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English 218

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06/05/2019

Short Story: A Tale's Inception

The crescent moon shined across the Southern Peninsula. The tides sparkled in the night, and the dozens of lights along the coastline joined it. Pale white kramon lazily swam through the water, and wellings quacked peacefully in their sandy nests. Ships of all shapes and sizes lined up against the coast and docks jutting out from it. To the north, pale green light glowed at the horizon, its source unseen. All through the air, glittering white dust hovered in the air, replacing the stars for light.

Among the dozens of wooden buildings standing on the coastline, many had lanterns hanging from hooks at their door, while others lit the windows of the homes. Few walked the gravel roads at this time of night, with only the occasional man lumbering from one house to another for a night's rest.

One building, however, was full of activity: The Bloated Visawk, with a sign that depicted a miserable black-feathered bird inflated to a ball. Raucous laughing filled the air around the half-open door, and cups clattered as drinks were passed around.

A man wearing little more than a shirt and pants stumbled out, half-waving to his comrades as he stumbled and tripped over the step. He recovered before he fell, then laughed as he tottered to a moored ship at the dock.

A shrouded figure brushed past him, then drew his brown cloak closer. He continued into the tavern, narrowly avoiding stepping on shattered glass with his bare paws. The light of the metal chandeliers above revealed the light-grey snout peeking out of the hood of his cloak. His pointed ears twitched at the sudden laughter erupting from the scattered tables, all filled with men of all classes.

Some slumped over the table with a stein in hand, and others engaged in arm wrestling, with a pile of coins going to the winner.

The figure approached the bar of the tavern, where a man with a bushy brown beard stood polishing a mug with a gray rag. He eyed the figure suspiciously, studying him from the cyan eyes under the hood to the tail hanging limply from his rear.

The man shrugged and proceeded to fill the mug from a tap with a brown, frothy drink. "Pretty far from any lykai territories. You a loner?"

The lykai sat on a stool, resting his head on his hand. He tossed a coin onto the counter, which the bearded man quickly tucked into his filthy apron.

The man set the mug in front of him with a clank and stepped away. "Ah, the quiet sort. Sorry if I was bothering you. Just don't see many of you in these parts."

The lykai sat upright and sipped at the ale, revealing a leather gauntlet around his wrist, and an intricate black flame with a spiral in its center etched on the back of the hand. A grungy man with peppered black stubble took notice and scooted next to the lykai. "Hey, you're one a' those lykai-people, aren't ya?" The lykai didn't respond.

The grungy man continued, wrapping around the lykai's shoulder. "Aw, don't be shy. Can't you do all that magicky stuff?" Again, the lykai didn't respond, choosing instead to tighten his grip on the handle of his mug.

Another man wearing a plaid red shirt hunched over and said, "You heard the rumor about a bunch of ghosts roaming 'round here? Heard they were searching for some lost treasure or somethin' like that."

A heavy-set man commented from another table, "You mean Eidoloc? Nah, they be searchin' for an heir of some castle. Line o' succession and all that."

Another man at the same table waved a dismissive hand. "Yer both wrong! They're all searchin' for a guy who fled their ranks! They had some army nor'east of here, under some Arthus guy." The grey lykai lifted his head, cracking the wood of the handle with his hand.

"You all speak true, men of Dool!" a loud voice exclaimed. All fell silent as they sought to find the source of the exclamation until the chains of a chandelier jangled. The crowd looked up, and a bird in the shape of a man sat precariously on the edge. He was covered in white feathers and wore a baggy forest-green outfit. His hands and feet were black claws, and his beak was black also, slightly curved. His blue eyes faced forward, lined with emerald feathers under them, and his tail also had a stripe of green across their width.

He fanned out the great wings on his back, then held out his hand, swinging the chandelier. "There are a great many tales unknown to this vast land of Brium, from the Northern Cliffs to the Kaena Woods, from the Western Cove to here in the Southern Peninsula." He swooped down and landed in the center of the crowd. "What you speak of is a grander story than you can imagine." The lykai turned, keeping his head low.

The bearded barkeeper crossed his arms. "What're you doing around here? I thought aerans didn't drink ale."

The aeran stepped toward the counter, drawing his wings against his back. "Taverns such as the Bloated Visawk are wonderful places to both gather and spread stories." He wrapped his feathered arms around two men sitting at the counter. "Tales of brotherhood." He swooned. "Love." He pulled away and held up a bag of coins. "Deception." One of the men shouted, then the Aeran tossed back the bag. "And hatred."

The aeran spun in place and when he stopped, a violin appeared in his hands, colored a perfect, shining onyx. "Tales long and tragic." He frowned and played an extended low note on the violin, allowing it to reverberate through the room. Then, he smiled and played a chirpy melody. "But it may end well with the right choices." He lowered the violin and held out the bow, pointing it all around. "And sacrifices." The bow stopped on the hooded lykai, who sat straighter, resting his hands on his lap.

The grungy man sitting next to the lykai leaned forward, asking, "Sounds interestin'...but how do you know all that?"

The aeran tapped the man's head with the bow of his violin, then tapped his own. "Aerans have a natural sense of premonition. Mine happens to be stronger than any other, for I can see the tale play out before it has even begun."

"You mean to tell us that the story you want to tell hasn't even been made yet?" the barkeeper asked. He huffed and turned around, polishing a glass. "Maybe you *have* been at the ale."

The aeran smirked and narrowed his eyes. "You're not interested in knowing the central character of this tale?" The barkeep turned momentarily but returned to the glass.

The white-feathered aeran returned his violin to his side, looping it around a rope. He looked around, watching the crowd gradually return to low whisperings. The aeran shrugged, turning about. "Very well. I see that all of you hold little interest in this story." He spun slower, coming to a stop. "But I will at least tell you his name." The tavern fell quiet.

The aeran stared at the hooded lykai, who continued to gaze at him. The aeran pointed at the lykai with his black claw. "Matheus...Avron." The lykai suddenly stood, then pushed through the tavern and stormed out the door.

The aeran's smile falters momentarily, but he bows and holds out a hand. "I will return." He flew over the heads of the crowd, much to their shouts of astonishment as he slipped through the open door.

Matheus walked briskly across the gravel and toward the hills that cropped behind the town. His breathing grew harder as he turned, seeing no sign of the aeran. He faced forward again, and the aeran stood in front of him, holding his hands behind his back.

"*Gah!*" Matheus shouted, stumbling back. He kept a hand at his side as he spread out his legs and snarled. "What do you know about me, and how did you know I'd be here?"

The aeran waved his hands and laughed. "I know everything about you, Matheus, both the good and the bad." He set his claw on Matheus' shoulder, ignoring the warning look. His face grew serious, and his blue eyes met Matheus'. "You have suffered much. But you can't ignore your duties any longer."

Matheus leered at him, gradually turning his head away. "Who *are* you? You're unlike any aeran I've met."

The aeran smiled, and as the clouds parted, the weak moonlight made the green feathers on his face and tail shimmer. "I am Xhoen, Seer of the Hole in the Sky." He looked up and scowled. "The peace has ended."

Matheus looked up as well and saw foul violet clouds passing over the moon, descending toward the town. As they drew closer, they formed more cohesive shapes, all of eldritch monsters. One was an enormous maw, another a pair of clawed hands, and another a screaming banshee—and they all surged toward Matheus.

"*Eidoloc*," Matheus growled. His eyes snapped back to where Xhoen stood, but he was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Matheus bared his teeth and parted his cloak, revealing leather clothing marked with numerous black paintings, some figures, others random shapes. At his sides were a pair of sheathed blades, each with a simple silver hilt. His paws hovered over them as the clouds drew close, and he focused on the pale, glowing eyes as they materialized on the ghosts.

The maw dove down and swooped toward Matheus' head, jaws wide. Matheus holds out a hand and shoots a pulse of bright blue light straight into it. The Eidoloc screeched and exploded in a puff of mist, leaving faint white sparks hanging in the air.

The banshee and hands hesitated for a moment, then spiraled toward him, taking a pincer movement. Matheus drew a blade and swung it in the air. The single edge slashed across the sparks in the air, then ignited into a bloom of azure flames. He slashed the hands in a single stroke, then cleaved the banshee in two lengthwise. They both screeched and exploded, just as the maw did.

The hood fell away from Matheus' head, revealing scrawling amethyst lines of fur among the gray. They wrapped around his pointed ears and the sides of his face and were joined by the lines coming down from his chin down into the leather clothing.

Matheus breathed in slowly, then exhaled. The flames on the blade faded, and he returned it to its sheath. He drew the cloak back over his head, then reached inside a pocket at his side. He pulled out a folded square of paper and laid it across the ground, revealing a map drawn with numerous red lines in the southern section of the land.

He traced his finger over them, careful not to cut the map with a claw. He mumbled to himself, noting the position of the moon and his current surroundings. He tapped a glade in the center of a forest, then folded the map back up.

Matheus faced the rolling hills ahead of him, and beyond that, a field filled with enormous crystal structures, all glowing in the night. He held up a hand and formed a ball of blue fire, then held it out in front of him as he continued forward, leaving behind the town of Dool.

He maintained a slow pace and occasionally looked down at his feet. Rarely, he said to himself, "Great Solus...let my nephew be safe..."

High above him, in one of the few trees among the hills, a certain Aeran played his violin, playing a mysterious, lilting song. Quietly, he closed his eyes and added his voice to the melody:

"Great Solus, our Salvation,

"May ye bring peace,

"To the souls of Brium,

"To those lost to hatred,

"And those lost in way.

"Gentle Fendus, our Protection,

"May ye bring guidance,

"To those enthralled in war,

"A war of mind or body,

"In the conservation of this land.

"Foul Runus, our Prosperity,

"May ye remain lost,

"Lost to your creations

"For your many lies,

"For your efforts to upend your brothers."

I finished my song, allowing the last few notes to echo into the night. I lowered my violin, then watched as Matheus trekked through the hills, ignoring the beauty of the melody and the glamour of the sparkling Runik dust that hung above and around him, despite the strength it gave him.

I look up, and the dark night sky warps and shimmers, then parts into a gaping with a pale-yellow light. I leap inside, and it closes beneath me, narrowly missing my tail.

I frown and shake a claw at the blank black space that made the floor. "Now, now, what did I tell you about clipping my feathers?" A low hum echoes all around me, feeling somehow mischievous.

I sigh and chuckle, then continued toward a desk just beyond, which had a stack of blank papers, a quill and inkpot, and a lantern sitting above it, containing a yellow orb of light. I picked up the quill and sat at the desk, then whistled. The space in front of me brightened, showing a close-up of Matheus as he trekked across the plains, unaware of my presence.

I begin writing on the paper, recording the events of what had just occurred. "Hole, you know how I hate making transitions from third- to first-person, right?" The space hummed in agreement.

I look up and tap my chin with my free hand. "I wonder how the reader will take it. Introductions are difficult, you know, especially in a world such as Brium." I shrug and continue recording. "I'm sure they'll manage. I'm not the protagonist of this story, after all."

Matheus is, of course, but I digress. You want to see how this continues, yes? To see Matheus' nephew, to see what the Eidoloc were after, to see what haunts Matheus' past? Well, keep on reading. I am the Seer of the Hole in the Sky, recorder of the tales of Brium and journeyer of worlds. I never let a good story go to waste.