

TYLER CRAFT

Sample

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The Newt of Taynora

Edis slowed his breath, honing his eyes like surgical scalpels through the viscous mists, the maelstrom within him clearing a path for a heightened sensitivity to any movement within the near colorless stone tower ahead. The rattle of the rains against the amphibian skin that enwreathed his conical armor faded from his perception, omnipresent noise that served only to obscure his ricocheting stare.

Edis' diaphragm could open to its full extent with the shifting of the living hide's chromatophores from their standard, blaring red to a grey that made him as any other colorless parapet atop the rooftop he knelt upon. The semi-cylindrical stone spires loomed in the fog like colossal, silent sentries, guarding unspoken secrets. His mind had wandered every dark corner within them, hoping for whom

he might find, and dreading what might find them first.

The stoic yet beastly visages of their spouting wall fountains cowered away from the grandest of these structures, the Tower of the Drowned, Casoko Božny, whose shadowy silhouette suggested itself through the haze. It had never grown any easier to ignore it. It called to him even when unseen, and still every distance and direction was measured against it. It lingered at the periphery of each thought, its shadow defying the light's guidance to hang over him.

Every ramshackle catwalk and shack of liquifying driftwood tacked onto the ageless faces of these indifferent edifices were now but checked off boxes, items on an ever shortening list of once innumerable unknowns to be made plain. All except for the current object of his fixation, which now sat bubbling and brimming with potential.

From across the gap between the towers, within the smothering darkness of the open window he stared into, a light peered back. A portraitier's cube. The dim, bluish beacon was unmistakable since *that* day, its memory still a wellspring of warmth within him. He sighed, and his eyelids wiped away the welling wetness between them. She was still alive. He repeated this to himself again and again.

Had it been a month already? The Nastela vines

along the lowermost walls, near the entryway, could be seen fruiting once again. Their hands, her and the wizened, bearded man she eagerly followed... he could still see them plucking the blue bulbs from their stems, gathering them into her little wicker basket one by one. He would point at their leaves, their thorns, and she would jot something into her little journaling cube with a flick of her wrist. When his strides would take him just out of her reach, her steps would quicken, and his would slow. He had to have been her father, right? How would Edis know the difference? The woman with them, she had trailed behind, staring into the nearby water and following as though unconsciously.

Was it inability, or unwillingness, that had stifled his bones that day? Certainly, there was nothing he could have done but to have watched the two adults thrown into the back of that rust coated Nositela, and driven into the mists by those spindly, shaded figures. Even with his training, he could not have stopped them. Who, even if they could, would fill his shoes? It should have been some solace... shouldn't it?

The girl, at least, had disappeared into the mist. There was still that. They had searched for her, but at last had driven away without her. Her cries had echoed through the alleyways, bouncing off the raindrops to Edis' ears in the same spot he now knelt.

He could almost swear to hear them still, their ghosts dwelling within the air to haunt him.

A movement near the entryway to the complex drew his eye, and the air within him fled like scattering insects. The whine of twelve rusted calipers heralded the death of all optimistic ideations. Three trucks wrapped around a nearby catwalk, and came to a stop just before the open doorway.

Their design was all too familiar to him, with the massive pan-like reservoirs that were fixed atop them, and twin water channels that funneled down toward the wheels, working in conjunction with some other invisible propellant to oscillate the six paddle-driven tires that ran along the vehicles sides in groups of three. The rear halves of the leading two trucks were designed such that a single driver could fit several captives within its cubical, iron storage compartment. The front halves were of similarly ominous construction, with great metal scoops, presumably meant for clearing debris in their paths. The cockpits were unnaturally cramped, as though the standards of human comfort and ease of use had never occurred to their architect. They comprised many levers and handles, with loosely adjoined steering wheels that bore no sign of lubrication. Ornate representations of cryptic banners, and an embossing of a divine yet unplaceably unsettling faceless head adorned their broad sides, a clear

indicator of the party's abysmal affiliations. These were undoubtedly the Nositela, trafficking trucks to the layman, of the Kosche, the sleepless catchers of the much maligned Harbingers of Svantev.

If it had only been these two trucks, he'd have been prone to fleeing. Many times in his aqueous spelunking had he encountered these hunters of men, often lamenting as they loaded their human quarry into their Nositela, and disappeared into the mists with them. At times, he had narrowly avoided becoming their prey himself. The survivors of Osmonia had speculated endlessly about their destination, but one thing was doubtless, and it concerned the third, and most horribly grandiose of their caravan.

The presence of this third truck nearly caused Edis' stomach to seek new dwelling among the denizens of his skull. Its size was near double that of its kith, though its rear was without any form of containment structure. Rather, it consisted of a single, stony throne, emblazoned with mineral pastiches of banners with infinitely complex, and equally incomprehensible glyphs. This, to those unfortunate to be familiar with the cult's machinations, was a representation of the splendid word of Svantev, the Faceless God.

Perched at the centrum of this throne was a man, too enshrouded in mist to identify, though Edis

needed no such clarity. Edis swallowed hard at the sight. This was the parade car of Arch-Harbinger Yazzyk, and its rare presence heralded fates worse than death.

Though the rains buffeted any sounds at, or below, speaking volume, Edis swallowed down the slightest utterance. Not even the mightiest of those plucked from the shadows had ever feigned a capacity to best Yazzyk in combat, and if legend were to be given credence, even escape would be an impossibility in the event of detection.

The inhuman silhouettes of the Kosche slithered from their cockpits, grouping with their admittedly smaller master at the mouth of the complex. Above, Edis could see much commotion, and the light of the portraitier's cube soon vanished, leaving only an all devouring blackness where the window had once been.

Each second drug on like eons, and added to the growing weight of Edis' heart. His breath quickened as the complex grew deadly silent, his eyes and jaws clenching tightly. Though none that Edis had spoken with had ever been profaned by the sight of the Svantevine cult's unspeakable rituals, some, whose lustre had long left their eyes, and who professed to have lost faith in the sanctity of humanity, claimed to have seen the results.

Soon, a light came to the window once more, only

this one was much dimmer, as though emanating from another room up the corridor. It was also of a wholly different color, that being a harsh and austere white. This color was customary for the handheld spotlights of the Kosche, matching the headlights of their Nositela.

Though still did the perpetual Taynora torrents drown out most sound, it was not enough to choke out what pierced through the mists, into Edis' very chest. It was the sound of a thousand dying screams, uncanny in their simultaneous waxing and waning. When Edis' latent survival instincts compelled him to flinch in response, he could have sworn he felt the wiry frame of his blood vessels protest the motion, causing him to move more stiffly than he otherwise might have. The subsequent beat of his heart felt slightly slowed, as though by some strange spell. This was followed by a chorus of sickly, gurgling chants, with a volume that seemed disproportionate when the distance was taken into consideration.

"Shit." Edis hissed through clenched teeth, his legs bobbing autonomously.

His hands hovered in proximity of his face, balling and reopening themselves intermittently. They feigned several strikes at the skull of their own proprietor, but alas, they dropped limply to his sides. Silence befell the mossy Seventh Sector once again, and only the rattling of falling water remained.

A trio of gaunt shapes emerged from the lower entryway once again, filing into their vehicles and disappearing into the all consuming vapors.

Edis' neck hung. He knelt there, motionless, until something sifted between the raindrops, into Edis' near drooping ears. This shuttering of the air, a shrill septet of screeches from what was undoubtedly a young girl, had diffused into silence again as quickly as it had begun. In its wake came a raucous clamoring, the cacophonous shattering of glass and splintering of wood. This tumult was interspersed with another, far less palatable soundscape that wouldn't be out of place in one's most hellish and life altering fever dreams. After this came the sobbing, more human than their precursors, soft and broken as a nearly forgotten song.

These, rather than stirring a maelstrom of disquiet within Edis, churned his latent muscles into motion, and he moved toward the nearest rickety footbridge. His heart pounded within his chest, sending a jolt through his body. He rose from his stasis, the telescoping rings of his wooden armor folding out to form their full conical form. He kicked their metallic locking mechanism into place, and made for the nearest footbridge.

Someone yet lived within the dark recesses of the complex, and an investigation was necessary.