**Cathuga’s Thief**

The Lake Cities, also known as the Three Kings, lie on the same continent as Mistran, but far to the east. Even then, there is much land before the eastern coast, pockmarked with craters from the crash of the Mothership. The three cities united due to their proximity, and named themselves after their monarchs and the large lakes around them. Each possesses their own name as well. Cathuga, the southwest city, saw great prosperity as Mistran grew. Through a trail of settlements with ever-widening roads, they operated as the door to trade with the far west.

With great wealth came great pride. The monarchy of Cathuga took to parades displaying the recent lavish purchases. Guards would carry cases displaying jewelry, ornate weapons, and ancient scraps of technology--Useless but prized for their uniquity. A historian society has grown in the city in response to the influx of artifacts.

A young member of this guild sits in his home--A small hovel on the third floor of a ramshackle building. Such constructs were made to accommodate the increasing population of the city, but almost no oversight was present during construction. They are treated more as walls making up the alleys and roads of the old inner city. Most rooms lie bare, but the man still keeps his. He has no choice at this point, the society pays well for their elder members, but new ones are given a pittance.

The afternoon passes as it usually does, a meager attempt at cleaning followed by looking out the window to ignore the squatters arguing below his flat. A parade is going by. The historian idly gazes at the passing troops, lauding their leader’s prizes. One jewel caught the historian’s eye. A small red stone, polished smooth. No bigger than a walnut. It was inlaid on a golden necklace, and the way the afternoon sun shone on it, it looked like it was flaming. The man was enamored, oddly so.

When night comes, the historian heads to the treasure hall for his work. Sorting papers, always the same. The workload is large, but the man is happy to stay. When finished, the building is all but empty. Carefully, he sneaks to the room housing the day’s most recent imports. There, under its glass box, is the jewel. He knows, if he is caught, he is as good as dead; but that doesn’t stop his hand from picking up a blunt object and bashing the glass apart. He reaches in, cutting himself in his haste, and his blood drips upon the stone. As he holds it, he feels a strange warmth flow across his body.

The sound of the glass attracts one of the night guards, usually posted outside the building. The thief loses control of his body, the jewel glows a stark red. The next thing he sees is blood on his hands and his shirt. The guard is dead before him. He sprints. He runs until the ringing of the alarm bells have all but faded. The dim lanterns hide his gruesome look, the wet streets flowing away his blood. He returns to his apartment, sneaking past the few awake squatters near the stairway.

Back in his room, he decompresses, coming to terms with the murder. He changes his clothes, stuffing his bloody ones into the wood-burning stove. The jewel sits on a desk against the wall. The lantern light seems to play on it oddly, the thief notices. He sits down to examine the stone more--A welcome distraction from the sickening knowledge of his deeds. He stares at it for a while. Deep within, it seems to swirl. What could be moving in there? He takes a magnifying glass to stare deeper. His face slowly nears the jewel.

Suddenly, the jewel flashes. The thief tries to reel back, but finds himself stuck in his position. He doesn’t see the jewel anymore. He sees visions of rolling plains, small thickets of forest, a wasteland of metal scrap. Then pain, sounds of battle. Then rain. Endless rain. He feels every single drop, one after another, millions upon millions!

With a scream, the thief jumps away from the jewel. It clatters back to the desk--It was floating during the transmission! In a panic, the thief scrambles up a ladder to the roof of the building. The cool night air hits his face with a satisfying billow. He retreats to the roof often, when the stresses of life are too much. He feels the visions fading slowly, but his mind still scrambles to organize the deluge of information. He sits against the low wall of the roof’s edge and stares up at the moon, the scattered few stars visible in the city night lights.

A paper airplane glides past his head and scoots across the ground in front of him. Taking it and unfolding it, he finds a simple greeting. Turning around, he sees the woman across the street, also inhabiting her building’s roof. As usual, he takes a pencil and writes a message back, refolding the paper and tossing it. With luck, it lands near the woman. As it comes back, he sees her name for the first time. Licia. He comments on her name, and shares his own, sending it back.

Her next message is an observation of the time of night, and a farewell. The thief sits alone for a while longer. The night passes slowly. The man is nodding off when a pebble clatters beside him. He jolts and looks around, then peers off the edge of the building. A person stands stories below on the streets. A tall woman in a black dress--The same pitch black that her long, curling hair is. She waves, smiling slightly. Without a word, she enters the building.

The thief scrambles back to his room, grabbing the jewel and stuffing it in his pillow. The woman knocks on his door, and he pauses for a moment. The knock comes again, and he acquiesces. The woman enters with thanks, and introduces herself as Tsel. The man introduces himself as Carn. With little small talk, she explains she has a history with the jewel the thief stole. Carn keeps calm. He asks if she works with the monarchy. Tsel shakes her head, no. She says she is only interested in the wearer of the stone. Carn is suspicious of this, but entertains the idea.

Tsel explains that the stone was stolen from a nearby settlement, and brought to Cathuga. She is bound to follow it by vow, but cannot wear it. Carn asks what the stone’s power is, why it shows him visions. Tsel vaguely answers, stating its age and many wearers have infused it with Aura. The answer is good enough though. Carn relaxes a bit. If she worked with the monarchy and wanted the stone back, she could have just taken it by now.

Carn gets up and puts the stone around his neck. Tsel flashes a smile. She asks what he plans to do now. He can’t go back to the historical society yet, they’re probably questioning everyone with access. In fact, he may be a primary suspect, having been one of the few present at the time of the crime. The sun is rising, pink light shifting shadows over the city. Carn wonders if he’ll just need to flee the city, take refuge elsewhere. Tsel frowns at this, and pokes fun at his masculinity.

Somewhat angered, Carn asks what she proposes he do. She thinks for a moment, then gets up and leaves without another word. Carn, confused and worried, chases after her. As he comes out into the hall, she’s gone. The day passes in mild discomfort. Carn doesn’t leave his room. No one comes knocking until the sun sets. Opening the door, he sees Tsel once again. She holds a sheaf of papers. The two sit down and Tsel spreads the documents out.

She explains that these are all of Carn’s documents from the government. Carn is taken aback--Standing up, threatened. Tsel holds up a hand, and asks if he wishes to flee or stay. Carn takes a moment to think. Stay, he states. With a gesture of her hand, the documents in front of Tsel flash alight with flame. They burn away over a few seconds, and leave nothing but ashes. Tsel proclaims Carn a new man, and asks what he wishes to do with his freedom--His new life.

Carn spends a while thinking and talking with Tsel. He explains his grievances with the state of the city. His distaste with the monarchy starts as a statement, but grows into a rant. He had never thought about it before, but a rebellion is what comes around this time in a city. The cycle of a great monarchy degrading into injustice and strife, followed by a rebellion that instates another powerful governance. Why shouldn’t he spark the flame in Cathuga? The city needs it. Tsel meets Carn’s ambition with equal fervor. She has seen monarchy in many lands, and they always seem on the cusp of revolution.

Over the next few days, Tsel is able to acquire more documents from the government. Carn asks how she has access to them, but she only says that the security around such places is subpar. Together, they’re able to not just remove and burn important documents, but subtly edit them. Tsel ensures they are replaced, and the fruits of their labor begin to show. Nobles are arrested for various types of fraud--Not uncommon. Large pro-monarchy voices begin to fade and disappear. Carn’s room grows much more organized, then immediately disorganized again. Documents are stacked all around, pens and ink scattered about.

Eventually, Carn has created a new identity with Tsel’s help. At least on paper, he leads a small, two-person newspaper. Funds appear on their accounts, and they are used to buy some fitting equipment. Soon, they are treading out daily papers. They begin to sneak in revolutionary and anti-monarchistic rhetoric. They perform decently well, but they need to pull back every so often to keep the eye of the monarch off of them. Still, they have stalwart readers. Carn talks with the daily visitors, and begins to learn about them.

Carn is doing well, but always must wear the stone on a necklace, beneath his shirt. He feels anxious without it. Regardless, he gets out more. He meets with Licia more, and the two begin to date. A few months pass. Carn and Licia get along well, having a shared interest in history. One night, the two sit in a park after dinner and a walk. Licia takes out a pen and her notebook, beginning to sketch the yellow lights of the complexes falling onto the streets and alleys. Carn sits with his elbows on his knees, waiting patiently as usual.

He feels the weight of the stone more than usual. It’s pressed up against his sternum, and almost feels warm. Carn focuses deeply on it, and feels vibrations. A voice, screaming but at such a low volume it is barely perceptible. He hears sentences repeated, over and over. “We can kill you anytime.”, and “I will eat you alive.” Carn is ripped from his trance, and realizes he was mouthing the sentences himself as well. Licia asks if he’s alright, he seemed to have lost focus. Carn assures her he’s fine.

After a few months, Carn and Tsel’s paper has a decent following. Carn has forged bonds with quite a few regulars, and they chat quietly about the monarchy. Carn invites them all to a warehouse on the other side of town, tonight. Many agree to come. With the moon hanging over the city, Carn sits in front of the gathered followers. He proclaims them a rebellion, and organizes codewords to communicate with them. They plot the fall of the monarchy carefully, noting which nobles will need to be dealt with before the king, and how the transfer of power after the king’s death will be handled.

A man yells to interrupt Carn during an exit speech. He shouts an oath to the king, and runs--Clearly meaning to squeal on the rebellion. He makes it out of the warehouse and rounds a corner, but finds Tsel waiting for him. Carn approaches from behind, menacingly. The man is suddenly impaled by a black spike that rises from the ground. He is held aloft for a moment before the spike retracts, letting the man crumple to the ground.

Carn doesn’t sleep much over the next few days. Coffee keeps him awake well enough, but the stone seems to throw off sleep. He spends his nights meticulously crafting coded articles for the next day’s paper. Tsel assists greatly, working as an intermediary to talk with especially close personnel. The codes are working. Small signs are returned to confirm the rebellion’s understanding, all across the city. Carn is growing anxious though. The date has been chosen, but the almanac predicts a clear day. For some reason, he insists upon it being a rainy day. Tsel can hear him muttering about the rain after an argument about the date changing.

The day comes, and thankfully, it rains. The king is set to give a speech, revealing a new economic plan in light of some struggling sectors of industry. The royal family has been pruned over the past few months, and confidence in the king’s health has been slashed by subtle implications of Carn and Tsel’s paper. The king comes out upon a balcony to trumpets at midday. He is shielded from the rain, but the masses below have no such luxury. They look up, bracing against the gale.

In a flash, a hooded figure stabs the king from behind. They are killed by guards immediately, but the damage is done. The king crumples and chaos breaks out. Carn and Tsel rush to the balcony as the king is dragged away. The remaining guards are killed, and Carn takes the stage. He calls out to the rebellion and the city, and declares the monarchy dead. He belts out a speech to the soaked masses--he himself soaked without cover--And proclaims a transition to democracy. A council of the citizens will form, and they will control. No more divine right, no more royal dues.

Some monarchists speak out, but are silenced with violence by the majority anti-monarchist crowd. The rest of the day is a blur. Papers written and signed by the council--Made up almost entirely of the rebellion members. Loyalist guards and nobles flee the city, but are said to still be on the outskirts plotting. An exhausted Carn returns home deep into the night, and Tsel is waiting for him. Carn rambles to her. He says heaven sent her to him. The two consummate, Tsel accepting Carn’s advances. The night flies by as well, a typhoon of sensation.

Months pass, and Carn is elevated to a position of power within the council. He gains fortune and fame for his dour exterior’s juxtaposition with his quick wit and sharp tongue. He and Licia spend much time together, but Carn never reveals his relationship with Tsel. His work is spent closely with Tsel though. Their relationship is only shown behind closed doors.

Carn discusses marriage with Licia after she reveals she has become pregnant. Carn promises to protect the child, and dedicate his life to their family. The wedding is extravagant, and hosts hundreds of people. The entire day is spent at different ceremonies, and Licia seems happy. Carn attends to every detail, and is clearly at his wit’s end. Licia worries for him, but he laughs off her attempts to get him to rest and relax.

In the afternoon, before the actual ceremony, two drunken guests break out into a fistfight. Carn arrives at the scene and helps break up the fight, and recognizes them as two early helpers in the rebellion. They slur out curses at one another, apparently fighting over who would get Tsel now that Carn is taken. Carn scorns the men, ranting at them and beating them. He calls off the wedding in a rage, and walks out. Licia trails after him, deeply worried.

The wedding is rescheduled for a few months out, this time almost no one is invited. Carn and Licia, Tsel, a handful of Licia’s close friends, and a small assortment of servants and close allies from the government. This settles Carn’s mind, but he still breaks into rages over minor things in the weeks after the punchup. Both Tsel and Licia are pushed away by his near-constant furious moods. He eventually begins to calm, but with the calm comes a fever and anxiety. He begins to suspect poisoning, and rapidly switches doctors, claiming each to be quacks as they fail to aid him.

Tsel returns closer to Carn, assisting him with daily tasks in his illness. Carn sometimes falls into aphasia, unsure if Tsel or Licia is tending to him. In his reveries he swims with guilt over his infidelity. Eventually, he begins to improve. Behind closed doors, with only Tsel to see, the stone has fused to Carn’s chest. Carn doesn’t seem to mind, and Tsel can barely hold back her joy. She explains that he will gain great strength from the stone, that it rarely blesses people so. Carn takes it in stride, and his health improves quickly.

Just a week before the wedding, one of the men that fought at the first wedding shows up at Carn’s door. He begs Carn for assistance, money, anything. He’s homeless, starving. The man breaks down, asking if Carn is controlling his life, ruining him for his transgression. As Carn stares at him, something snaps. Paranoia takes over, and he believes the man to be a threat. Someone who’d look in the windows at night, knock and run, haunt his dreams.

Carn lunges at the man and begins beating him in the street. He blindly rambles, his stresses pouring out of his mouth, as he smashes the man’s face into the curb over and over. Police are called and Tsel comes out to pull Carn off his victim. Carn is sobbing, but still furious. He asks Tsel for forgiveness while trying to rip out of her grasp to get back at the man. The man is taken away by medics and the police arrive as Carn is pulled out of his rage.

After talks, Tsel assures Carn that the event will be erased. Carn calms down slowly, returning to reality. His hatred still burns, but he’s able to push it down for now. He cleans himself up and returns to the wedding preparations. Days fly by, and the wedding is upon him. Only in a small garden, it is quaint compared to the extravagant first one. Licia’s family makes up the bulk of guests. Carn still runs about, tending to different matters, a ball of well-handled stress. He talks friendly to everyone. New technology, a camera, is used to snap some pictures of the bride and groom.

At midday, at the altar, the priest recites before Carn and Licia. Tsel stands near the back of the audience. She watches until she feels a thrum in the air. Carn flinches slightly, but only Tsel notices. From her black dress, a wisp of Aura reaches out. It trails under the chairs, up the stage, and wafts to Carn’s chest. A red flash emits from the gem, and Carn doubles over.

Carn is suddenly in a different world. Green plains dyed red, warping up to the sky. Wren stands before him, looming tall. Wren tackles Carn and tears away at him, belittling the man and laughing at the horrors he committed. Outside, Carn shakes and writhes on his knees. Licia leans down and puts her hands on his shoulders, but catches a glimpse of his eyes. They’re black, bleeding. Horns are sprouting from his head, and his fingers are bursting into black, chitinous spikes.

Licia screams and back away. The other guests are panicking, and begin to run as the ground shakes. Tsel alone stands firm, staring in awe. Carn’s psyche is a bloody pulp. Wren’s world inside the gem begins to break down. He stares as the ground-sky breaks apart, a glimpse of the real world finally hitting his eyes directly.

Carn is lifted up by the outpouring of Wren’s Aura, built up over years and compatible enough with his own that it wrests control of Carn’s body from him. Wren crafts a body for himself with Carn’s flesh and Aura, a red glow overtaking the area. Tsel approaches the newly formed Wren as he roars. He turns and sees his lover, and she bows to him. Wren lifts her to her feet, and emits a low, thrumming growl; turning towards the center of the city.

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The next morning, Cathuga is in flames. Wren and Tsel make their way eastward, retracing the steps Wren took in the stone. They plan to return to the Demon Tablet and activate it, allowing Demons to once again live. Tsel suddenly doubles over, vomiting. Wren stops to look at her. She looks confused, vomiting again. But then, her eyes widen in realization. She must be pregnant.