

Chapter 3 is a typical action adventure episode, with no flashbacks or inner monologues. The prince escapes the cellar, there's a funny scene with a tiny mouse, giant shell sledding, and rabbits chasing him on boats. He leaves the isle with the help of a tall Lily Nun from yonder north, the land of his mother, and the order she used to be a part of.

Chapter 4: the nun drops him at the Wailing Whale Isle where the guava parlor was. He learns his ship hasn't been seen around, and it should have by then. Tired, hungry, desperate and disoriented, he falls asleep listening to whale songs by the docks. He dreams of yonder north and his last visit as a teeneager. He is very critical of that land and people, and his descriptions are hilarious. By the end, he hesitates to recount what happened at the Lilies Temple on that trip. He promises to decide if he would share the unfortunate memory in the next letter.

Chapter 5

The Dance of the Lights

It was my first and only time at the Lilies Temple, since men are usually not allowed. It was a lot bigger and more beautiful than I expected. I had seen the outside, of course, and just like the one in the Marshes, it had six tall towers and a building crowned by a large dome. But being so cold there on the side of that rocky mountain, and covered with snow instead of vines and fern, it was easy to miss the resemblance. At the Academy, we have open gardens and column archways everywhere, instead of being all enclosed.

We were received by a large amount of nuns and priestesses in the courtyard. The white and blue heavy uniforms of the nuns, and the light blue of the novices, also contrast greatly with the cream and emerald green shirts, pants and berets of brother scholars. But I did see the resemblance of the Grand Magister's and the High Priestess' robes, except for the headscarves and wool coats, of course.

Other than the cold air, and how different humidity felt in both temperatures, the main difference between the Academy and the Lilies Temples is clearly the smell. Yours takes all praises in that regard, entering it was like stepping into a bouquet of flowers inside an impeccably clean rocky fountain.

I was with Mother, Cerise, her family and our guards. We got a thorough tour. Mother clearly did not need it, but I was surprised to see how much of it went into the mountain and underground, and how terraces were connected by tunneling hallways, stairways and halls. I vividly remember the indoor gardens, crystal chandeliers and ponds filled with lilies, well behaved coy fish, and trained water striders. I was also particularly fond of the caterpillar nursery, and regret that I never got to witness the release of the Lily butterflies for their migration south. I hope my next visit to yonder north coincides with this or another ordinance ceremony, so that the temple is open to visiting relatives.

My favorite thing, by far, was the sacred hall and its depictions of the tenets of the faith, specifically the ones with images of prophetic bird folk. I had never seen images of birds in such detail and magnitude before. Cerise was almost moved to tears. "Some of these paintings predate human settlers in the north, before the great fire consumed old Silenia," he remarked.

Cranes seemed to have been such skilled and civilized folk. And the images of Owls holding lamps as they chanted at night in long processions around the mountains are simply magical. I ran around the strategically illuminated murals overwhelmed by the sheer amount of colorful depictions extending all the way up to the high ceiling.

"Can I draw them?" I begged Mother. "Please!"

"I would love to take his drawings with us." Cerise backed me up, and I was allowed to spend

most of the afternoon there.

I confess that then I suspected birds were as mythical as the Lords of Heavenly Mesa they supposedly revealed to humans so many generations ago. After all, no human I knew had ever seen a single bird. It was not until I traveled far yonder that I realized they existed in the real world and were folks just like us, and the rest of mammals and reptiles.

Still, these were not messengers of Lords I met on my travels. And they were certainly not the spirits of our dead. But neither were they imaginary characters in human fables. These were folks, made of flesh and bones... and feathers.

I was fascinated by their image, regardless of thinking they were not real. The idea of winged messengers descending from the heavens to talk to humans was enticing, even if it were dreamed up by delusional wanderers in an unforgiving land. And once I met real live birds, the story still seemed quite unreal. You probably know the tenets better than me, but allow me to recount what I remember of their origin story.

According to ancient scriptures, many generations ago, unknown bird folk came down from the heavens, and revealed to humans how the world began. They said that first there was only the sky: deep, dark and eternal, and Light descended until it reached the sea at the edge of it, revealing these two substances were mirrors of each other. Light, which was some sort of bird it seems, flew in and out of the surface, painting the stars in the sky and the fish in the sea with the traces of each substance that trailed and trickled from its tail feathers. And these creations started to gaze upon each other through the infinite mirror that was the world.

Then it came to pass that giant sea turtles, who I guess were some kind of fish then, raised the lands from the waters as an offering to their creator, becoming the first creatures to do so. The biggest of them, Gaelah, brought up the giant Mainland, of course. In gratitude, Light filled these lands with all sorts of plants, flowers, fruits and critters, and allowed turtles to rise onto the surface to enjoy their gift, making them the first of all folk species. Turtles later laid eggs, and from them, came all sorts of companion folk they could talk to, and roam the lands with.

Creatures of the earthly surface fed each other in a circling dance at the edge of the sea and the sky for an eternity.

In time, Light wanted to be part of the dance. It plucked its tail feathers to create... legs?. These were Might and Virtue, the first human folk. The rest of its feathers became millions of birds that went on to rule the heavens as Lords on their Heavenly Mesa and other light cities in the sky, their Court, skyfolk and messengers. Humans, in turn, ruled the lands over the seas, and the folk on it. Only the eyes of Light remained flying through the sky and sea. One is a burning ember that brings about the seasons, and the other a frozen lake that brings the tides and the rain.

I believe this is the gist of it, according to... well, some ancient bird folk of yonder north, who later disappeared to never be seen by humans again. I convey this to you in my own words as a means to communicate the following. Even though we have encountered bird folk in our travels and explorations of yonder lands, the Academy is yet to find any signs of any Lords of any Heavenly Mesa, or their messengers, with or without horns. What we have found instead is that the Mainland is by no means the largest portion of land on the surface of the seas.

Furthermore, we found in many a remote town and kingdom, mammalian, reptilian and feathered, all sorts of fabulated deities, tenets, myths and creation stories of their own, never substantiated by evidence, and usually incongruent with each other, and with the natural world as we have observed thus far. These are only accepted within each particular flock's natural borders,

and held only by their traditions and ignorance of anything beyond these borders. My intention is not to disturb your beliefs. I simply need you to understand that I am bound to a different kind of truth than that of the north. To us at the Academy, these representations of “Light, Might and Virtue” are as absurd as the customary phrases they've inspired. The only truths scholars hold are the Known Knowns and Known Unknowns, and for both we employ doubt, evidence and reason. We encourage exploration and scrutiny, so that unknowns may become known.

As I looked at the murals in the sacred hall, I wondered why Light was depicted as a bird. In what sense is an immaterial phenomena also one of the creatures it is said to have created. Does it have feathers? Does it lay eggs?

“Is Light male or female?” I asked Mother, while still drawing.

“That is unknown and irrelevant,” she said as she urged me to follow her.

“So, why do we suppose it has feathers?” I got up, and we walked down a hallway with our guards.

She seemed to have had enough of my inquiries, and said, “Some things are not in our place to question. The Lords provided us only what was necessary to know the way.”

“The only way to know anything is by questioning?” I rebutted like a true Magister.

Mother stopped for a beat.

“Do you know why the Academy was created, M’Nuel?”

I knew this, of course. When the Mainland kingdom was declared, Father set out to unify all human territories, and she made it her mission to gather the most brilliant human minds.

“That is how it was created, but not why,” she clarified.

I thought about this for a beat, and gave her my best answer. “The Academy’s mission was to learn about the lands and the skies in order to produce better crops, understand the heavens: its weather and seasons, and the soil: its plans and critters. This knowledge is responsible for the fruitfulness of the Great Plains and the Mainland Kingdom as a whole.”

“Is this what the scholars are saying now?” She seemed displeased with my answer. “Did they fight to unite the lands? Do they run the trades along its roads and between the towns? Or are they the ones who keep them safe, made The Great Plains accessible, or even built their own temple?”

It was obvious Mother was not happy with the Academy. She stopped to lit a candle inside a mural, closed her eyes, and prayed in silence.

“The Temple in the Marshes was modelled after this very one,” she finally said. “...where my sisters and I were formed, and our sisters of the past before us, a temple built with the divine guidance and inspiration of birds in honor of Virtue. I commissioned the southern temple for the sake of all boys in the Kingdom. Those of yonder North, who if not strong enough to join the army and produce heirs, were disowned by their families. There is also Silenia, where boys of lower casts and young aristocrats were continually lost to the streets and its wine. And then there was Phyras in the desert, quickly becoming a breeding ground for thieves and corrupt merchants, who would think of nothing but amassing gold and exploiting others for it. Boys were becoming threats all over this Kingdom, and I started the Academy as a haven for them.”

We continued walking past the largest of the indoor ponds, towards the ceremonial hall.

“It is true that the land is more prosperous thanks to the scholars. This is why the King tolerates funding them. But the realm is safer now that boys have a proper place to be formed as

gentlemen, to become gentler. That is the Academy's biggest accomplishment."

"Not for long," I smirked as we reached the huge entrance. "We are working on something that will change the Kingdom forever."

"Whatever it is, will it bring peace and happiness?"

"Something more impressive. It will open up the heavens, and bring about more knowledge than we have ever seen before."

The guards opened the heavy doors of the hall, while mother gave me a dead serious look, and voiced in concern, "Nothing is more important than peace and happiness. Our winged prophets knew this, and so did the Light's first manifestations of Might and Virtue. Their way is the only knowledge we need, the only necessary to achieve peace and happiness. Any other knowledge is just man's greed and desire to displace the Gods."

She sounded just like the priestess that opened the ceremony shortly after.

We were seated at a royal balcony in the hall, and listened to a choir of Sisters after the priestess address and scripture readings. Mother was in front of me and Grand Aunt next to her. At one point Cerise walked onto the balcony, and whispered something in Mother's ear. She looked attentively at the stage, then turned back to me.

"The closing act is about to start," she warned me.

I grinned pleasantly relieved to learn it was almost over.

Cerise left the balcony as the choir of sisters exited the stage, and the audience clapped. What looked like a bouquet of giant flowers with pastel color petals was brought up to the stage by a group of elegant white bison bulls. Suddenly, the choir started singing from another balcony, and the flowers came to life. They were Sisters dressed as actual lilies. They started performing the Dance of the Lights, which I had seen countless times, and was boring enough the first one. Mother was attentively watching the performance with her spy glasses, while Grand Aunt slept next to her. I felt a tug on my robe, and looked back to find cousin Sofi peeking through the curtain behind me. I made sure Mother was not watching, and scurried out of to meet her.

"Sorry I could not see you at the manor." She kept scratching her headscarf. "I was up all night with the other novices sewing those darn petals well up to now." Her black hair was a mess that kept creeping out. I had never seen it out of the neat ponytails she wore outside of the temple. She scratched her dishuffled headscarf in obvious discomfort.

"At least this time you are not complaining about another poise and propriety class."

"Praise the Lords in their infinite Mesa," she snorted.

"Did you manage to finish the book on Legumes and their Plagues?"

"Are you kidding? I read it twice. It was the only thing keeping me awake during Personal Prayer and Covenants. I left it and my review with Asha, the tall skinny mountain goat."

"I brought a history book on Sileni Aristocracy, if you want to read it."

"Oh, bless me be imbued by the Light," she exclaimed, and pointed out it was the worst of all north yonder phrases. "Imbued? What am I? A wet rag?" We both laughed. "You truly are my most honourous saviour, but don't let that go to your head,"

Everybody now knows I never liked to read textbooks, or write reports. I was gifted at charting, calculating and learning languages, but had little patience for history, biology or dogma. Sofi, in many ways, was my kindred soul, but loved reading, and my books were the only way she had to get her hands on Academy's texts, being a girl. She wanted nothing but to study in the Temple in the Marshes, but knew this was impossible, and getting an ordinance at the Lilies to honor her

house was her duty and only choice. We were lucky to have found each other in those ruminant maids' quarters.

The crowd exploded in cheers and applause in the hall behind me. I ran back to my seat before Mother could notice my absence. I didn't even say goodbye to Sofi. Mother was standing up, and Grand Aunt woke up next to her utterly confused. I applauded, and mother turned to me with a huge grin. I was smiling, but because I managed to sneak out without getting caught.

On the stage, one of the dancers in pink pastel petals with maroon dots was standing, and the others bowed around her. She raised her hands, and the crowd exploded in cheer again. She took a big bow, then rose up to bow again looking at our balcony.

When the dancers left the stage, Cerise came back to join us visibly excited.

"How was she? "

"Simply fantastic," said Mother. "Don't you think so, M'Nuel?"

"Perfect, phenomenal." I smiled trying to seem agreeable.

Cerise repeated, "fenomenal!"

Grand Aunt went right back to sleep.

As we walked towards the reception hall by the temple's courtyard, Cerise mentioned that the performers were going to change into their formal attires.

"You know what would be great?" He turned to me. "If the prince would present the star of the show with a gift. And I have the perfect thing!" He clapped, and oneguards came carrying a little chest. "These are called xocolates. They are made of an exotic seed from the jungle yonder West... rare and dangerous to collect, treasured by wild monkey tribes. Try one."

I cautiously asked if they had milk in them, making a face.

"Oh, Heavens, no! Who would even conceive such a displeasing idea!" Cerise gasped. It turned out, the Jack of Royal Affairs and I had something else in common after all. I looked at the colorfully wrapped gifts trying to select one.

"Some have wild berries or nuts inside, others have grasshoppers or mealworms." He clarified. I ate one joyfully. The roasted mealworm cracked and creamed in my mouth accompanied by a taste equally bitter and sweet. I had never eaten anything so exquisite and overpowering of the senses. It took me a while to decide it was indeed delicious. Mother and Cerise looked at each other, and smiled complicitly.

We reached the courtyard and greeted the rest of the visiting relatives. About eight newly ordained Sisters walked out to join them. Later, outside of the temple, about four balloons and a dozen horse and bison carriages awaited them. All balloons were Sileni, adorned with scarlet banners, big ribbons, and painted with images of flowers, butterflies, cats and birds. Horse carriages were Phyrian or from the Royal Meadows, and as plain and practical as they are meant to be. There were also a pair of giant mammoths covered in impeccable fur, holding a huge carriage between them; it was the size of a small hut. I guessed these were hired by some honourous north yonder family. The Phyrian horses were very chatty with the giants, they had never seen such large folk before. And mammoths were standing tall, refined and composed, loving the attention.

Suddenly, the girls that were outside turned in unison, gasped and ran towards each other, excited to see another Sister step out of the temple. She had a huge red dress with white and gold scarves around it, that were both silky and velvety. She wore an impressive head scarf adorned with roses and rubies. The girls sighed and whispered at the sight of her dress.

Cerise rapidly announced “Lady Grace of Silenia, the star of this marvelous ordinance.” Then he looked at me, and said, “This is the moment to present a gift.”

I walked over while a guard next to me carried the little chest.

“Congratulations, Lady Grace.”

She bowed gracefully. The guard opened the chest, and she smiled, saying xocolates were her favorites. Her skin was blindly white, but her lips, nose and cheeks were uncharacteristically round, plumped and naturally rouged. Her eyes were purple, and she had a dark heart shaped spot on her temple. I had never seen anyone with features like hers. They were clearly Sileni, yet paler than my mother’s. I was trying to decipher where in all the lands these features came from, when mother approached us, and said it was not polite to stare. Grace blushed and bowed. I felt embarrassed.

We accompanied her towards a balloon, where her Sileni family was already expecting her. I marveled at the fact that her parents were both of a dark complexion, which was not surprising since they were Sileni, yet I expected them to at least have different skin and hair tones, like mine did.

The Sisters and families were looking at us, mainly at her and her dress, all except for one, Sofi. She was close to the temple wall still wearing her novice habit with her hair undone under the scarf. Her family was not there. They did not have a balloon, carriages, or could hire mammoths to bring them up the mountains. I felt bad for her as I reached the stairs leading up to Grace’s impressive vessel.

“Why don’t you help her up the stairs, M’Nuel,” Mother asked.

This proved to be a difficult task given how impractically large that crazy dress was. I can only imagine how clumsy I must have looked trying to help, but I had no business looking annoyed. When we finally reached the top of the stairs, I looked down at the temple trying to find Sofi to at least wave her goodbye. But she was gone. I couldn’t see her anywhere.

“Did you enjoy the performance?” Grace asked.

“Yes... Oh, yes. It was fantastic,” I said cordially, still scanning the crowd below, trying to find Sofi. I must have gotten closer to her, for it was at this moment that Grace leaned forward, and gave me a slight kiss on the lips. I froze. Everyone gasped. I was taken aback, and felt so embarrassed. She descended into the vessel, and I stood there in shock. I thought I had done something very inappropriate, and did not want to talk about it then or ever after.

For many sun cycles after, that moment haunted me for all the reasons you can imagine. But also, I never enjoyed parading in public, even if I was used to doing so. And I cannot believe this was the first time I kissed a girl. On top of all, the fact that I felt forced to lie to be cordial really bothered me. I was supposed to uphold the truth, I was to become a Magister scholar, devoted to the known knowns and known unknowns. I had no idea if I liked her performance, I did not see it. Not only was I a bad royal, I was a bad scholar, blatantly lying through my teeth.

I was having another nightmare during my exile in which Grace asked me, “did you enjoy the performance?” I woke up scared and iceskulled on the boardwalk in front of the sea yonder south. I was shivering. Wailing Whale Isle was silent and dark already, and everyone on the docks and stairs to the reef were gone. Even whales had abandoned the shore. Above me stood the tall gray eyed Lily Sister almost hiding a smile.

“Did you enjoy the performance?” she asked me again.

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