**Into the Darkness**

At the beginning of all time, before the creation of the earth, before the sun and moon, before animals and before people, there was only the eternal Nerromiktok, blessed be the name. They existed of the earth and through it. They existed in all space and time, forward to the end and backward to the beginning. They were all things, and all possibilities. Throughout themselves, Nerromiktok thought and wondered, pondered and meditated on all things. And the universe lay like this for an eternity; Nerromiktok in thought, and the world at rest, in a state of unmake.

However, after this eternity, Nerromiktok finally ceased his infinite thought, and looking at himself, decide to split himself into light and dark. Through the creation of the two, there would be a dynamism, a movement, and an ebb and flow to the world. Dark and Light now looked at one another and were satisfied. And so they danced.

They danced, swirling among themselves, reveling in their difference, endlessly curious about the otherness of their opposite. They weaved and flowed through the universe. All things were now Two. And varied between the two; back and forth, another eternity lasted in this state.

However, after this eternity, Light finally ceased its infinite dance, and looking at itself, decided to split itself, not into two, but into a million pieces. And so it did, and from Light the world came into being: the trees, the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and all animals and finally men as well.

Dark looked at these new things and was confused. There was no one to dance with any longer.

Dark shifted. Dark ebbed, and flowed. Dark searched and spun, looking all throughout the new universe. And the early men, and the early animals, and the sun and the moon all shrunk from the other. They did not remember the dance. They did not remember the Duality hat had been forever, just as Dark had forgotten itself Nerromiktok.

And they were fearful of Dark. They were fearful of the lack of light. To them, looking inwards, the universe was them. The universe was light, and so, they were fearful of that which was not themselves. They were fearful of the other.

One day, darkness came to the animals and the humans. In their terror, they reached inside themselves, drawing from them the light that they themselves were, and from this self-light they pulled taliq, the soul-flame.

In it was the heart of the original light, undampened by any lesser dark, hidden by no object. It shone through the word and the world was brightened by it. And Dark remembered Light. Dark saw the taliq and rejoiced. There before it was the partner with which it once danced. Yet Dark did not leave, for Dark was as of the universe as Light. And in making taliq, the animals and man had diminished themselves.

An uneasy existence for the remains of Light: man clung to life, forever perpetuating the taliq to hold back Dark, yet knowing that it was a precarious balance. The application of self was instrumental, and necessary, not simply for a season, or even for a lifetime, but for all seasons. And thus man lived, and laughed, and hunted and built and died, yet through it all must keep the taliq. To stop was to allow the darkness within, and all they had made would be caught in the dance.

It was in this time that Issumatar was born.

Issumatar lived far to the north. His tribe lay past the most inaccessible passes, further than the last great river, past the frozen marshes in a place where the land was cold and the sap needle trees lay burdened with snow. The tribe was so far north that right before their village lay the great folds of taliq, and beyond that, the darkness (for they did not know of Dark, merely darkness)

And Issumatar was born. His name meant Superior for he cried with a mighty roar at his birth. And through his life he was of his name, performing great feats of strength, daring and courage. So, when it came to his coming of age, the elders took him to the clearing in the twisted scatter-trees, where it was too cold for snow to fall, and the world was frozen and lifeless. They pointed to the north, and from the clearing, Issumatar could see the great taliq. And in this moment of wonder, they proclaimed him Ataneq, Champion.

The year was a blur for the new Ataneq. The training was fierce and unrelenting. The elder warriors, the great men of the tribe pushed him to his limits, past even feats that they themselves were able to accomplish. He must, after all, battle singlehandledly with the darkness that lay beyond the taliq. The elder women challenged him in feats of the mind, assaulting him with puzzles of horrible complexity whose answers twisted and squirmed before the mind. He must, after all, see through with clarity, the deceptions of the darkness that was his foe.

And the men and women and children all labored hard in that year to create the gifts that he would take with him into the darkness past the taliq. From all ways of life, these gifts were made: crafts of strongest iron and hides of the toughest beast skin, sigil talisman of lesser taliq, clothing of the warmest furs, a spear taken from the very core wood of his name-tree.

And the labors of the year, the hunt and harvest, his training and the flow of life all passed before the march of time. And before too long, the full year had passed. It was the time of the Ataneq.

Issumatar knelt as the members of the village came before him, depositing their fine gifts beside him. He shone brightly at each one in turn, and gave a few words to each of the craftsmen. However, there was one craft in particular, and its owner that he was interested in above all others.

Panik at long last came before him. She wore simple clothes, but such simplicity belied a subtle grace. She approached Issumatar holding something in her hands. She made no noise, her slippers silent against the snow before his appointed place. He hair was black as the darkest night, and shone with the torchlight. Her face and hands were smooth and kind.

Panik approached Issumatar and held forth her gift. “Ataneq, I give this freely.” She entoned, speaking the customary words. She did not look up at him, not yet.

He leaned forward and received her gift, but in doing so, he clasped her hands in his.

He her make a small noise, and she looked up at him.

“It is an amulet.” She said with a smile, gesturing down at the item in their hands.

He looked down. In their hands was a beautifully carved wooden bead necklace. Each of the beads had on it a different word of power, to remind the wearer the strength of taliq. At the end of the necklace was a white gem. Multifaceted, it absorbed the yellow torchlight and radiated back out in pure reflection.

Issumatar gasped. It was astonishing. It shone with a brilliance quite out of factor with anything he had been given so far, and it radiated with a light that could have only been made from the deepest true taliq.

“I don't know how to repay such a thing.” He stammered, deviating from the ceremony.

The elders behind him frowned.

But Panik straightened herself, gently freeing her hands from his. “It is freely given, Ataneq. May it light your path in the darkness.” She bowed before him, and then slipped away before he had a chance to respond. His heart beat heavy in his chest, and he did not remember the rest of the ceremony, so taken was he with the gift.

But the day was short, for it was still in the late winter days, and snow yet lay on the ground. It was already the day of Ataneq.

The whole tribe turned out; the ceremony was one of the most important of the entire year. He stood before them, bedecked with all the gifts they had given him the day earlier. The elders said their piece. He said a few words. A handful of people of the village gave him encouragement, or expressed their gratitude. Yet through it all, his eyes were locked with Panik. He longed to run to her, to cast off his gifts, save for the brilliant necklace, and wrap her in his arms.

But such a thing would be unthinkable. He was Ataneq. He was chosen. And all too soon, it was time for him to step through the pulsating folds of taliq.

The village walked with him, the elders beside him. When they came to the same clearing, the tribe stopped. He looked at Panik one last time then continued with the elders towards taliq.

He looked at the elders around him and then at taliq, and then at the gifts in his hands, the weapons, the jewelery, the armor, the boots, and of course the necklace. Slowly, he began to regret his decision.

But it was far too late. The small ceremony before the taliq was far too quick for him to completely change his mind, and when the last of the wild dancing before the fire they had constructed was over, the elders performed the last ritual from which taliq flowed, and the arms of the barrier opened for him.

Darkness loomed in front of him.

He hesitated, he looked to the elders, brilliant gem in his hands. They nodded to him and gestured towards the opening. And he stepped through.

He stood at the ready, his spear in front of him. He looked around his surroundings, expecting at any moment to be attacked from any side.

However, the area around him was simply, seemingly, a continuation of the area from the other side of the taliq. There were no monsters. There were no beasts. There were no madmen nor seething pools of black ice.

But Issumatar would not be tricked. He had, after all, trained for this moment his entire life.

He scanned his surroundings. He was in a large clearing of trees, which seemed to not want to grow too close to the taliq. The spacing between the trees was larg though, and he could see no indications of animals or movement. All was still. Snow coated the ground, growing steadily thicker off into the distance, where there seemed to be a drop off into tundra or perhaps ice sheet.

He stole a quick glance behind him. The taliq wavered, invincible, yet diaphanous and shfiting, behind him. All he could see through it were smeared shapes, which could have been people, but also could have been trees. It was impossible to tell.

Some instinct made him reach out one hand towards the taliq, the other wrapped around the white gem. He could not touch it, such was its power. The opening was one directional. That was known. To be otherwise would allow the darkness to fill their world.

Nervousness slipped away from him slowly, and the tense moment of entering what was supposedly the world of darkness transformed into an uneasy curiosity.

He walked under the sap needle trees and gazed at their branches. There were no signs of life of any form besides the trees. There were no tracks, no calls, no nests and no movement besides his own footsteps.

As he walked, spear out, into the forest, he realized that the world of darkness wasn't particularly dark at all. He had expected perpetual night. He had expected strange shifting shadows, which stalked his every move and lunged at him. Yet there was nothing of the sort.

It was strange. It was unexpected.

Five days later, he had summited the highest of the hills closest to him. Perhaps there was some trickery at foot in this place, for he did not remember the journey particularly well. He simply walked when he walked, and slept when he slept. He did not seem to need to eat in this place, or at least felt no hunger.

The land was muted. Even the sun was muted. There seemed to be an unnatural fog which surrounded this place which got thicker the deeper he ascended onto the hills. Thus, what should have been a perfect vantage point at the top of the summit was instead only a fogy expanse of nothingness.

Everything was gray. It started to snow. He pulled his gift-cloak around him, and thanked the tribeperson who had fashioned it. It was soft and warm yet kept out the wind. It looked to be made of fur and seal skin.

From the hill he could see, just barely in front of him, a line in the distance. He could not quite place it, but he figured it was ice pack. He had not been gifted a kayak, but he was perfectly capable fo making one given enough time, and time seemed to be something he was certainly not lacking.

Too much time.

He had never been a scholar, or a writer ro a thinker, but lacking all other forms of stimuli, his mind drifted as his legs carried him over the dull featureless frozen ground.

The nature of this place was certainly different than what he had expected. It seemed that the whole village was wrong in its thinking regarding the land beyond the taliq. Besides the fact that one could not return, this land seemed surprisingly normal. To be sure, the fact that he had stopped sleeping and eating was strange, and pointed to bewitchment, but certainly not of the devious or harmful kind; quite the opposite.

It placed his whole situation in somewhat of a confusing state. He had been ready to fight monsters and darkness and almost certainly to perish in the effort. There was of course, no one who had ever returned from beyond taliq.

So, what should he be doing exactly?

He struggled to deal with this sudden lack of purpose. He had trained to be a warrior above all things, but it seemed that there were no enemies here to vanquish, nor feats of strength to overcome. Certainly, if there were no food, and he needed to scrounge for morsels among the sap knots, that would be one thing, but this unexpected… dullness was not something he had foreseen. He felt like a ship adrift, aimless and wandering.

He stopped and became aware of his position. It had been ten days since he had summitted the hill. The night and day seemed to be less dramatic given the fog, but he somehow knew this fact as certain, even though he hadn't needed to sleep.

He shook his head and trudged forward.

The snow got deeper. The air got colder. He could feel its gusts now through his coat even. He silently thanked the adversity though, if only to have something to fight against.

He pushed his way past two more days.

He clutched the gem in his hands always. He imagined that it radiated a great warmth, for, even in this gray featureless land, it still seemed to radiated light from some far off source.

He longed to see the sun again, or to hear the sound of another human, or even an animal.

He walked for another day.

He had started to sing songs to himself. He had never been a good singer, but now he relished the childhood melodies which now came to his mind. He ran through them, or at least as many and as much of them as he could remember.

He sung the men's parts; he sung the women's parts. He sung the melody and the accompaniment. He sung and he walked. And he became aware that he was tiring.

Another week past.

The mysterious line in the distance was ever elusive. He had estimated that it would take barely three days, yet the days were growing one after another, and the lack of *anything* was grating on his spirit.

The wind stopped the next day.

He kept on walking, growing more and more concerned: more and more… bored.

The snow stopped the day after.

He shouted to the heavens, and cursed out loud. He screamed in anger at the complete emptiness of the land.

The trees stopped the day after that.

He seethed and simmered, an unexplainable anger rising in him.

Why was he here? Why did they send him at all? Where was the darkness? Where was the challenge? This was the most important ceremony in the entire village! The tribe worked tirelessly to have gifts to give to the Ataneq. So what was the point of all this?

Finally, gripping the gem in his hands, his palms scored with its edges from his grip, he emerged out onto that plain and stared at the land towards which he had been journeying for so many days.

It stretched off into the infinite distance. There was no more fog. There was simply ice. The land was a featureless sheet of ice; a perfect flat, featureless sheet of ice. His breath caught in his lungs. An existential terror gripped him.

The line was before him.

It was a chasm within the ice. At one point he would have approached it carefully and anchored himself before attempting to take a look, but after the many days of travel, he merely flung himself to the edge and peered over.

Part of him had hoped it was endless as well, that it extended farther than the eye could see into churning evil blackness which boiled with waving tentacles of death.

Of course it did not. It was perhaps one or two hundred feet; deep, but by no means infinite. It was somewhat dark, but not black. He could see straight to the bottom.

At the bottom were the shattered bodies of the past Ataneq. All around them lay scattered broken gifts, half covered with forgetful snow. The bone pile stared back up at him, immobile.

Fury shot red hot within him. They had tricked him! It was all for nothing after all! They had tricked all of them! He yelled at the sky, he cursed the elders who had deceived him. He raged for endless hours. He screamed and shouted. He rent the ground with his spear. He spoke horrible words which scarred his lungs, and in a moment of anger he grabbed the gem on his neck, snapping it off its tether, and flung it into the hole, before he realized what he was doing.

Only in the moment after did he stop and understand what he had done.

Panik's kind face wavered before him in his mind, then disappeared.

He caught himself, and a small choking sound emerged from his lips.

He fell to the ground and stared down into the abyss. The gem glittered at him innocently.

Tears fell from his eyes and froze on his face. Why had he done such a thing? The gift had had valued the most! His only connection with Panik!

Then he was filled with regret. He regretted his training, which had been a pointless lie. He regretted all the times he had defended the tribes customs to others, when he had defended the traditions. It had all been betrayed.

Most of all, he regretted not telling Panik his true feelings. He regretted not simply staying with her, customs be damned. He regretted not making a life for the two of them. He regretted entering the taliq. From which he could never return.

Regret ran through him for days, and solidified into sadness, then depression. He walked along the edge of the chasm, wailing aloud. His voice was hoarse and noiseless after days or perhaps weeks of sorrow, but he could not find it within himself to stop. It had all been a lie.

He collapsed on the cold ground, lungs heaving. He stayed in this state for an unknown period of time.

And in this sadness, and crushing despair, a thought came to him. He was staring at the gem amid the chasm, as he often did, and it came to him.

Perhaps it had not been a lie. Perhaps it had been a mistruth.

Was it truly darkness on the other side of the taliq? Perhaps, but assuredly not in the way that they had been told.

Was there something fearful and unknowable on the other side of the taliq? Perhaps.

Did it mean them harm? Would the world lie in ruin if it were to escape? Perhaps.

He looked at the gifts covering his body. Each one was a masterpiece, the collective effort of the whole village over the entire year. He wore them now, and they were gone. However, next year, there would be another Ataneq, and they would labor just as hard, and just as long to create the perfect gift for the next.

He looked around at the bleak and featureless landscape. Perhaps he *was* fighting the darkness. Perhaps he was fighting it, along with all the gifts; the whole village was lending him their strength. They were all fighting the darkness.

He stared down at the gem shining at the bottom of the chasm and knew what he had to do. He thought of Panik, and took a step.

And as he fell, he did not truly fall, for such things were no longer of consequence. Instead, he stepped forward and walked into Dark.