

Being the Final Testimony of Lukas, an Adventurer and Vagrant

Arbiter Nevill: Does the convicted have any final words?

Lukas: It weren't me! I told you and I told you again, it weren't me! I'd have never killed that family! They had me trapped in a dream! I di'n't know what I was doing!

Arbiter Nevill: Your plea was recorded by the court. Your evidence was found wanting. Surely you have a better use for these last breaths than to repeat your testimony?

Lukas: But you must hear! You drink from that stream! All your people! All your animals! You drink from the steam of the skull! Your water comes from that cursed grotto, where the spirits play tricks with a man's sight and his hearing and make him see friends as enemies and trap him in dreams and puzzles! What must it do to you to drink from it your whole life long? You people gots to move! This city is cursed! Must be! Your laughs! The sound of your laughter! Your neighbors, they know your curse from the sound of your laugh! It's as plain as day to everyone who aint'nt from here! You're cursed! You drink from that foul spring, where the spirits torment each other until they get them some living to sport with instead! Only hate lives there!

Arbiter Nevill: The convicted will not win his freedom by threatening us.

Lukas: I ain't threatening you! I'z telling you to up and move, by all that is holy! Gather up your things and your families and your cows and go anywhere! Anywhere but here! You drink from the skull!

Arbiter Nevill: Very well, let the record show that the convicted, having been given his last words, did spend them so, and was executed, as established in a fair court before gods and men.

Lukas: You curse yourself! You curse your children! Leave this...

Arbiter Nevill: Executioner, proceed.

Elder Vale: Stop. I would hear more.

Arbiter Nevill: The convicted has been tried, and tries our patience. His time is done.

Elder Vale: I was unable to attend that trial, owing to the distance to my estate. Indulge me. I would hear his tale.

Arbiter Nevill: Surely not.

Elder Vale: Surely so.

Lukas: Bless you and keep you, ma'am.

Elder Vale: Do not waste our time. Speak.

Lukas:

It's the skull! The skull, ma'am, and the river that it spits forth! We went 'cause we'd heard of the treasure, the wealth of a fallen god-king from the before times! But we found naught there! Oh, there's the skull a'right, and we followed the river into its very mouth, but there it was, nothing. There was nothing there. Just the cave, and the spring, and quiet.

An' we cursed our luck that the legends were lies but bedded down there. It having been three hard days hiking to arrive, and much misfortune having found us each day in the frozen woods. We was tired, and we'd been on half-rations since the accident on the ice. So we bedded down in its very mouth.

And then came the full moon through the teeth and woke us, though it ought to have been a half moon that night. In the moonlight we could see below the spring, a kingly hall, on the underside of the water, you see? There, where in daylight there was naught but rock and stream, we saw the hall of a king, with tiles of lapis lazuli and yellow marble columns shot through with copper veins. And strangest of all we could smell it, from the other side of the spring, it was all of cinnamon and cloves over rotten meat. It stank of that, and the faint dust smells of tattered cloth and unloved books.

And I knew, I knew then that place's curse was the master of us all, and I said we should turn back and try our hand elsewhere. And the rest, they all agreed! All 'cept for Amos. He just stepped into the pool, and we saw him stride into that hall and open a chest there and take out such treasures as the ancients had kept to their graves. Two golden cups, a copper trumpet, and silks new as this morning. And the others stepped after him and started to plunder that place. So I followed too, though I knew better. I knew. But I stepped in all the same.

Four days and nights we looted that place, never finding an exit but always finding more treasures. More than we could carry, so we picked and chose and japed.

And the spirits came to greet us and told us we were welcome. They feasted with us on foods that were fresh despite the centuries, and that was when things turned. Once their wine had passed our lips, they had our dreams, and they sported with us and set us to puzzles and traps and made us wear the masks of their generals. They made us their commanders, you see? They told us that we'd earn our plunder by bringing home wealth anew to them, from distant lands.

We commanded their dead armies, but it were against each other. We found that out too late. Soon we'd murdered each other, 'cept for Lyn and Abri, who somehow made it away. They found a way out, but I never did. Soon I was the last one standing and the victory was mine and the armies, they marched at my command and we fell on the next village in conquest! I would bring new glory to the empire! New treasures!

And that's how you found me, among the bodies of that poor family, woken from the dream, blood on my hands. I knew then what I'd done. It wasn't me though! It was the dream, the dream of the kingdom in that skull! Those spirits! They trapped me, you understand? It was never me! It was their old dream! I'm innocent!

Arbiter Nevill: You see? By his own lips he is condemned. He confesses freely.

Elder Vale: I do. You may proceed.

Arbiter Nevill: At last. I am glad you see he speaks only madness. We can close this chapter. Executioner, pro-!

Elder Vale: It may be madness but yet true. I will commission an expedition to find the source of our river and investigate what this man says.

Arbiter Nevill: You will not!

Elder Vale: I will, and I have the right. You will not stop me.

Arbiter Nevill: And I thought he spoke madness! Perhaps you wish to spare him? Keep him as a guide for your expedition?

Elder Vale: No, I have no use for him. You may proceed.

Here the Arbiter did stare long seconds at the Elder while the assembled witnesses stood waiting.

Arbiter Nevill: Madness! Lukas, I commend your soul to any god who will take it.
Executioner, end this!

This concludes the record of the execution of Lukas, vagrant, adventurer, and murderer.

Signed on the twelfth day of Altrice, in the year 214 After Empire, by the Secretary of the Council,

Jona Blackquill