty to say. After a while, Nottle started droning out Howi's voice, like when he spoke of his favorite hunting or fishing spots, which Nottle found boring. The AI listened to everything, however, prompting Nottle to ask questions at times.

"Hold on, Howi." Nottle cut the man off. "You just said Tso'apa. I thought you said that meant dead man."

"Ghost." Howi corrected. "Spirit."

"But you were just speaking about hootseba, birds, in the trees, wunudu. And you said tso'apa again. Describe what that is."

Small creature with colorful wings, Howi explained.

Butterfly, Baby translated.

"Tso'apa means spirit, *and* it means butterfly." Nottle remarked. "Huh."

(Undertake A Journey, Day 1 – 3 +2 Wits against 2/8. Weak Hit. Mark progress. -1 supply.)

On that first day, they witnessed bighorn sheep and antelope, grazing on the sturdy grasses and shrubbery that defied the advent of Fall. They stopped a few times to eat and rest. Nottle felt they could have made more progress, but he didn't want to push Howi too hard. That night, they sat close together with two blankets over their heads, keeping warm with the oil urn.

(Undertake A Journey, Day 2 – 5 +2 Wits against 2/8. Weak Hit.)

The second day, early in the morning, they witnessed dozens of large bats in the dark sky. The bats had wingspans as wide as the arms of the two men, prompting them both to hold their

spears and shields ready. Later that day, they came across more antelope. Howi wanted to hunt them, but Nottle suspected the man was tiring of their hard pace. If they did manage to bring one of the animals down, it would take hours to dress it.

(Undertake A Journey, Day 3 – 2 +2 Wits against 1/6. Weak Hit.)

Their supplies were steadily dwindling, Nottle estimated on the third day. They saw a few animals, a few birds. The only noteworthy thing they came across was a gray fox chewing on a dead toad, near a stream that still had a good current to it.

Howi threw his spear at the fox, knowing he'd miss because the animal was too far off. Nottle let the man take longer breaks, as he too was feeling the strain on his feet. They both had a lot of blisters on their feet that night.

(Undertake A Journey, Day 4 – 4 +2 Wits against 1/3. Strong Hit. No loss of supplies.)

The fourth day started off warm. Nottle was positive it would be the warmest day he'd ever spent in Uqo-Klija Tir-Jon, the Northern Lands.

The temperature will be in the mid to high seventies, Baby predicted. Twenty-four Celsius.

“How do you know that?” Nottle wondered.

I can gauge the sensations of climate your body sends to your brain.

“And here I thought you had a thermometer up my ass.” Nottle chuckled, before he addressed his companion. “How you holding up, bud?”

“I can manage.” How answered.

“No you can't. Let's get through the morning, if we can do that much. At around noon, we'll find a nice shady spot and stay there for a while. Can you make it that far?”

“I can.”

Nottle considered the red-skinned man. Howi's condition betrayed his words. He too was feeling the strain of the long walk. One thing Nottle had not anticipated was growing tired of the scenery. All he'd seen for the last three days was ugly plants and reddish ground, now that all the snow had dried up. He did see a few hills in the distance, but nothing man-made to really break up the monotony.

The day grew hot an hour before noon, or at least Nottle estimated it was an hour, since he didn't really know how long days were on that planet. They found a grove of giant cacti to hide beside, when the sun really bore down on them with a vengeance.

Howi threw his spear at a jackrabbit, missing. He did not head off to retrieve his primary weapon for a good ten minutes. After he did, he used his knife to start digging around the base of the cactus, eventually finding and killing a rat. Howi looked proud after killing that rat, showing it off to Nottle and smiling. He was proud of the knife, too. It was an iron knife he'd gotten in the village. Nottle wondered if the knife was the best thing he'd ever owned.

“You gonna eat that thing raw?” Nottle teased.

“Tonight, cook for supper.”

“How's it taste?”

Howi answered with a word Nottle didn't know. Baby said it meant gamey.

“We’ve got to ration our food better.” Nottle said. “If we reach Bleakfield and for some reason we can’t get food there, we are fu- Uh, we will be in trouble.”

“The desert will feed us.” Howi replied. “I will skin this rat.”

“Take your time. We’re not moving from this spot until the sun gives up its hate for us.”

Howi laughed. The cactus had thorns on it that looked like eagle beaks. He found a good spot on the plant and started working on it with the knife. Eventually, he cut off a couple of fat chunks and handed one to Nottle.

“Eat.” Howi said.

The taste reminded Nottle of tart watermelon. The texture was thicker, harder to chew, like the white part, the pith, and not the softer red. “Not bad. It’s juicy, at least.”

“The desert will finish our thirst.” Howi went to sit beside Nottle, clearly enjoying his chunk of cactus.

“Many people in Windhaven think your people are cannibals.” Nottle said. “They think your people eat other people.”

“The madness takes them.” He replied. “Once the demon is inside, it cannot be driven out.”

“That old man in the cage, the man you killed, he was a cannibal?”

“He was.” Howi confirmed. “My son and I were banished from our tribe. We can never return. We can still help the tribe by killing those who would eat the children.”

Nottle couldn’t understand that: Howi staying on the periphery of the tribe that had exiled him. It made no sense.

“I am purchased.” Howi said. “I will stay with you for all days.”

That made Nottle wince. He did not relish the title of Slave Master. The people of Windhaven could accept it, even Howi had, but he never would. “Is it true that your people catch the Windo-Touta people, and make them slaves?”

“It is true.” Howi admitted. “We catch them.”

“Do you eat them?”

“Eat? We do not. We take Windo women for wives. Their children become our children. This happens when the sickness takes too many Tuyya into the Great Void. The Windo will not accept their women and children again, once they have become Tuyya.”

“Tuhewepu.” Nottle recalled. “The Great Void. You used that word when I first told you I was heading into the desert. Why is the desert tuhewepu?”

“Men become gone in the Great Void. Men become ghosts.

“Have you seen that happen? How does it happen?”

“The butterflies come to tell us.”

Nottle was puzzled over what that meant.

That afternoon, Nottle felt the sled hadn’t lost any of its weight, despite that they were down to two days’ worth of supplies. He was dragging ass now, like Howi had for the last two days.

When Howi released his harness and walked to the sled, Nottle didn’t say anything. Howi retrieved his spear, went to the edge of the road and sighted a prickly plant. He launched the short piece of wood into the air. Like most times, the spear fell short.

“One day, you’re going to become Superman and your spear will fly across world.” Nottle grinned, pausing when the prickly brown plant started moving. “Whoah! That’s a porcupine!”

He went to stand next to Howi. They both watched the slow animal rise to its feet and scurry further from the road.

“Can you really eat that thing?” Nottle asked.

“If we must. Troublesome to skin. Meat is good when no other meat is found.”

“Why do you keep throwing the spear, when you know you’re going to miss?”

“Must throw many times to hit mark.”

“Yeah, yeah, practice makes perfect.” Nottle replied. “When I hunted with a spear, I always kept it close. I never threw it. Think about that. If you throw away your best weapon, guess what happens? You’re standing there with empty fucking hands.”

“Small animal will run, not fight.”

“I know that!”

Nottle watched as Howi walked out to gather his spear, instead of trotting out there.

Late that afternoon, they came to another small forest of big, fat cacti. The plants were a good ten to fifteen feet tall, with arms thicker than Nottle’s waist, and trunks as wide as the sled. They looked like faded green giants with a thousand beaks. It was something different to look at, anyway.

“Let’s stop here for the day.” He decided. “We can use the extra rest.”

Howi did not hide his relief. Right away, he went to the sled, going through a specific bundle. It had a pouch of salve in it they’d been using on their feet.

They spent about an hour throwing spears at the cacti. Howi could hit the wide targets from thirty feet away. Nottle had trouble doing it at two-thirds that distance.

“Iron spear will not break.” Howi said, once they’d started up a small fire with the last of the kindling. “Glass rock will break quickly. Spend much time replacing. Even when making new spear, new knife, glass rock will break.”

“A good thing to have.” Nottle said, understanding the Tuyya was talking about brittle but sharp obsidian. “And now you have an iron spear and an iron knife.”

“Good boons.” Howi nodded. “The gods smile upon me, and upon you.”

Nottle couldn’t help thinking about Awan and his missing leg. The thought that the science of that world was so primitive would dampen his spirit, if he dwelled on it too long. “Let’s talk about Suda’yoo Tabewabe, the Bad Lands. Why are they bad?”

“The stories from the ancestors tell us it is bad. The Bad Lands have monsters and vengeful spirits. It is unwise to tread there. The Tuyya warned the Windo not to travel there, not to build. The Windo are a stubborn people who will do as they want.”

“The Bad Lands have a reputation for being bad, but your people haven’t been there lately.” Nottle extrapolated. “The Tuyya and Windo aren’t fighting there?”

“Tuyya will not go there.”

“What if the iron in your knife came from the Bad Lands? That’s why the Windo came out this far; to mine the earth for resources. Do you still want to keep the knife?”

“I did not take the iron from the earth.” Howi reasoned. “If the earth is angry, its anger is meant for the Windo.”

Log Date 2022.12.23

(Undertake A Journey. 2 +2 Wits against 2/4. Weak Hit. Supply is down to 1.5. Journey Progress Track is full.

Reach Your Destination. 10 against 6/9. Strong Hit. Make another move at +1.

Gather Information. 2 +2 Wits +1 Companion +1 Bonus against 8/9. Miss. Results in dire threat or unwelcome truth.

Settlement Trouble. Rolled 98, so roll twice. 30 – Mysterious murders. 28 – Production halts. Both are very much in line with my plot! The Bleakfield entry in the Uqo-Klija Setting Guide predicted evidence of a battle and reckless warmongering!)

If there was ever a place that lived up to its name, Nottle thought, Bleakfield was it. Past the stunted, twisted chaparral, past the reddish soil and sand, the village stuck out like rotten teeth on an old man. The buildings were of wood and stone with thatched roofs, similar to the homes in Windhaven, but they came in all sorts of sizes, from tiny to extra wide, as if a mad architect had run loose. Even from a distance, the village gave off an aura of neglect and disrepair.

“The road is built fine, right up to the start of the houses.” Nottle noticed. “Whoever built the road said, that’s it, that’s far enough. Let somebody else take over for the rest of it. Hey, bud. Can you appreciate the contrast between road and village?”

“Bad spirits here.” Howi replied.

“Yeah, I can feel that, too.” Nottle set his hands on his hips, watching. “Nothing is moving, as far as I can see. Let’s not walk into the middle of that mess like idiots. Let’s circle around a bit for a closer look.”

“Still no signs of life.” Nottle mentioned, a good ten minutes later. He had walked south, was now halfway around Bleakfield. “They’ve got their well right there in the middle, built up right the way the road was. Looks like the engineers did a good job there. The buildings start up in every direction, crowding around the well. Makes sense, if the miners were disorganized, in a hurry to get to the actual mining. Lots of hills to the east and north. Probably where the mines are located. You got something to add, Howi?”

“People are dead.”

“I don’t see anybody.”

“The dead stink. Many are dead there. We must not enter this open grave.”

“You don’t want to go into the village?” Nottle asked.

“The stink of death is strong. The ghosts will take me, give me their madness. Bad risk.”

“You make for a bad investigator, you know that?” Nottle replied. “If you’re not coming with me, go back to the sled. Go guard that.”

Nottle discovered the first resident as he wandered through the buildings, keeping his spear and shield up. A man had been crucified against a log wall, flayed down to the waist. His second layer of flesh was exposed, the blood coagulated all over in dark purple and black. Pieces of the mans’ face were torn out, including the eyes, probably by scavengers birds. Crooked teeth still remained, making for a grisly portrait now that the lips were gone.

“He’s giving off heat.” Nottle said.

Radiation, Baby replied. The body is highly irradiated. This is not a high danger for your upgraded constitution. Only do not remain in the body's presence for a sustained duration.

He came across other dead bodies. Some were killed quickly, while others were obviously tormented for some time.

"If I had to guess," Nottle said, moving steadily toward the village well. "I'd say a mob of people started chasing other people, one at a time. Once the one person was killed, they would go after somebody else." He paused before a woman's body, hanging upside down, her head and arms missing. "Then again, the mob really took it out on some of these people."

In the distance, he heard a crow cawing, deciding to head that way. He'd only taken a few strides in that direction, when he heard another sound.

Smack!

It was a sound he didn't like, coming from a building or two away, near the well.

Smack!

Nottle kept his back close to a wall, as he sidestepped closer.

Smack!

On planet Ahnta, he'd punched frozen turkeys with his bare hands, to keep his reflexes up when he didn't have a boxing partner around. The impacts his fists made on those turkeys, that's what this new sound reminded him of. Something was striking soft flesh.

He turned a corner slowly, his trained eyes scanning the general area first, before honing in on the disturbance. He'd reached the center of Bleakfield. Standing close to the well, which was a lavish affair, admittedly, a grizzled man was using a short arm to slap on a small body.

Nottle wasn't supposed to step away from cover, but he did. "Hey! Over here!"

The man holding the short arm straightened up. He was nude except for a dirty loincloth at his waist. His hair and beard were withered, matted. His eyes bloodshot.

"That was somebody's kid." Nottle said.

He could be a defensive fighter, if he had a fire team to lead. Not this time. Nottle rushed at the man, bowling him over with the shield. The spear plunged into the man's middle two, three times, hitting soft belly, opening up grievous wounds. As quickly as he'd attacked, Nottle moved back, keeping alert to all sides, as the man rattled toward a quick death.

"Anybody else?" Nottle shouted. "Come and get it!" He looked behind him, looked into the uneven alleys between the buildings. "Come and fucking get it!"

Nottle waited. Nobody came.

He had time to consider the well. If the situation weren't so dire, he'd stand there and marvel at it. The well was at least ten feet wide, circular, with a safety wall four feet high made of mud brick. A bench had been built all the way around, made of the same bricks, allowing people to sit and ponder under the shade. And there was plenty of shade, thanks to six sturdy beams that held up a conical wooden roof, large enough to cast shadows over the well for the majority of days.

Nottle made a mistake, however, when he peered into the well. He gulped, estimating a good hundred bodies had been thrown in there. Men, women, children, everything.

"Shit." He said. "You catching this, Baby?"

I am.

"You want to try to explain it?"

I cannot.

Nottle started toward the closest homes. “I need someone to be alive here to explain this to me.” He stepped up to the first door, made of hard wood. “No lock.”

He shoved the door open with his shield. The door had a single room, twelve by twelve. From his initial survey, nothing looked out of place, as if the residents had stepped out only minutes before. The second house he entered was a little larger, but in a similar state.

“None of these houses have locks on them.” Nottle walked by more structures. “Either the miners here aren’t that smart, or they didn’t care that anybody could walk into their houses at any time. Then again, maybe this is all temporary housing. It’s not permanent because whoever built the road and well, whoever built Windhaven, knew it was going to be temporary. All these crappy houses were built by the miners when they came out here.”

Nottle walked all the way around the well. He had the urge to throw the man he’d killed, and the small body next to him, into the well, if only so he wouldn’t have to see them anymore.

“Not my job.” He decided, moving out to the second circle of homes. He found more bodies, some flayed, some dismembered, some simply fallen over and stabbed or bludgeoned to death.

“Howi was right about the stink.” He grimaced, moving further away from the bodies.

Most have been dead between five and twenty days, Baby mentioned.

“That’s a long time for a clusterfuck.” Nottle replied. “Like premeditation, as in meditating on killing people every couple of days. Why? The people here didn’t eat something and go crazy all at once. Maybe it was a creeping sickness? Maybe it was like Howi said, something demonic that put one group against another, until there were no more groups left.”

It must be related to the mine.

“You’re right. Miners can be greedy, greedy enough that they’d build shit houses for themselves. Just a roof over their heads for them to sleep under. Hell, a miner could lose an arm or a leg and still drag himself into a mine, hoping for that big strike. That could explain the radiation, which superstitious Howi would see as demonic.”

He pushed at the door to another house. Inside, he saw a simple cot, worn blankets, a single pot and a few personal items. Looking further inside, he counted two more cots with similar items next to them.

“The people at Windhaven called this a village.” Nottle said. “It’s more like a work camp. I asked a lot of questions in Windhaven. Why would the people there lie about this place?”

They are not far thinkers, Baby replied. *They believe any settlement would be like theirs.*

“I know what that means. Cognitive dissonance. When you can’t imagine anything past your own limited point of view. What about this? The miners went into the mine, they dug into a spot with a lot of radiation, and they slowly went insane and killed each other. I can see that because the miners might look past a minor sickness so they can keep on mining. Wait, that would not explain groups of miners turning on each other, only one or two at a time.”

You should not stay in this village long. I cannot gauge the level of radiation without scientific instruments.

“And I won’t know until my teeth start falling out.” Nottle kept moving. “If the miners already had their little cliques, and they were already at odds with each other, then they might turn against each other in mobs. And the mob leaders would get the special torture. I can see that happening here. Or... Or the miners found something in one of the mines. Whatever it was, was

so valuable that they were willing brave past the radiation, willing even to kill each for it. This place looks like a war zone more than a pandemic.”

Nottle realized he was going in the wrong direction. He wanted to head out to where Howi was, except the houses were built in such disarray that he ended up facing north, only seeing this when the hills came into view.

“It was every man for himself.” He gathered. “That’s why these dummies don’t even have a road going into the village. The supply people coming from the west probably had to stop at the edge of the road to unload their stuff. The miners probably fought over it.”

I am not accustomed to such selfishness.

“Neither am I.” Nottle said. “I’m not going to get answers here. I know I’m not made of good bio-material, because the good stuff can hamper the effects of radiation...”

You want to enter the mines?

“You got any better ideas? If I want answers, that’s where I have to go. Cart of manure!”

Log Update 20221224

*(I wasn’t intending to go into a Delve yet, but since a Mine is one of the Domains, I went ahead and rolled for it. **Spoilers ahead!***

The Theme is Hallowed. Rolls were 65 Mineshaft and 90 Perplexing Mystery Or Tough Choice. Threat – Scheming Leader. Fine, let’s Delve a little more...

Action – 98 Search. Theme – 90 Quest. Character Goal – 41 Create An Item.

Advance A Threat – 77 Makes Dramatic Or Immediate Move, Major Event Reveals New Complications.

Threat: Scheming Leader – 11 Form A New Alliance.)

“Great danger.” Howi said. “Must not go.”

Nottle and the Tuyya man were sitting at the edge of Blakefield. They still had the greater part of the day ahead of them, after the hard pace Nottle had set to get them there. The day’s temp was going to be warm, around 70 F, 21 C.

“This food I brought out, are you going to eat it?” Nottle motioned at an unmatched pair of clay jars. The first contained jerky, hard bread and cheese, all stuffed in until the jar was full. The second jar was three-quarters full of ale. “I don’t believe it has radiation poisoning in it.”

Howi looked at the jars as if they were full of spiders.

“Do they smell bad? Your nose works better than mine.”

“I will eat nothing from them.”

“Suit yourself, bud.” Nottle gave up. “We still have about a day’s worth of food on the sled, two days for one person. You are welcome to it.”

He’d chosen that specific spot to sit in. It gave the men a good view of the north end of town and the nearby hills.

“Still nothing.” Nottle said. “Bro, look at me. You and I, we’re different people. You stay away from danger because that’s what any normal person does. Me, I’m not like that. I have to go into the mines to find out what’s going on. Even if it kills me.”

“Stubborn Windo.” Howi said.

Nottle grinned. “Tell me about it. Just do me one favor. Wait for me. If I’m not back in two days, head on back to Windhaven. Eat yourself a porcupine along the way. Take care of your son when you get there. Maybe the asshole chief will let you stay, but I can’t make any promises.”

“You must not go.”

“Bro.”

Howi lowered his head. “I will wait. Gods keep you.”

“The houses at the edge of the village, I don’t think they’re as radiated as the middle where the well is. I think... I think the people in the well are what’s giving off radiation. You can stay in one of those houses if it gets too cold.”

Howi kept his head low.

Nottle knew what that meant. He got to his feet. “Wish me luck.”

*And I'm bringing home the rain
There's no supper on the table
And my feet are in the flames
I'm drying out again
- The Builders And The Butchers*

Nottle expected he’d have trouble finding the right mine, as several trails led away from Bleakfield and into the northern and eastern hills. He chose the trail that looked busiest. He also found out why the village was named Bleakfield. The northern edge had a small field, a garden patch really, of hardy crops like onions and potatoes. Most everything was dug up, though, or had become food for wandering critters.

Nottle stopped when he reached the mine’s portal. It looked like the Devil’s groaning mouth, uneven on the sides, jagged on top, with piles of rubble on both sides creating a lazy man’s ramparts. He knew he had the right mine because two dead men sat on stools to either side of the portal. They were both armed with swords.

“Why do I get the feeling you two are going to stand up and start swinging?” He asked the silent guards. He went as far as pushing them over, onto the ground, hearing their dull flops, but even then he wasn’t comforted. “Shit.”

For a moment, he was tempted to steal one of their swords.

“I’d better not.” He decided. “I’m used to the spear and shield combo. No sense in switching weapons now.”

He’d brought out a makeshift lantern. Basically, it was a pot half full of oil, with a wire handle on it. The dead men had a better version sitting by the portal: a bowl with a flat bottom and a glass dome over it. Nottle made sure the bowl had a good supply of fuel, before he struck flint over wood shavings, setting a rag to smolder. That got the lantern going.

He had one last look at the dead men, who had not stirred, before he went inside.

(I want to roll for Undertake A Journey, with a Dangerous setting. I don’t want to drag the scene out too long, however. For that reason, I’m making it Troublesome.

Undertake A Journey – 4 +2 Wits against 2/7. Weak Hit. Since this is a short journey, instead of reducing supply I’m going to substitute events or dangers.

Gather Information – 3 +2 Wits +1 Companion against 7/8. Miss. I thought about burning Momentum, but decided against it. I might need it if things get hairy later. To Pay The Price, I’m going to Endure Stress. Spirit goes to 4.

Endure Stress – 4 against 6/6. Miss with a match. Momentum drops to 7. The match means Nottle endures an additional Stress. Spirit goes to 3.)

“I don’t scare easy.” Nottle said.

He’d only traversed the mine’s portal by fifty feet, when circumstances forced him to stop. The tunnel he was in was a good eight feet wide and six tall, with rugged stone walls and even ground, since that part was used so often. What had stopped Nottle was the discovery of at least a dozen Tuyya heads. They’d been hung on hooks, hooks probably used to holding gear on better days than this.

“Why would the Windo people do this to the Tuyya?” He asked. When he received no reply, he queried a second time. “Baby, you there? Can you hear me?”

Nothing.

“Fucking cart of manure.” Nottle cursed. “It has to be the radiation. It must be causing interference so Baby can’t talk to me. I wanted to ask Baby to keep track of the mine for me, in case I run into all sorts of passages. So I won’t get lost.”

Eleven heads, he counted. Mostly, they were the heads of adult men, but not all of them. The hair on most had fallen off, and also the teeth.

“They’re trying to tell me something, aren’t they?” Nottle questioned.

He trotted back to the entrance. The first thing he did was make sure the dead guards had not moved. The second was to speak out loud.

“Baby, you there?”

I am here. Contact was lost for approaching eight minutes.

“Yeah, I’ll probably glow in the dark by the time this little foray is done with. Check my body stats. I want to know how strong the radiation is inside.”

Give me one... You have elevated levels on the epidermis, strong enough to cause rash. I estimate you can travel for one hour before you must return to the entrance, less time if radiation levels increase.

“Two hours round trip. I wish I had a digi-watch. Then again, if I did have one, it probably would not work very long. Wait, I’ve got the lantern. I need an estimate of two hours based on how fast the oil burns.”

Just inside the portal, Nottle found the remains of a small fire, probably used to keep the guards warm on cold days. He collected several pieces of charcoal to mark the lantern’s metal edge, and also to leave large, crude Ns and arrows on the walls to mark his advance.

“Two hours, Baby. If I’m not out by then, send in the cavalry.”

You are the cavalry.

“Yeah, I know. Ain’t that a bitch?”

(2 +2 Wits against 3/5. Weak Hit. Mine progress goes up to 6, with a hitch.)

As it turned out, the mine had a dozen tunnels to explore. Some were only a few feet long, while others stretched on for half of eternity. Miners used ladders to climb up to holes they'd made higher than the main shaft, or climbed down into dark pits the lantern could barely shine into. He was particularly put out when the main shaft split up into two parts, each looking as large as its counterpart.

"I've been in here a good forty minutes now." He gauged the oil in the lantern. "And all I've got to show for it is my face stinging."

He passed another pit, this one with rope dangling into it. After a few more minutes, he found the shaft he was in ended. Returning to the pit, he tossed a loose rock into it, guessing the drop to be maybe forty, fifty feet.

"I don't scare easy." Nottle said. He had to leave his shield behind, tying his spear to his back with his outer shirt. The mine was cool but not cold. He figured he'd put the shirt back on once he'd finished making the descent. Keeping the lantern balanced was going to be tricky.

He got lucky. After about ten feet of a straight drop, the shaft wall started sloping at an angle. He could hold the lantern out and guide himself down with one hand.

"Maybe I should sing something." He muttered.

Nottle reached the end of the rope. He held the lantern past him, illuminating even ground only a couple of feet lower than he.

"That don't make sense." He said. "How would they carry material out using this one rope? Oh, this must be a shortcut. There must be a longer way--"

"Have the gods sent you?"

The voice startled Nottle so much he nearly dropped the lantern. As it was, he jostled it and nearly doused the flame out. His choices were limited. Either he jumped to the ground and the lantern would go out, or he climbed the last few feet and had his back vulnerable.

"Yes, the gods sent me." He spoke out.

"You are not Windo and you are not Tuyya." The voice said.

It was a man's voice, speaking Windo language.

"I come from far away." Nottle said. "The gods told me to come."

"Can you brave the inferno?"

"The inferno? If you're talking about the radiation, yes, I can handle more than most people. Is that where you're trying to get, past the inferno?"

Hoping he wouldn't get attacked from behind, Nottle finished the descent. The moment he reached flat ground, he set his lantern down and removed his shirt. He untied the knot that held his spear in place.

Through the flickering illumination, he could see the vague form of the man speaking to him. The man was nude save for a loincloth. He held a sickle in his hand. A lot of large bones were visible near the man's feet, from animals, or maybe people, he'd eaten while he'd sat there waiting for someone to show up.

"The gods did not send you." The man growled, seeing Nottle holding his spear.

"How do you know?" Nottle challenged. "Maybe the gods didn't mention all those Tuyya heads hanging on the wall, up near the entrance. Maybe I don't want to end up like that!"

"The gods said the Tuyya could brave the inferno. The gods were wrong. The Tuyya perished before they reached the holy altar to retrieve the relic."

“I’m going to perish too, if you waste my time by getting in my way. Tell me where the relic is and maybe I can get to it.”

The man crouched slightly, possibly getting ready to pounce, possibly undecided.

“Tell me, or wait for the next guy to come along. What’s it going to be?”

The man deliberated. Finally, he straightened and let his weapon arm loosen up. “A stone’s throw through this tunnel, and a second stone’s throw past the stone walls.”

“What is the relic?” Nottle asked. “What does it look like?”

“If the gods sent you, you should know this.”

“The gods gave me forgetfulness.” Nottle argued. “So I wouldn’t tell anyone about the relic. So no one else would come with me.” He glanced at the lantern’s oil level. “I have to hurry!”

The man motioned Nottle further in. “A stone’s throw through the tunnel. A stone’s throw past the stone walls.”

Nottle took the lantern. The passage here was narrower than in other parts of the mine, in places barely wide enough for a man to walk straight through. He had to squeeze by the man with the sickle, and in doing so he got a good look at him. The man had reddish flesh from the exposure to radiation, skin that clung loosely to his body, even drooped from his face, causing his eyelids to sag, and his mouth to hang open.

As Nottle walked past, his short boots crunched down on the bones, from whatever the man had been eating to stay alive.

(Undertake A Journey. 4 +2 Wits against 4/10. Weak Hit. Progress advances to 9.)

The radiation intensified. Nottle refrained from scratching at his face and hands. They felt as if they had ants crawling all over them, as if his flesh might start to boil at any moment. His mind imagined abrupt death.

“Just like in the old MICROS days.” He chuckled.

The passage narrowed more. It had been a crack in the rock until the miners had widened it out into something a human could walk through, albeit sideways. Nottle walked with his spear ahead of him, and the lantern held up high at the shoulder. The shadows dancing on the walls, he hoped they came from the flame he carried.

“The gods manipulated the miners into doing this.” Nottle theorized. “Maybe they sent illusions into the miners’ heads, making them think this relic had great value, or making them think it was a vein of gold or something. The illusions, plus the radiation affecting the men who were down here, that’s what made them homicidal enough to start killing each other.”

He came to a wall made of monolith stones. He couldn’t see much of it thanks to the narrow space, only a few stones that were two feet high by three feet wide, wedge-shaped, irregular shaped, that fit against each other like in the ancient sites of Peru. The miners had used their picks to break through a single wide stone.

From the hole, Nottle could sense a greater energy ebbing out, stinging at his face, causing his eyes to water. “Whatever is in there, I’m not going to make it out. But I have to go in there.”

Sliding the spear and lantern ahead of him, he started crawling through the small hole.

“No matter what, I have to go in there.” He said. “The gods convinced the miners to mine through the wall. That’s what let all the radiation out. How long has this fucking place been

here? A thousand years? Ten thousand? Before the Tuyya, at least. This place was built before the Tuyya ever arrived.”

He set the lantern on smooth stone floor, inside the wall, before crawling through on his hands and knees. When he got to his feet, he realized he was in a corridor made of monolithic stone blocks, as far as his eyes could see. He felt warm sweat run down his forehead.

“Boiling...” He started. “I’m boiling in my own fucking juices. What’s in here? Plutonium, uranium, something like that. Maybe the miners triggered a trap that gives off nuclear radiation. Maybe there is some kind of nuclear power plant in here, with rods that melted through their safety casing... The gods. The gods are a fucking sham! The daemons did this to the miners, daemons like Baby! What do they want? Whatever it is, it must be pretty important for the daemons of this world to put so much effort into getting it.”

Nottle looked at the lantern, wishing he hadn’t done so a moment later. It was half a minute to midnight, in radioactive terms.

“I’m not going to make it out of here.” He said, but he started off anyway.

Nottle looked into several small chambers. They appeared to be the inner workings of a vast machine. He saw metal levers as tall as he, and stone gears half his height, always lining the back wall of each of these chambers, wondering how they all connected to each other.

In one chamber, he found what he was looking for. The chamber appeared to be a social room, twenty feet wide by twenty deep. The walls were monolithic, with several stone tables and benches, and the desiccated forms of half a dozen very tall people. Their skulls were as long as his forearm, the foreheads sloped back and rounded.

“Fucking Paracas peeps.” Nottle panted. “What are you doing so far from home? What... What’s it like to sleep with your long-headed women?”

Sitting between two of the silent figures was an item, squared shaped, about a foot tall and wide. He knew, Nottle knew this was what he’d been sent to find.

“Handbag of the gods.” He grinned. It pained him to grin, as if his face was on fire. His throat had gone dry. “Fucking handbag of the... Of the...”

He took it, hoisting it high on his shoulder with its leather straps, on the arm holding the lantern. He started back toward the break in the wall, knowing he would never make to the surface in time. He had to try.

“Did you find the relic?” The melting man asked, once he’d seen Nottle staggering through the narrow crack in the earth. “Did you find it?”

“I haven’t looked inside the damned thing, but yeah,” Nottle nodded. “I found it.”

“Give it to me!” The melting man rushed at him, raising his sickle.

Nottle expected an attack. His spear had a longer reach than the man’s weapon. He jabbed it into the man’s neck. The sickle still came down, slashing at Nottle’s right arm, ripping through his clothing, slicing deep into his flesh. Nottle had the strength to jab out a second time, killing the melting man before his own strength faltered and he had to drop the spear.

The rock and earth around him seemed to shudder, even to screech at him, or maybe it was the way the lantern had jumped about during the brief scuffle.

“I’m winning.” Nottle goaded the daemons of that world. “I got your fucking handbag of the gods. What are you going to do about it?”

Holding the lantern and the strange handbag close, Nottle started the climb up the rope. It took all of his strength to make the ascent, with blood pouring from his arm the whole time. At the top, he walked around confused until he found one of his wall markings.

“Thank goodness.” He said.

He tried to run, finding he could no longer keep his balance. When he felt, he vomited in red from whatever was falling apart inside of him. He crawled, with barely enough strength to lift the lantern, making sure he was going the right way.

“Everything is going to be fine.” He said. “Peachy keen, know what I mean? I have to reach the portal. Get some fresh air inside of me.”

Nottle fell, dousing the lantern. He lay there on his side, trying to get up, heaving. He tried crawling, not advancing much, wondering how far he was from the entrance.

When Nottle opened his eyes, he found himself in a shadowy place. It was warm here, wherever he was, warm and wet. The worst thing about it was his nose worked right. This place had the worst stench he’d ever smelled in any of his lifetimes, or at least in the lifetimes still in his memories. He felt like a fish in a full bucket, packed so tight next to the other fish that their scaly bodies were starting to graft together into one silvery, stinking mass.

“I’m in the well.” He realized. “Damn it, Baby! You recreated me in the fucking well!”

It was necessary, Baby said.

Nottle went into a scramble trying to get out. He floated in a pool of the dead, then waded, stepping on bodies and clinging to the damp, rounded walls. The grafting he’d felt, that was him ripping his new flesh away from the corpses around him. He’d been remade from the dead.

“I’ve got no strength in me.” He complained. “Oh, god, I feel so nasty inside.”

Nottle felt along the walls, trying to get a grip so he could start his climb out. His hands touched a nook, a hollow he could use as a handhold. He found other nooks. “Whoever built the well, they were smart enough to add a way to climb out. Probably for upkeep.”

The climb out was arduous. Not only did he have a fresh body to work with, which he had to acclimate to the world, but that body was made of decomposing bio-material. It was worse than being born as an old man.

At the top, Nottle lost the little strength he had. He lay over the well’s thick safety wall, breathing hard. The smell of wet rot had come with him, he thought. No, he *was* the smell.

Eat food right away, Baby directed. *As much as you can. It will take much material for me to renew your cells into standard range.*

“No shit. Speaking of shit, that’s what I look like, don’t I? My arms are gray, man! I look like the fucking walking dead!”

His muscles were so useless he could only flop over the safety wall, landing near the radiated man he’d killed earlier. Wait, was it earlier? How many days had passed while Baby had formed this nasty body for him?

Do not eat the radiated man, Baby cautioned.

“I wasn’t planning on it!”

When Nottle gathered enough power, he started crawling away from the well. Even then, his legs weren't working well. The best he could manage was a half-drag into one of the houses he'd looked into before. He tossed a jar of old jerky onto the cot, before he hauled his body up into a sitting position. The dryness of his mouth, his throat, his entire body, made him leave the cot, long enough to grab a covered pitcher of old, flat ale.

Eat quickly, before you deteriorate further. Eat as much as you can. I will help you replace the dead cells with better quality cells.

"Eat and excrete." Nottle said. "Yeah, I guess I can do that."

You were out of body for several days. Test your memories.

"I remember all of it. The walk through the tunnels, the Tuyya heads, the melting man, the Paracas long-headed people... Oh, shit. The handbag of the gods! It's still down there!"

Did you look inside of the bag? That is not in your recorded memories.

"No, I didn't look inside. I was too busy trying to get the hell out before... Before I died. Let me tell you, my plan did not work. I died, Baby! The bag felt heavy, anyway. It felt like it had a brick in it. And before you ask, I'm certain it was the relic the melting man was talking about. Man, I hate that I have to go back for that thing!"

The daemon of this world are angry not to possess the relic. They are pooling resources to take it away from you. You must eat first, then claim the relic, then leave this village as quickly as possible. I believe they intend to pursue you until they have the relic.

"So let them come. I ain't afraid of the big bad wolf." He considered his clammy gray chest and abdomen. His dead arms and legs. All of him was gray and lifeless, except for places where he'd been grafted to other dead bodies. Those spots were pale, subterranean white. "I look like the freakin' Frankenstein monster!"

Nottle laughed out loud, knocking over the ale pitcher and causing it to gurgle its contents out onto the cot he sat on.

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It wasn't hard to find Howi, later that night. The Tuyya man had holed up in an empty house at the western edge of Bleakfield. His hacking coughs gave away his hiding place. Nottle stopped outside the door to speak. He was sure a man like Howi had barricaded it from the inside.

"Howi." He called out. "Listen to me. You stay inside. I smell like shit right now. I look just as bad, too. You stay in there and listen."

"The gods are angry with you." Howi said. "The gods fight over you."

"Yeah, I end up situations like that. I want to thank you for what you did."

"The gods willed it." Howi replied, before he started hacking again.

"The gods told me what you did."

"They appeared before me." Howi went on, once the coughing subsided. "A red god and a blue god. The red god demanded I retrieve a relic found in the mine. The blue god said I should retrieve your head. It told me it could bring you back to life if it had your head. I did not believe the blue god, but I trusted the red god even less."

"Thank you for retrieving my head." Nottle said. "Thank you for throwing it into the well." He grinned like a ghoul, tempted to enter the house and scare the Holy Jesus out of poor Howi.

“I followed the wall markings you made.”

“You did good, Howi. If you had retrieved the relic for the red god, it would have taken over your mind and driven you mad. That’s what the red god did to the miners. Listening to the blue god was the right choice.”

“My thoughts are clouded now.” Howi admitted. “My sight has grown dim.”

Nottle winced. If only he had access to a Re-In tube, or at least some military grade iodine tablets. “I’m sorry, Howi. You don’t deserve any of this. But the job isn’t done yet. I have to go back into the mine. I have to get the relic.”

“You will only die again. I do not have the strength to retrieve your head.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll make it out this time. You stay where you are until I get back. Once I have the relic, we’ll head to Windhaven together.”

“I do not have traveling strength. Soon, I will be floating with the spirits.”

He’d used the tso’apa word, meaning ghost or butterfly.

“This won’t take more than an hour.” Nottle said, stepping away from the doorway. After he’d taken a few strides, he spoke to Baby. “What are Howi’s chances?”

He will not live long.

“That’s not what I want to hear!” Nottle shouted at the night.

(Undertake A Journey 2 +2 Wits against 4/4. Seeing the Miss, I decided to burn Momentum. That turns it into a Strong Hit with a Match. Progress is up to 10.

Reach Your Destination. 10 against 8/9. Strong Hit. Momentum goes up to 3. Make another move with +1.

Sojourn. 3 +3 Heart +1 Bond with Howi, who is the community +1 Bonus against 2/9. Weak Hit. I’m going to say Howi’s Health went down to 2 from radiation, so he can recover up to 4. That’s a surprise! I thought Howi was done. Sharing a bond with Howi/the community, Nottle can take a slight improvement himself. Spirit goes up to 5.)

When Nottle returned, he was exhausted. He called out to Howi a few times. When his friend did not answer, Nottle assumed Howi was dead. He didn’t have the heart to look in on the man, and staggered into the next house over. The inside of the house was in disarray, likely the result of a brawl. Nottle ignored the mess and nearly fell into the cot. He dropped the relic on the dirt floor beside the cot, hoping it would still be there when he woke up.

“Ace Nottle!” A stubborn voice called out. “Ace Nottle!”

Nottle groaned, turning his head to see who had come in. He was shocked to see Howi standing near the door. “You’re alive! I thought you died last night!”

“I thought you were dead today.” Howi replied.

Nottle raised his arm, seeing how gray it was. “Nah, I’m not dead. This is my winter look. How do you feel, bro?”

“I am much improved. When you were gone, the blue god came to me. It said go into the neighboring houses, take the strongest ale you can find and drink it. The blue god said the poison within me will come out with the drink. I must also eat much from the cactus plant. When we are

once again in Winterhaven, I must ask the healers for a specific potion. My health will return to me as it was before.”

“That’s good.” Nottle yawned, suspecting Baby was doing more for Howi behind the scenes. “Let me sleep a little longer. When I get up, we’ll get provisions ready and head out.”

“I have started preparing already.” Howi said. “I have gathered dried food and water. I will prepare a tea next, from leaves I found in a woman’s pouch. The blue god tells me it is close to the tea we were given by Condi. I have not found healing salve for our blisters.”

“We’ll travel slower.” Nottle decided. “I won’t push us as hard as I did when we came out. Get enough provisions to last us six days.”

“I will do as you say. The blue god tells me the red god is angry at us both. The red god will send its hatred toward us.”

“I just need a few more hours of sleep, and then I’ll be ready.”

“You must not pass away.” Howi said, before he left.

When Nottle was alone, he asked, “Did you figure out what the radiation is?”

Not exactly, Baby answered. It is an exotic combination I am not familiar with. Its primary components are deuterium and helium three. Some of its effects can be countered.

“That sounds like nuke stuff.” Nottle remarked. “What the hell were Paracas long-heads doing messing around with stuff like that?”

I do not know. Further study must take place before I can attempt a theory. Your EVS suit can block most of the radiation. Will you open the relic and show me what is inside?

“My spacesuit is back in Windhaven.” Nottle groaned. “You want me to come back here, after everything Howi and I just went through?”

The handbag lay within arm’s reach of the cot. Nottle picked it up, curious enough to move into a sitting position. He opened the handbag and withdrew two items from it. The first looked like a watch made of stone, attached to a worn leather band. The watch face showed ten long petals colored in alternating gold and brown, but it had no dials or buttons on it.

The second item was a flat, rectangular device, four inches across and six inches high. The device was heavy for its size, colored in faded metallic blue. The entire front of it was a dark screen. It did not have any operating controls on it either.

“Why does this remind me of a hand ‘puter?” Nottle wondered. “Don’t tell me the Paracas people had stuff like this! Have you ever seen anything like it?”

Baby stayed silent.

“Can you turn it on?” He tried again.

Again, silence.

“Tell me something! I died getting this piece of shit!”

I must study the device further, and the place where it was found.

“That’s all you’re going to tell me?”

Knowing more will put you at risk. I do not want this to happen. I will only add this. The ley lines of a planet are its energetic veins.

“That’s a big clue.” Nottle determined. “You’re saying maybe this device can communicate all over this planet, like we do on the Internet? Wait, are you telling me people can travel across the world using this thing? No wonder your red brother wants it so bad!”

The other daemon is not by brother. We are distinct beings.

“You mean you’re contrary beings, like one of you is good and the other one bad. Are you ever going to tell me what you really are?”

Tso’apa, Baby said. The butterflies of the gods. On Old Earth, certain cultures referred to us as Jinn. Other cultures called us-

“Angels and demons.” Nottle finished off. “What happens when a demon can give his supplicants the power to cross a world instantly?”

Nothing good.

“That’s all you’re going to say? In that case, don’t expect me to rush back to Windhaven. Me and Howi, we’re going to be tourists, taking our time, enjoying the sights, throwing spears at targets half a mile away. Six days, Baby. We will get there in six days.” He looked at his gray hands and wrists. “I hope this death pallor is gone by then.”

Baby did not respond, he noticed.

“Shit.”

The days passed. The men traveled, recovering during their languid journey.

They reached Windhaven.

Nottle did not enter the village. He was bundled up from head to toe, except for his eyes. That was passable considering how windy it was that morning.

He called out to the men on patrol. “Get your fat-ass chief out here! Drag him out of bed if you have to. Tell him it’s important!”

Small village like that, rumor spreads quickly. Condi heard the news before Samis did. She ran out to greet him, wearing her worn beige apron and holding up the ends of her pretty blue kirtle. The girl Tian ran after her, as she usually did.

“Don’t come any closer, Condi.” Nottle warned. “Stay back!”

She didn’t listen. Women never listened.

Instead, Condi ran up to him, panting, a great big smile on her face. “The gods said you would arrive today! There is much to speak of!”

Condi looked into his eyes, saw how bloodshot they were, saw the clammy gray flesh that surrounded those eyes. She screamed and lunged backward, falling on ground lightly covered in snow. In a moment, Condi was on her feet, clutching at Tian like a life preserver.

“Go back into the village, Condi.” Nottle said. “The gods don’t tell you everything, just like they do to me. Uh, good luck with the baby.”

He turned, telling Howi to become a buffer between him and the growing crowd. He waited with some regret until the chief arrived.

“I am here.” Samis announced, stepping around Howi.

Nottle kept his back to the man. “Don’t come look at me. You won’t like what you see. Hell, I don’t like what I see...”

Samis must be half-woman, Nottle decided, as the man ignored his warning and walked over to face him. The chief stiffened upon seeing Nottle’s sorry state, but he did not run.

“Suit yourself.” Nottle said. “Everyone in Bleakfield is dead, including their horses. The miners went looking for copper in the wrong place. They unleashed a demon that gave everyone in the village insanity. They killed each other. I know the Windo are stubborn people, so I made

a map. Howi has it. The map shows the one mine your people have to stay away from. The rest of them, that's business as usual. I mean the other mines are safe."

"What happened to you?" Samis asked.

"The demon killed me, but the gods decided I wasn't done yet. They brought me back. Listen to me, chief. The demon will leave miners alone now, because I took the thing it wanted. However, if miners start going into the bad mine, the demon can walk in there with them. It is possible the demon could want other... relics from the bad mine. The demon doesn't know if there are any more more relics, but it can find out if the miners get stupid enough to go in the bad mine. Are you getting all this? Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"That's good. I have to go back there, because the gods are telling me that's what I need to do. I just came to pick up my blue sky suit. I'm asking for supplies for five more days. If your people want to come along, there are a ton of goods they can salvage. There is a lot of material waiting to be picked up, but no animals to pull carts with. Your people will have to bring along a lot of water, because, uh, the water in Bleakfield is tainted now."

"Your sky suit is no longer here." The chief replied.

"What do you mean? I told Cenia to watch it for me."

"Cenia has run away." Samis revealed. "She has taken your suit, and your lightning box and helm, south toward the larger Windo settlements."

We spoke about this, Baby reminded Nottle. The daemons of this world are angry enough to do anything to shake you from your path.

"I need that suit." Nottle muttered. "I won't survive the radiation without it."

We must recover the suit.

Samis started talking.

"What's that, chief?" Nottle asked. "Sorry, I was distracted."

"Tell the Tuyya man he must follow me. He must see his son."

That didn't sound good, Nottle considered. He passed the message on. Samis said he would lead Howi out to where Awan was. Nottle and a few soldiers followed, with Nottle careful in keeping most of his face hidden.

They found Awan lying face down, two hundred yards from the southern end of the village. The young man had used a crutch to travel that distance. The crutch lay at his side.

"He did this two nights ago." Samis said, as Howi went to crouch next to his son's body. "After Condi gave him a sleeping tea he did not drink. When the guards discovered him, I set two of them here. The father will tell us what he wants done with the body. We will do it."

"I must use the sled." Howi said, once the message was translated. "I will take Awan to a place where his spirit will roam free."

Nottle wondered if the daemons of that world had something to do with Awan's suicide.

Nottle, the daemons taunt me, Baby said.

"Tell them to shut up." Nottle moved away from Howi and his son. "Or better yet, tell me how to kill them."

Nottle, they have Kold.

Nottle walked faster, gaining distance from the other men. “What do you mean they have Kold?”

She is here now, on this world. They have brought her here. I have seen her.

A vision filled Nottle’s mind, of his lover in a dark, dank cave, wearing her blue EVS suit. Kold was a tough cookie, but she looked scared.

“Momma didn’t raise no dummy.” Nottle said. “They want to trade Kold for the relics. Where is she?”

To the west, past the mountains. Near the coast.

Nottle turned around. Samis watched him with an anxious look on his face. Howi kneeled by his son’s body, grieving quietly. Already, two soldiers had been dispatched, probably to retrieve the sled.

“Howi is going to slow me down.” Nottle decided. “I hate to do this, but I may have to trade that man to the chief, for enough supplies to get me to the mountains. The real question is, do I go south first to get my hot-damned plasma gun, that you told me to leave behind? Or do I go west with only my bare knuckles, looking like a hot-damned zombie come from the ground?”

Baby waited for his decision.

“This world ain’t seen what a man like me is capable of, but they’re about to. Oh yeah, we got fire and brimstone getting ready to rain down on this bitch.” He grinned at Samis. “You ever see the sky turn red, chief? You ever seen it rain blood?”

The gray man lifted his head toward the heavens and issued a howling laugh that shook the world.

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borro-milo-qikto (la ani ang)

Windo-Touta

Tuyya

Companion – AI ‘Baby’

1. When you Gather Information, add +1 and take +1 Momentum on a hit.

2.?

3.?

Combat Talent – Brawler

If you are unarmed or fighting with a non-deadly weapon...

1. When you Secure An Advantage +Iron by engaging in close-quarters brawling (such as punching, kicking or grappling), add +1. If you score a hit, also inflict 1 Harm.

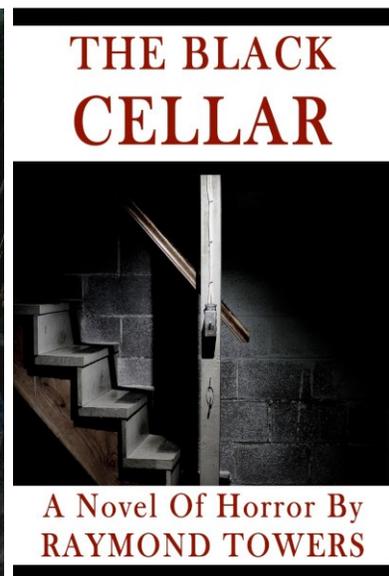
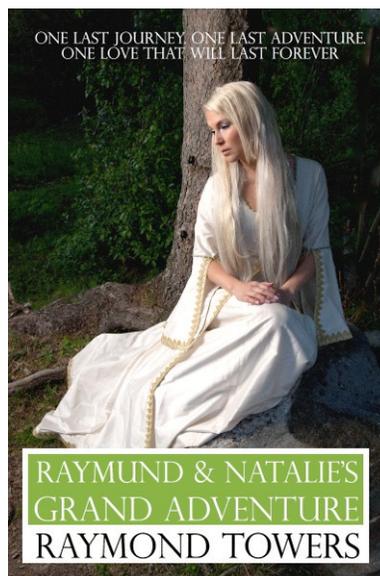
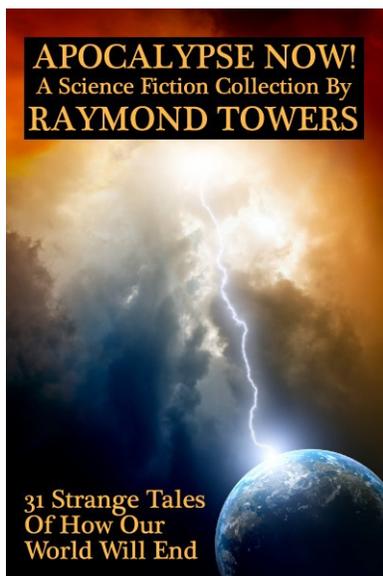
~~2. When you used an unarmed attack or simple weapon to Strike with deadly intent, add +2 and inflict 2 harm on a hit (instead of 1). On a weak hit or miss, suffer -1 Momentum (in addition to any other outcome of the move).~~

~~3. When you Face Danger or Clash against a brawling attack, add +1 and take 1 Momentum on a hit.~~



Smashwords End Of Year Sale is going on now! From December 15th through January 1st, I have marked down 18 of my fiction titles. I've got 3 more titles marked as free or Reader Sets Price, and all of my Verum Et Inventa zines are free. To see the selection, click the link below and head over to my Smashwords author page.

<https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/raymond towers>



Among my discounted titles are:

Apocalypse Now! – A collection of short stories and novellas about the end of everything.

Raymund And Natalie's Grand Adventure – A romantic, sensual and goofy couple says enough is enough, and sets off for a thrilling journey through medieval England and France.

The Black Cellar – Paranormal horror, starting in this world and bleeding into the next.