

AN UNEXPECTED INVASION

THE 2ND TALE

When Master Logan Arancino returned home after a nine- or eleven-hour day at the wheat fields, his mother and father had left him a copper plate of warm chicken, boiled carrots and peas and roasted potatoes, and a copper mug of freshwater. The dining room lit with candles, and the kitchen was clean. It was close to ten o'clock at night. The air was a bit chilly.

'Cold, but relieving return home,' he thought, taking his seat at the table.

Logan, the king's godson of the Keaton Kingdom, was a practically normal eleven-year-old boy who worked with many other groups of children employed to harvest and regrow crops. Though paid only four and five copper coins a day, many of the crop farmers presented them with two loaves of bread or a small basket of vegetables, but some cared less than the average man. The Arancino family were one of the largest in the kingdom, most of them living in the region of Canton Peters for its vast crop fields, dense forests, narrow streams, gravel tracks and the San Pilgrim village. Logan was the youngest member, but one of the most likeable for his commitment to family service and his respect, and loving others as much as he loved himself. The next sunrise of an autumn Saturday morning, Logan, shirtless and barefoot in the mud, sat down on the porch's front edge with a mug of green tea. His parents were still asleep. Unlike the Arancino family, all others were poor, and the parents could not afford clothing for their children, except for the cheapest trunks they could find. For all of winter, all children, living in such poverty, spent their time indoors, sitting beside small fireplaces for warmth as the parents did their work in woolly winter clothing. Logan wanted equality between all other children and himself, and he blended in by looking practically the same as everyone else under the age of thirteen years. On Saturday and Sunday mornings and evenings, they either went to vast muddy fields or large pools of brown water fed by cobblestone stormwater pipelines and enjoyed throwing mud at each other or swimming deep in the cold, dirty water. They dreamt of playing such activities in large groups, sometimes up to twenty or thirty members. It was what they did to relieve themselves from the ever-lasting stress and bone-crushing toughness of poverty that mostly affected the sons and daughters. Beyond the front of the porch, crop fields of healthy corn, carrots and wheat stretched towards the base of the mountain range covered in forests and waterfalls. Above the mountains was an orange and blue sky. The bright, dark golden sun shone from the east (or Logan's right) and lit up the village of San Pilgrim settled in the west (or Logan's left). The air was cold and smelled like fresh, wet mud and hay.

After finishing the last mouth-full of tea, Logan placed the mug on the porch and pushed himself off the edge, now standing in a vast, cold sea of combined water and soil. He goes to the village centre roughly one-hundred yards away from his hut made of wood, patterned glass, and roof tiles. The sun shone at the back of his neck, drying the moist from his early morning bath, then burning the skin. Some of the houses had light from candles, but most of them did not. Most of the villagers were still asleep, but some of them stood on their porches, eating their breakfast, or gulping their morning drinks. They took a few breaths of the fresh, morning air. A very thin mist covered the village's muddy but grassy centre yard. For a short moment, a chilly, but a light gust blew in between the short, oak trees, softly moving the

leaves, then slowly travels through the village. It was the beginning of autumn. When many of the Arancino family lived in comfort, Logan preferred to spend most of his time with the poor children like they meant the world to him. His parents may have found his behaviour as odd or subnormal, but they completely understood him and why he spent most of his time with the other children. They never much bothered him coming home soaked in brown water or covered in wet soil if he had enjoyed the fun with his friends between weekdays.

After walking through the soft mud to get to the village centre, Logan noticed two of his closest friends, Mitchell, and Mason (brothers) who were sitting on a garden bench after bathing their faces, chests and hands at a nearby river. Both had smooth, dark brown hair like Logan. Mitchell was the same age as Logan, and Mason was two years younger. Both brothers were shirtless and wore identical trunks. They were talking to each other. The village centre was a square-shaped, grassy garden with a young apple tree, the garden bench (under the tree branches) and a gravel path that horizontally arched from one end to the other. Logan came to a stop before the edge of the grass, guarded by a cobblestone outline. Still, Mitchell and Mason did not notice Logan. He felt unnoticed like a lone soul, wandering wherever it dares to go. A flock of crows flew over their heads. The sun was still rising above the misty horizon.

‘Lovely morning?’ Logan called, interrupting their conversation.

They were not offended by this sudden interruption.

‘Great morning, Logan,’ Mason replied.

‘We’re waiting for more friends to join our group for today’s activities, and I’m glad that you might be here to be a part of it,’ Mitchell said.

‘So am I,’ Mason added.

‘I was hoping you had something planned for this morning,’ Logan said, feeling excited about today’s expected fun and enjoyment. ‘Now, I’m looking forward to today’s relief from the tough weekdays.’

‘Oh, great!’ Mitchell replied.

He picked up his walking stick (used for long journeys) and stood up.

‘We have more company,’ Mitchell said, and Logan looked back.

Two more youths, aged eleven and twelve, walked along the main street towards the village centre. Named Samuel and James, they wave their hands. Logan and the brothers wave back.

‘We are in no rush,’ Mason said, getting up and grabbing his walking stick.

‘Where do you have in mind on this chilly morning, Mitchell?’ Logan asked. ‘I hope it is someplace we have not been in perhaps one or two years, or someplace we’ve never visited.’

‘We shall go beyond the borders of San Pilgrim and visit some historical territory, as I’ve found a few unique places on my grandfather’s old map,’ Mitchell replied.

‘A new adventure?’ Logan thought. ‘I was not expecting that anytime this morning.’

Mitchell and Mason, carrying their walking sticks, joined Logan as Samuel and James enter the village centre. Now, there were all united as a group of youths that they had named, “The Mud Gang”. Though all the children enjoyed getting themselves covered in wet soil because there was no other playful activity to do on weekends, “The Mud Gang” were the most active players with mud and in brown water. It was how Logan made a lot of friends in his short lifetime by doing what all others of the Arancino family would not have tolerated. Still, he was more cheerful, full of honour and loyalty than most of the family members. That was what earned him the right (from his parents) to be with the poor youths. Together, they left the village centre and headed towards the world beyond their eyes.

‘We should be back before noon,’ Mitchell said as the group walked along a muddy track in between two large houses.

Both sides were plain wood, no windows.

From there, the terrain was hilly and covered in trees and bushes. A wooden fence (no higher than a yard) at the summit of the first hill outlined the border of San Pilgrim. The small forest was mainly oak and birch, some of the trees as old as two centuries. The grass was turning a light brown, and the leaves were beginning to fall off the grey-skinned branches. At this time of the season, the wave-shaped forest floor partially covered in leaves had a few streams of freezing freshwater flowing along the troughs for miles. They were the villagers’ supply to clean water and always have been since establishment in A.B. 322. The first, grassy hill ascended for five or six metres, and the track turned into sharp gravel and damp dust. For two days, Mitchell had planned to go and visit an abandoned mine where close to two-hundred workers, as young as ten years, dug for iron and gold in the early fourth century (A.B. 324 to A.B. 339). Though it boosted the village’s economy, powerful rainstorms flooded the mine, wiping out dozens of miners, many of whom were married or even fathers. The map Mitchell took with him dated back to A.B. 328, and he knew where the mine was. He was one of the very few people who remembered such early history. For many years after this tragic disaster, San Pilgrim continued to thrive for its crop fields and wondrous terrain that caught the attention of explorers to this very moment when the youths began their journey along the gravel-peppered and dust-surfaced track to the mine. Unlike all other children, the brothers, who had walked this painfully sharp track many times in three or four different seasons, were used to muscle aches from heel to toe. Within the first one-hundred yards of the two-mile path, Logan began getting muscle pain and spent his walking on the soft grass, along with Samuel and James, until there was no more grass outside the path. The first twenty or thirty metres were uphill to the summit that stretched for nearly a quarter of a mile. The next two hundred metres of the path were downhill.

‘Need a rest to ease your aching feet, you three?’ Mason called with a bit of laughter, as he and his brother stopped on the track. ‘Better get used to it soon because we have nearly two miles to walk along this track.’

‘What are we to expect when we get there?’ James asked. ‘Is it worth anything of a great rarity because I’m not up to walking on this track if it isn’t.’

‘Trust me,’ Mitchell replied. ‘The track will get smoother when we get to the trough and walk downstream. I have walked this track more times than you have harvested enough wheat for a loaf of bread, my friend. You’ll be proud, I promise you.’

A short moment later, they continued down the gravel track, towards the river. Logan listened to a flock of white magpies call to the bright sun rising. The sky turned a lighter blue.

‘I’ve packed some ointment for when we get to the end of this rough track to ease the pain,’ Mitchell said to the three youths journeying behind.

‘Oh, very relieving,’ Samuel thought, silently complaining about the pain in his feet. ‘I should’ve taken my worn sandals.’

Mitchell and Mason, sometimes, thought of activities that surprised the other children such as crafting small fireworks, exploring flooded caves, or jumping off waterfalls. The orange horizon fades away. After an agonising five or eight minutes, the youths finally made it to the smooth grounds of the river edges. They were all in pain, but the brothers were not bothered by it at all. As Mitchell shoved his hand into his pocket, Logan sat on the grassy edge, cleaning the dirt off and cooling his aching muscles from heel to toe. The water was calm but chilly. Samuel and James soon joined him.

Mitchell opened the small tin container of brown ointment as Logan washes his face and hands before stepping out of the river.

‘Do you need a fingertip of my ointment, Logan?’ Mitchell asked.

‘Yes, please?’ Logan replied and dipped the tip of his finger into the soft ointment.

Samuel and James helped themselves to the light brown paste and sat on a large rock. Mitchell shoved the tin container back into his pocket, listening to a few willie wagtails chirp from an old-looking tree branch and hearing the water flow through rocks resting on the riverbed.

‘Mitchell, I cannot wait any longer!’ Mason called from the distance as he impatiently stood outside the stream. ‘I want to get to the mine before lunchtime!’

Mason’s excitement overpowered his patience like going to a festival at the Keaton castle, one of the most popular events of any year. Mitchell sighed as he felt rushed like he had been on most weekdays since he started work on the farmlands with his friends.

‘Come on, you three, let’s go,’ Mitchell said, and the three other youths got up.

‘Why rushed when it is just after sunrise?’ Samuel asked. ‘It’s not like we need to walk five or six miles to get to this mine that Mason had just called out for a one- or two- hour visit and then walk back.’

‘He’s excited,’ Mitchell replied. ‘He’d longed to see the cave paintings that stretched for half a mile.’

‘Were you meant to keep that information to yourself?’ Logan asked.

‘I never minded about saying such names of what we’re visiting,’ Mitchell said. ‘I do mind keeping its secrets to myself as my grandfather told me before he died. Now, come on!’

All got together again and progressed towards the abandoned mine. The river edge was much smoother than the gravel-peppered track, which brought relief to Logan and his friends. The ointment worked well in getting rid of the pain. For the next few minutes, all was silent.

The crests of both hills turned into cliffs, no higher than ten metres. Here, the air became colder, and their footsteps softly echoed like maple leaves falling onto boulders.

‘Mitchell, a good friend of mine, what is the significance of the mine?’ James asked, feeling curious but slightly nervous. ‘I’m not fond of visiting such dark, abandoned places.’

‘It is to do with the cave paintings in a tunnel connected to the mine complex,’ Mitchell replied. ‘In the time when Native tribes lived in the fallen White Horse Kingdom, the Molokai creatures spent the remainder of their days in tunnels that protected them from the rising Blackhawks. Their forests and settlements burnt, and their land claimed as part of the Blackhawk Kingdom. Earlier last season, I was at a library, reading the worn, dusty scroll written by Lindo Crow. He claimed to have lived in the caves for nearly a year before his death in A.B. 41. I don’t remember much about his story, but I do remember him painting over three-hundred images reflecting the Aureorean War.’

‘Oh, I see,’ James replied, ‘I’ve read the same story.’

The mist began to disappear like tiny water droplets evaporating from the water sources surrounding San Pilgrim.

‘Why’d you ask, James?’ Mason asked. ‘You sounded like you’d lost interest in the trip. What is such a matter?’

‘It’s to do with my fear of darkness,’ James answered. ‘I’ve not coped well without light after feeling cursed by bad spirits for a month or two. I’ve not lost interest in this trip at all but getting a bit nervous.’

‘That’s normal. I’ve been there myself for some time,’ Mitchell replied.

The cliffs grew taller as the youths gently walked their way along the river’s right edge. Smooth and rough boulders and rocks jagged the path between both cliffs that had multiple layers of sandstone, cobble, and soil. Vines or roots grew or hung from the high, grassy tips of the cliffs. The blue sky above had become partly cloudy, and the air got warmer between the cliffs and beyond. The sight felt peaceful but a bit haunting as it was part of the scene when the deadly flood took place.

Back at San Pilgrim, many children were out and about in the mud, or brown water, or elsewhere, having finished their everyday breakfast of toasted bread and cooked eggs. Logan’s grey-bearded-and-haired father Murray, dressed in brown leather clothing (leggings, jacket, and boots), helped other villagers load crates onto two or three carriages for a trade mission. The sun shone brighter as the morning aged. The time ticked seven o’clock when Murray returned home for a warm mug of morning black tea. Earlier, after sunrise, Murray read Logan’s short note he had left on the dining table.

I have gone out with my friends this morning. From Logan.

Though Logan went out with his friends every day, he rarely went out before or during sunrise. For the next fifteen or twenty minutes, Murray sat on his outdoor rocking chair and enjoyed a relaxing break, sipping his tea.

Meanwhile, Logan and his friends entertained themselves by jumping from rock to rock submerged in the shallow river until the ravine split into two different ways. At this point in the journey, thick, green moss grew on both cliffs.

‘Which way?’ Logan asked after having a bit of fun jumping from wobbly or statue-still, smooth rocks.

They were walking along the river’s right edge.

‘Right, this way!’ Mitchell called as he read the map to the mine.

It was not far, only half a mile. The cliffs grew taller as they walked nearer towards the splitting part of the ravine. They were now thirty or forty metres in height.

‘Good timing!’ Mason cried. ‘If we carry on walking without rest, we can get there before eight o’clock.’

His voice echoed between the walls, and so did Mitchell’s.

Jumping over the chilly water had pained Logan’s feet again.

‘I’m in pain again, Mitchell,’ Logan said.

Mason laughed.

‘You’ve never walked or jumped on this kind of terrain?’ Mason asked. ‘This is what we deal with all the time with no shoes or sandals.’

Logan felt irritated. Samuel and James fell behind as the smooth stone-peppered edge pained their feet.

‘Come on, you two!’ Mitchell called. ‘We’re nearly there!’

‘Oh, please,’ Samuel replied as the pain slowly strengthened, ‘I need to rest for a moment.’

Mitchell, showing little compassion, sighs and carried on walking to the mine with Mason.

‘Can you pass me the ointment, please?’ Logan asked as he stood still on the stones.

Mitchell pulled the tin container out of his pocket.

‘Don’t lose it,’ Mitchell said as he passed it to Logan.

Logan returned to Samuel and James sitting on a rough boulder beside the cliff. A chirping flock of spotted pardalotes flew through the darkening ravine as the oak treetops stretched their branches over the top and blocked the sunlight.

In a dark oak forest where the Carlton River flows underneath a large, mossy cobblestone bridge, all was silent until a few chirping crows flew underneath the ancient structure. The black tree branches with orange leaves stretched over the river edges. The sky above remained blue but partly cloudy. Then, a military Bataille of mounted archers and knights walked their horses across the bridge. The major commander named Lincoln Lyon leads the

Bataille with his two lieutenants holding Keaton flag poles. The Keatonian Army, consisting of three Batailles and seven Banda, was preparing for war. The Keaton Kingdom has a different military hierarchy compared to all other countries. Under the rank of king, there were ten commanders (minor and major), followed by the soldiers (archers and knights). Commander Lyon, white-bearded, seemingly in his early sixties, and wearing iron and leather armour, leads his Bataille for the first time. A light breeze softly shook the leaves and branches and blew the red and gold flags northward. The track they follow leads them to San Pilgrim a few miles away.

That same moment, Logan, Samuel, and James caught up with the brothers, taking a few breaths of the fresh air that smelled like moss. There was a third of a mile to go when the youths moved into the shallow river, hoping to find or feel little gold or iron nuggets, but with no favourable outcome. Though this may have seemed unfortunate, they were at least cooled down by the chilly water. Time ticked to fifteen minutes to eight before they finally spotted a familiar-looking entrance to a tunnel outlined with old pillars of wood. The cliffs less mossy and bits of metal rusting in the water and along the river edges.

‘At last!’ Mason cried in exaggeration. ‘We are where we should’ve been an hour ago!’

‘At least we made it before eight, my friend,’ Logan replied and took another breath, desperate for a rest.

‘We have plenty of time to explore the cave paintings before we head home for lunch,’ Mitchell said. ‘Also, we can eat some cave berries as we walk down the tunnel complex.’

Mitchell and Mason enter the cave.

‘Come on!’ Mason called as he disappeared into the darkness of the mine, the tunnel floor flooded with an inch of water.

Logan, Samuel, and James followed the brothers and soon the light of day disappeared from their sight. Their footsteps and the splashing of water echoed. All felt a chilly sensation on their tanned skin like heading into the arctic tundra. The walls were rough and cold, and some of the mining tools left on the tunnel floor. James nearly screams after hearing a deep, eerie noise that sounded like a bending metal rod. Rusted nails held the wooden sleepers in place. They all heard it and stopped for a short moment. Their path lit by glowing, blue glow worms in the ceiling and walls.

‘I’d prefer not to go deeper, Mitchell,’ James said softly, feeling deeply anxious.

‘Trust me, James, my light-hearted friend, we don’t need to go much deeper to get to the cave paintings,’ Mitchell replied quietly. ‘We’re away from the perils and haunting darkness.’

‘I trust you,’ James answered after a short moment of silence, but without confidence.

The gang carried on through the mine as Mitchell pulled the map out of his pocket. In the bright, but small dots of light, Mitchell holds the map close to his eyes. A large crack in the wall marks the entrance to the wall-painted tunnel. It was thirteen or sixteen yards away.

‘Let’s go,’ Mitchell ordered, and his friends followed him to the crack (outlined with purple glow worms).

They were not aware of what lay beneath the surface of the shallow water.

After Carl Keaton signed an executive order to invade the Tarantino Kingdom, he sat on a wooden and gold bench in his private garden. The light-grey-headed king of the kingdom, wearing a brown leather and chain chest plate, brown leather leggings and boots, a red cloak, and a branch-like golden crown, and in his late fifties. His garden decorated with hedges of red roses and white roses, two healthy apple trees, freshly green grass, and guarded by sandstone block walls (two metres high) from surrounding houses. His garden bench sat near the structure of a large tower. All was silent as he breaks off the thorns of a red rose stem. King Keaton had ruled the kingdom for nearly twenty years and has been preparing his army for half his time of service. A power-hungry leader with a purpose to expand his land.

‘His Majesty, King Carl Keaton, has sent Commander Lyon and his Bataille to the border village of San Pilgrim this morning and before the invasion of the Tarantino Kingdom,’ the Mayor of San Pilgrim announced to the adult villagers in the town hall.

‘We’re to carry on with our usual duties until the invasion is over, no matter they win or lose,’ the Mayor continued.

All the children continued playing outside. The time ticks eight o’clock.

Murray raises his hand.

‘Pardon me!’ Murray called from the crowd. ‘But are we usually notified four or five days before any commander and his men enter our village?’

‘Usually, we are,’ the Mayor replied, ‘but King Keaton kept this a secret of all villagers, not just us.’

‘Then, how did you find out?’ Murray asked.

‘I didn’t. My son reported Lyon and his men marching along our track to the borderline with the Tarantino Kingdom,’ the Mayor answered.

Many of the villagers loudly interrupt each other or the Mayor. Some of them remained silent.

‘Everyone, come down!’ The Mayor called after blowing his horn that he had picked from the stage floor. ‘Please?’

Everyone turned silent.

‘I know we’re not fond of Commander Lyon because he’s tough on us, but we must act like nothing’s happening or things may get out of hand,’ the Mayor said. ‘Lincoln and his guards have beaten young people in other villages and ours in the last five years for disobedience or other reasons.’

Murray, having seen Commander Lyon and his guards beat a couple of children two or three years earlier, got extremely nervous.

And then, Commander Lincoln and his Bataille pass the border fence and out of the dark oak forest. The villagers could hear the clopping of their horses from nearly a hundred or more

yards away. High above their iron helmets, the sky became cloudier. The track turned from dusty gravel to soft mud.

Far from the presence of Lyon's Bataille, the youths squeeze through the end of the crack and step into the tunnel of the cave paintings. The tunnel floor remained flooded, and the shallow water remained chilly. The cave walls seem smoother and more circular than the mine.

Beyond their eyes, the cave painting glowed in colours of red, blue, green, purple, violet, grey, white, pink, brown, black, orange, yellow, silver and gold. All the colours were either light or black. The beauty of such a wondrous spectacle astounds them.

'My,' James said in astonishment. 'I'm not going to turn back anytime soon, Mitchell, my dear friend. I'm glad that I agreed to come along with you to this vast, colourful, wondrous, historical, and stunning tunnel. I thank you, Master Mitchell, for what I'm grateful to see with my blue eyes. I've never seen anything like this place before, and perhaps may never see anything as colourful as these bright, glowing cave paintings.'

'Let's not wait any longer and go deeper into the tunnel,' Mitchell replied. 'Come on.'

And so, they walked deeper into the colourful wonders of the tunnel that brought comfort to the tribes of the Native Molokai race. A place with a deep dark history but with a sparkling drop of light. The children, who shortly saw the light of day before the war, painted the artwork the same time the parents crushed cave berries into a paste with a bit of water from the tunnel floor. Though the war lasted for three years and two months, the Native tribes were too afraid to step out of the tunnels, therefore spending the last of their days in the haunting darkness. They painted blue streams of water, green and brown forests, violet and pink flowers, red fires and brown tents, orange horizons lit by yellow suns, and friendly soldiers in silver and gold armour fighting the frightful Blackhawks in their black hooded coats and beak-shaped face masks. Though the walls were cold and damp, the paintings seemed intact and well-preserved. Logan slid the fingertips of his left hand across the tunnel surface for a moment, feeling the tiny water particles form on his skin. The shallow, freezing water that flooded the tunnel floor remained every day and night since the Native tribes moved in or long before the war took place.

'Master Crow must have practised artwork for many days and nights,' Logan said as he admired the visual creations on the cave wall. 'His paintings are catching my eyes like nothing else I had seen in a long time, my good friend Mitchell, but it breaks my heart when we walk in the footsteps of the last surviving tribes who suffered to their fate in the darkness of this tunnel.'

'Only so many of these paintings were his, Logan. Hundreds of Native Molokai children drew their visions on these walls,' Mitchell replied, 'other than artwork, they told each other happy tales to lift their spirits.'

'Do you know one?' Samuel asked.

'I remember Crow's short story,' Mitchell replied.

As they continued walking deeper and deeper into the tunnel, Mitchell thought about sharing Lindo's tale to the rest of the group. The time ticks nine o'clock. Storm clouds darken and block the sunlight.

‘Would you like to hear it?’ Mitchell asked.

‘I would,’ Logan replied.

All agree to hear Lindo’s tale.

‘One morning in the orange mist, a young Native Molokai named Federico woke up in a field of colourful flowers. The golden sun shone in his eyes, and a flock of sparrows called to the light of dawn. Monarch butterflies flew around the flower field as he stood up, glancing at the vast plains and line of trees. The grass was green, soft, and moisty. After looking around the scenery, he heard the voices of other children playing in a pond of water. In his sight, he noticed a bright water surface opposite the line of oak trees with white trunk and branch bark, and dark green leaves. A few leaves fell to the overgrown or surfaced roots like feathers falling from the sky. Federico, full of curiosity and wonder, quietly walked towards the pond where four shadowy figures fade in like clouds forming in the heights. A few yards closer and the sounds get louder and more joyful. He now saw the children splashing water towards each other and elsewhere. The sun became brighter and hotter. As he walked nearer to the pond, they asked him to join the fun, and he does. We, who rest in the darkness but with hope, will find the light again, we shall relive a life of peace and silence, and walk across soft, fresh grass.’

Logan felt a sense of tragedy for the ill-fated Native Molokai creatures. No one to blame but King Luciano Geodesy, the first leader of the Blackhawks who ruled until his death in A.B. 45. He was the last generation before the Murdoch family took over. He had, without question, an obsession of power and control, his motive to start the Aurorean War (A.B. 38 to A.B. 41). At the dusk of summer of A.B. 35, he, who wore a black leather and silver chain chest plate, black leather leggings and boots, a black leather witch hunter hat with a black hawk feather, a black cloak, and a black beak-shaped and carved face mask, secretly began building his army of men. Loggers fell forests of trees and miners dug up iron ore for weaponsmiths to craft bows and arrows and swords at their finest. King Geodesy created a military hierarchy consisting of one general, ten commanders and ten Batailles (each having twenty-thousand soldiers). Such men in the army, dressed in sword-proof black leather hooded coats, black leather leggings and boots, and black beak-shaped, arrow-proof face masks. The strength and quality of their leather were profound and never worn by men of other kingdoms. At the dawn of A.B. 38, King Geodesy commanded his army of two-hundred-thousand men to destroy enemy campsites and villages, setting fire to houses and tents and slaughtering the Native Molokai creatures. Dreadful news of the mass violence reached the ears of the kings of the White Horse, Red Raven and Greyhound kingdoms, but their armies were no match to the strength and size of the Blackhawk military. Though combining forces gave them an advantage in largeness over the Blackhawks, their cruel enemies outwitted them in many battles, had more weapons and were more prepared. For over five months, the three united kings watched fires rage in dense forests and vast fields. The vision of black and grey smoke rising into the orange, dusky sky, the burning hot flames lighting up the wide flat or mountainous horizon still haunted historians. Logan, though having a better education than all other young people at San Pilgrim, did not remember much about this heart-pounding story of the Aurorean War, but felt intrigued by the secrets behind the cave paintings.

‘Mitchell, do you know what hides behind the ink on the walls?’ Logan asked.

‘I’ve known a lot about the cave paintings, but I’ve forgotten many of the secrets they hold, Master Logan,’ Mitchell replied. ‘If you wanted to know, you’d need to learn them for yourself and not to tell anyone.’

Many historians, even some of the most committed history storytellers, have not known the complete story of the Aurean War. From mid-A.B. 40 to the end of the year, the three united kings struck back with the help of the Altera Assassin Order (A.B. 21 to A.B. 78), a well-trained league of killers who wore white cotton coats or robes, black leather chest plates, leggings and boots, and red bandanas. They spent their lifetime in tunnels, lit with candles or lamps, and only came out into the wilderness for assassination missions. For twelve or fourteen hours, they trained like Kung-Fu martial artists every day between manhunts. A trainee must have served for twenty straight years before becoming a master. Logan did not remember much about the Altera Assassin Order neither.

‘My memory,’ he thought. ‘I must’ve not been paying enough attention to my history studies.’

Logan was not always fond of history, but storytelling and agriculture.

‘We’ve been walking for many long moments, Mitchell,’ Mason exaggerated, ‘and should we think about heading back before noon? It’s after nine in the morning.’

‘Let’s rest,’ Mitchell replied. ‘There should be some berries close by.’

And all youths (except Mitchell) lay against the cave walls, stretching their legs. Mitchell searched the cave walls for a stem-shaped, hollow, purple trunk.

‘How long did you know the brothers?’ Logan asked Samuel and James, who have been good friends for years.

‘Nearly two years,’ they replied.

‘We’ve met each other at the wheat fields one evening, an hour or two before we finished work. At nightfall, we had a short walk in the frosty mud, talking about interests and other random stuff. It was a great time with the fireflies and crickets. The next morning, we’ve got together again under the tree shade after breakfast and became close friends a year before you joined the gang,’ Samuel continued.

‘I remember the day when you threw me into a dead stream of brown water and laughed the whole time I crawled out of the river,’ Logan said.

‘So, do we,’ they replied as they remembered tightly holding Logan’s wrists and ankles, swinging him from side to side and letting him fly into the stream.

The memory always stuck in their minds.

‘I remember the time when Mason and I walked through a large cornfield far beyond the borders of San Pilgrim, then got chased by an old farmer carrying a hoe. We did get away with a bag of ripe corn, maybe fourteen or sixteen pieces, but that was the last time we went to the farm,’ James said.

After a short moment, Mitchell returned carrying a small pile of cave berries in his hands, juicy and ripe.

‘Did you find many berries, Mitchell?’ Mason asked.

‘That’s all for us,’ Mitchell replied. ‘They do not grow as much as they used to.’

‘No worry,’ Logan said. ‘At least we won’t head back on empty stomachs.’

Mitchell, who felt and seemed annoyed by the small number of berries he could find, feels some sense of relief, shares them between himself and all other youths. Though a bit sour, they were mostly sweet, and they enjoyed them. The water chilled their skin. Logan, as he rested in the same place where Lindo Crow spent his last few days, felt his mind wandering around the hidden secrets behind the cave paintings. He saw nothing but darkness for a moment or two. All became silent when the voices of his friends slowly faded away. He felt lost in a dark world, breathing in the cold air of the tunnel.

‘Julie and Amanda, my dear children-,’ a mother’s voice faded into his mind. ‘Hold on to your hope, never turn your back to the light.’

He opened his eyes. Now, there were fewer cave paintings, and the walls looked whiter like light shining upon them. The water remained freezing, and his body aches. He continued hearing voices of children and adults in his head. Feeling unaware of the activity going on, he stretched his arms and noticed his grey and red-striped skin. This bizarre discovery surprises Logan for a moment, then rubs his smooth left hand. He has no nose, no mouth, no hair, and no ears. Like all other Native Molokai creatures, he was wearing light brown cotton trunks that stretched to the tip of his knees.

‘What have I become?’ Logan thought. ‘Who am I now?’

‘You are Lindo Crow,’ a voice replied in his mind.

Logan turned his attention to another young Native Molokai, looking remarkably similar, but shorter; only one-hundred-and-twenty centimetres tall.

‘You are a Red Raven Native, my friend. You must be going through a lot of pain and stress like yesterday,’ the child continued, ‘come on, we are waiting for you.’

Logan stood up, still confused, and feeling lost in the unknown.

‘I am George Barry,’ the child said. ‘We are good friends and have been for years, Lindo.’

Logan was still astounded.

‘What happened to me?’ he thought.

‘You collapsed earlier this week,’ George replied. ‘You fell flat on the cave floor. Afterwards, I sat by you for a few hours. Also, I like you to meet my new friend.’

George leads Logan towards the end of the crowded tunnel. Logan looked around, noticing the hope and sadness in others’ eyes. He felt uncomfortable, slightly anxious, mildly disorientated, and sorry for such victims of the ongoing Aureorean War.

‘I know what you feel,’ George said, ‘and I understand why, but keep your spirit lifted.’

George found his new friend.

‘Hello, Charles!’ George called, waving his hand to Charles.

Logan could listen to every vocal thought in the minds of others.

‘Hello, George!’ Charles replied. ‘How are you, my new friend?’

‘I am all good, Charles,’ George answered. ‘This is my old friend, Lindo Crow.’

Logan took a short, friendly bow at Charles.

‘I am Charles Louis, Master Crow,’ he said.

Logan shakes his hand.

Both looked identical and equally tall (one-hundred-and-thirty centimetres).

‘It is a pleasure to meet you, Charles,’ Logan replied.

Though a vision, it felt more real and powerful like reliving an old memory. Such a coincidence was quite rare. Though Mitchell learnt the secrets of these cave paintings, his visions were very weak and short-lived. They were not like reliving old memories of lost souls, more like seeing illusions in the darkness.

Meanwhile, the other youths finished their cave berries. Their hands and mouths covered in sugary, purple juice. Logan remained still with his eyes closed. Mitchell, suddenly, heard water pouring into the tunnel. No one else heard such noises as they have a random conversation. Mitchell silences them.

Outside, the dark storm clouds with alarming thunder and heavy rain flood the ravine. Water flows into the cave. Small, but hundreds of streams rush down the cliffs, releasing sprays of water droplets. There was little or no light at all.

Back at San Pilgrim, parents desperately bring their children indoors. Puddles form on the muddy track. Hundreds of mounted soldiers trot their horses to the East Border and beyond, prepared for battle. Commander Lyon, now settled in the candle-lighted village hall, comfortably sat at a white, wooden table, smoking a long, specially-crafted-and-carved pipe. He was seemingly a man in total control of his Bataille and the villagers, watching the soldiers, in large numbers and dark spirits, cross the East Border ahead and enter the Tarantino Kingdom.

Other than blowing out clouds of black smoke, he tears a small piece of rye bread from his silver plate and dips it into his golden chalice of red wine. The dark storm strengthens. He could hear the wind strongly blow through the narrow gaps between the windowed doors and the doorframe. Two soldiers guard the main entrance. Other than the commander tracing a route from the East Border to the Tarantino Castle, ten or twelve officers plan future attacks on Tarantinian villages and other settlements at their brown, oak tables. The floor creaked whenever one or more walked on the old planks and rusted nails, and grey cobwebs covered the edges of the ceiling. Large droplets of water strike the glass panes torrentially. Murray, locked inside his house, became deeply concerned about Logan as he sat at the end of the dining table with a saucer of biscuits.

Back in the tunnel, the youths carried Logan by his wrists and ankles. They were unable to wake him up. They desperately hurry to the far end of the cave as the water level slowly rose to their knees. It would be too much of a struggle to get him through the narrow crack. The

curvy tunnel stretched for a mere mile from end to end. Their hearts beat anxiously, hearing powerful streams of water strike walls of the mine complex. The cave paintings began to go dim. Deep down inside, Logan seemingly could not escape the power of his vision like had permanently morphed in Lindo Crow in memory long forgotten.

‘Where does this tunnel lead us?’ James groaned. ‘I cannot help carry him for much longer!’

‘Oh, James!’ Mitchell replied as he got exhausted. ‘This is not a time to complain or explain, but a time to run away from danger! Don’t make me or anyone of us slow down until we are in the clearing! Keep going!’

‘Should you have warned us about possible floods this late morning, Mitchell?’ Samuel asked, carrying Logan’s right ankle. ‘Didn’t you remember, or you’d forgot to observe the weather?’

Mitchell was getting irritated by their complaints.

‘Come on, you two!’ Mason replied and getting outraged. ‘We’re nearly at the end!’

They had half a mile to go, and the water rose nearer to their knees. The tunnel got darker and became harder to see. They were in great trouble.

In the vision, Logan, George, and Charles walked across the stone-peppered cave floor to the entrance of the tunnel and into the bright daylight. Logan, full of curiosity, looked to his left and right, feeling the smooth stones move about beneath his feet. As they step outside, the golden sunlight comfortably faints and reveals a red stream of water. All other surroundings looked the same as when he had entered the tunnel for the first time. The sky was light yellow and cloudless. Logan, stunned by the redness of the blood-like river, tries not to let this horrific scene distraught his soul or let the others sense such worry or sorrow.

‘Pardon me,’ Logan thought, then both Charles and George looked at him, ‘but I don’t remember—coming out here to see the sunlight and breathe in the fresh air.’

‘Many of us forget the light of day,’ Charles replied as he took a step into the red river. ‘Though the Aureorean War has come to its end, many Blackhawk hunters journeyed around the land to slaughter the last of the Native tribes.’

He sat down on the river edge.

‘One time, we used to come out for an hour or two, either to drink water or rest in the morning air that smelled like ripe apples,’ Charles continued. ‘Now, only some of us spend no longer than ten minutes outside.’

Logan and George joined him and stretched their legs, submerged in the red stream. Logan felt very odd like he was becoming a new self. As they sat, a flock of crow flew through the ravine and called to the rising, hot sun. Being a Native Molokai was a hugely different experience. You could not feel the air rushing through your nostrils, nor could you see the same way. You breathed in air through your touch-sensitive skin. Your sight was whiter or more golden. Both Molokai creatures and Cantonians spoke more formerly than us as humans.

‘The last day we children splashed and swam in the water, eight or nine Blackhawk archers attacked us from the top of that cliff,’ George said as he pointed to the top of the cliff before them. ‘They killed five youths, no older than ten or eleven, and hurt two others. Three days later, I peeked through the crack on a cold evening and noticed a blood-like stream. It was the same river we used to play in every morning and night because we believed that the ravine was a safe place, not elsewhere.’

‘I’m sorry about the attack,’ Logan replied, feeling out of character.

‘Have no fear, Master Crow, my new friend,’ Charles said. ‘There is some hope that our future will brighten, but I do not know when or where it will take place.’

Logan felt some relief, but still heartbroken.

‘I had a vision,’ Logan said, ‘a young life as a human from a village called San Pilgrim.’

Such an introduction drew the fascination of Charles and George. They turned their heads to him as he remembered the early morning in the village with his mug of tea.

‘One early morning, I sat on the porch of my parents’ home at the eastern side of town, enjoying a mug of green tea, barefoot in the soft mud. Being a cold, autumn dawn and without a shirt, I slightly shivered in the air that smelled of wet soil and hay. As the bright sun rose above the orange horizon, I left my emptied cup and walked towards the village centre where I met two of my good friends, Mitchell, and Mason. After James and Samuel joined our group, we walked beyond the borders to explore a tunnel Mitchell found on an old map. Its walls painted with images that told stories set before and during the Aureorean War. My feet ached as we walked on rough and smooth tracks and river edges. The tunnel was two miles from where we started our journey into the unknown. For a few moments, we jumped from rock to rock in the freshwater stream until we made it to two different ravines stretching north-westward and south-westward.’

A flock of red crows flew in between the cliffs, calling to the rising sun.

‘So, what happened next, Master Crow?’ Charles asked. ‘If you can remember.’

Logan remained silent for a moment, trying to get back to where he stopped in the tale. He clicked his fingers a few times.

‘Where were we?’ he thought. ‘Where was I?’

‘You said about making it to two different ravines,’ George answered, ‘on your way to finding a tunnel.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Logan replied. ‘We headed north-westward for a few more moments until we saw the haunting entrance to the abandoned mine. Below the blue sky, the cliffs covered in green moss and the sun shone upon the bushy clifftops.’

‘Tell us more about your friends, Lindo, before you tell more about the story,’ George interrupted. ‘What were they like?’

George sounded like he had never met a human in his life. Though the Native Molokai creatures were the dominant race, humans were flourishing more with the guidance of their

kings. They fought in armies, established villages, built towers and castles, and crafted weapons.

Logan talked about his friends for two of the last few moments before their time to return to the cave. For that time, all else was silent, other than a light gust and a few white robins chirping in the sunlight. George and Charles stared at Logan, intrigued like never.

‘When my friends and I sat against the cave wall, Samuel said, he and James met the first time at the crop fields an hour or two before finishing an evening’s work. They had a walk at night in frosty mud with the fireflies and crickets. The next morning after breakfast, they got together again under the tree shade and became close friends a year before I came along and joined their gang,’ Logan said.

‘What about when you joined the gang?’ Charles asked.

‘They threw me into muddy water,’ Logan replied, ‘and laughed to their knees until I crawled out and brushed the dirt off.’

George and Charles giggled like they had not felt such amusement in many dark months.

‘It’s one of many fond memories of me with my fellows,’ Logan continued. ‘Perhaps one of the fondest of all.’

‘When you said, cave wall, what cave were you talking about?’ George asked.

‘The tunnel behind us,’ Logan answered. ‘We were spending an hour or two looking at the cave paintings in the chilly water and cold air.’

‘A few days ago, you thought of a story about hope,’ George said. ‘Tell us, Lindo!’

Logan felt uncomfortable as George and Charles waited with excitement. Then he remembered Mitchell telling him Lindo’s tale he had found intriguing. It was two minutes until they needed to return to the cave for their protection. Until the end, he spoke clearly and softly, feeling no rush.

‘One morning in the orange mist, a young Native Molokai named Federico woke up in a field of colourful flowers. The golden sun shone in his eyes, and a flock of sparrows called to the light of dawn. Monarch butterflies flew around the flower field as he stood up, glancing at the vast plains and line of trees. The grass was green, soft, and moist. After looking around the scenery, he heard the voices of other children playing in a pond of water. In his sight, he noticed a bright water surface opposite the line of oak trees with white trunk and branch bark, and dark green leaves. A few leaves fell to the overgrown or surfaced roots like feathers falling from the sky. Federico, full of curiosity and wonder, quietly walked towards the pond where four shadowy figures faded in like clouds forming in the heights. A few yards closer and the sounds got louder and more joyful. He now saw the children splashing water towards each other and elsewhere. The sun became brighter and hotter. As he walked nearer to the pond, they asked him to join the fun, and he did. We, who rest in the darkness but with hope, will find the light again, we shall relive a life of peace and silence, and walked across soft, fresh grass.’

Charles and George made Logan proud of telling a story that touched their hearts. Then, they returned to the tunnel of cave paintings.

‘Great story!’ Charles said. ‘May I recommend you sharing it to the other children because they are losing their souls.’

‘I will tell them another time,’ Logan replied as they entered the tunnel.

Their footsteps echoed.

‘Promise you will?’ George asked.

There was a short moment. Logan collapsed to the tunnel floor, feeling dizziness. George and Charles anxiously tried to help Logan, calling for help and pulling him back up, but to no avail. Within a matter of a few seconds, his vision came to an end. All became dark and silent.

Logan remained asleep on top of a mattress and under sheets until he slowly woke. Other than light coming from a candle sitting on a brown chest of drawers, everywhere else in the bedroom was dark or dimly lit. He rested on a single bed placed against a windowed wall. Silk curtains closed. Inside, there was also a wardrobe, a mirror, and a table and a stool. He heard the voices of children and adults outside his room. Still feeling dizzy, he peeked through the curtains. He had no idea what happened at the end, other than collapsing to the tunnel floor and losing consciousness. Though back to normal, he could not feel any different until Murray quietly opened the door and peeked through the gap. A bright light shone from outside.

‘I’m over here,’ Murray said, grabbing Logan’s attention. ‘I got concerned about you, Logan. I thought you got caught in the flood this morning or noon. It’s a miracle you and your friends made it home with only a few cuts and scratches. They’re here in the dining room having soup and garlic bread.’

‘I promise to tell them a story,’ Logan replied. ‘Of what happened, and you must believe me as I shall tell the truth, father. Will you?’

‘I will bring them here,’ Murray answered.

He went to the dining room, leaving the bedroom door open. Logan sat up and leaned against the wooden bedframe behind him, rubbing his sore eyes. His sight was slightly blurry. When Murray returned to the door, he allowed Mitchell and Samuel to run into the room and tightly embrace Logan. When they carried him to the porch in the heavy rain, Murray and his wife ran out of the house, more terrified than ever before. When he mysteriously had no heartbeat for a long moment, they fell into shock and called for a doctor who rushed to their home in the deep mud. All other youths felt the same. Seven or eight hours after the doctor checked him and said, ‘you have nothing to worry about because his heart is beating’, they let him rest comfortably in his room until he woke up. They were relieved and happy.

Two or three months later, King Carl Keaton had announced victory to the people of the Keaton Kingdom that shocked the civilians as they wanted nothing to do with war and everything to do with peace between them and neighbouring kingdoms.