

[Hieron: The Months of Autumn Pt 1](#) (transcribed by Han @mercutioes)

SAMOL: Oh, I suppose I have one more story in me. But if you want me to tell you about them, then, well. I need to start from the beginning. The very beginning.

[MUSIC underlay -- "Inside"]

SAMOL: When I was a young man, Hieron floated in the void, anchored to nothin'. The only light was the ambient glow given off by me and my kin. Time passed uncounted. There was no such thing as a year then. After all, there was no common center by which folks could count and organize their lives. Imagine that. Really try to. No holidays, no birthdays, no days at all. How would you count 'em? And then, with his strength and wisdom, Samoths struck his hammer to scalding iron and built us the sun, placing it in the sky above, giving us not only light, but time, too. Suddenly, everyone on Hieron had something new in common. We were all united under his blazing star. Don't get me wrong, I am not sayin' that was his intention. For all that Samoths has done for us, sometimes it feels like it's a side effect. Like a whistle on a steam engine. In any case, years passed by, an uncountable number. Partially, because there were a lot of 'em, and partially because, well, the way we gods wrote and rewrote history then, it meant that it was a little difficult to get a complete count. Still, you probably know the stories. Loose alliances between elves and men, roving hordes of orcs, the dwarves diggin' deep, humble halflings and gods alive. Now, don't get me wrong, those stories, well, they're stories, not histories. But for the most part, the basics line up just about right. And then, the war between my boys and then Marielda and then what happened between Maelgwyn and Samoths. Y'all call what happened next The Erasure.

[MUSIC ends.]

SAMOL: And after that, people lost track of the years again, for a whole new reason. Not because there was no sun, not because we were rewritin' history, but because folks were so busy tryin' to survive that they didn't have time to count the days. For years, decades, centuries, nearly everyone on Hieron struggled to survive. Even in the safest places - the City of First Light, Nacre - life seemed stretched thin. When terrible things happen at the periphery, even the center feels it. Ain't no inside without an outside, right? In any case, time passed, and eventually, after a lot of death, after a lot of failure, things started to even out, bit by bit. Drop of blood by drop of blood. Populations slowly grew until finally, there were a number of settlements that you could rightly classify as cities. Now that I think about it, them folks you wanted to know about? Each one of 'em came from one of those places.

In the dead center of Hieron, the Last University of Mages stood tall and proud. Scholars of sorcery and magic studied and trained their disciples. That is, at least, until a few decades ago, when everything took a turn. Which is about when an elf who called

himself Fantasma, The Great Fantasma, who did not call himself a mage but instead a Wizard, fled the ruined classrooms and dormitories, stepping out into the wider world for the first time in his life. These days, of course, the greatest font of knowledge isn't the School of Mages -- it's the New Archives, which the orcs carved directly into the mountains themselves, to the north of where the Last University stood.

In the old days, for a whole mess of reasons, most humans thought of orcs as savage thoughtless creatures. They were wrong, of course, but the stories stuck. These days, though, the orcs are known as scholars and collectors, amassing an endless catalog of this and that and the other thing from the pre-Erasure world. Orcs called semioticians can arrange and rearrange those things - tables and portraits and swords and living creatures and doves and the rain and whispers - into strange configurations, all to perform what you might call "pattern magic", a method of evoking powerful effects by adjusting the relation of things just so. It's a little like what we used to be able to do, me and my kin. Just a whole lot more complicated. And it's what that orc, Lem King, the one with the fiddle, it's what he does. Except instead of arranging flowers and lights and chalices to produce his effects, he arranges the notes on his fiddle.

To the west of the Archives, is Auniq, a village - no, a fortress, hidden in the icy woodlands. A long time ago, it was a place of peace where the snow elves, the goblins, all manner of people lived together. But in time, the folks there, well, it's a long story and we'll come to it but in time it was reduced to just those elves. And a strange thing started to happen: they began to age more and more rapidly, dyin' a natural death in just a handful of decades the way humans do. Until recently, that is. The newer generation of elves, including a man you might call a Ranger named Throndir, well, they just seem more virile, stronger, younger. And to escape the curious scalpels of his jealous elders, Throndir fled Auniq, joined by his trusty dog, Kodiak.

Further west still is Velas. Back in the old days, it was a seaside metropolis all its own. Now it is a humble city, still filled with the abandoned tenements of the long dead but growing all the same. And at the center of Velasian culture is the church of Samothès. At the center of the church is a man, a paladin - Hadrian, Sword of Samothès, Defender of the Undying Fire, Officer of the Order of Eternal Princes. And that man has a lot on his mind these days, Captain. *A lot.*

To the south of Velas is Rosemerrow, the sprawling home of the halflings. Which, back in my early days, well, the halflings were, uh, let's say, a little more feisty. These days they're all pipes and tea and biscuits and bullshit and, well, rapid expansion. Every damn day there's a new residential development, a new shopping district, each crafted in the shape of the distant past which they adore and desire to rebuild. But one halfling, the Druid named Fero Feritas, despises this devotion to all that folksy charm. Why look back, he thinks, when there's the horizon ahead?

And then, off the western coast of Rosemerrow, is the island nation of Ordenna. But you know all about that, don't you, Captain. All the smoke and fire of industry, the ironclad ships, the humming metal of your island that is anathema to magic and anything like it. Survivors of the great storm all those years ago who fled and struggled and survived, divided into four clans, but united by their will to live. Oh, is it -- it's three clans now, isn't it? That took a turn for you, didn't it? And I look at you, Captain, and I wonder if you're here looking for her. The Ordennan, Hella Varal, mercenary, warrior, Fighter, the woman who carries that sword, that Blade in the Dark. In any case, it was these five who started their journey just a few months ago. Hella, Lem, Hadrian, and Fantasma were contracted by Velas to travel to a small island north of Ordenna, a place called Eventide, where a mysterious tower - my sister's - seemed to emanate a magical force that was causing catastrophic flooding, storms, and other disasters. After arriving on the island and encountering its skeletal carekeeper - rest in peace - the group made their way to the tower entrance. They had two possible directions to go - a stairway upwards and a sealed door, beggin' to be busted open.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron]

LEM: From my perspective? The thing that is possibly causing stuff in a tower is either at the top of the tower or very very deep underneath the tower. Um, so I'm not entirely sure --

AUSTIN (overlapping): Now, why do you think that?

LEM: Why do I think that?

AUSTIN: Why does Lem think that?

LEM: Past experience with towers.

AUSTIN: Okay.

LEM: Partly from actual towers that we've found and cataloged and things and also just from the general cultural - there's a mythological, cultural through-line of towers. Villainous towers being powered by stuff at the top and bottom. So I don't know whether or not -- should we just push forward? What do people think?

FERO: Now Lem, I hear you on this top and bottom thing, I do, but I'm thinking maybe the sealed-off area is probably an important place?

LEM: Yeah, alright, let's give that a shot.

FERO (triumphant): Yeahhhhhh.

ALI: Is this an inanimate obstacle that I could get past?

AUSTIN: You could try to lift it, like try to get down there and put your fingers in and try to find purchase and lift it? Or are you gonna try to - how are you gonna try to get through?

ALI: I'm broad, I'll do that.

AUSTIN: Alright.

ALI: I definitely just rolled a 4.

AUSTIN: Cool.

ALI: Which isn't great.

AUSTIN: You just can't get it up, like, it's just not moving at all from the lift. You can tell that it does move up, you can feel that this isn't just concrete, that it should be able to slide upwards, but you've never felt anything this heavy in your life, you can't lift it. While she's doing this, you hear a bell ringing from above you.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: The bell led them upwards, and on the higher floors of the tower, the group faced all manner of things. A ghostly kitchen staff, turnin' the furniture of the place into an upholstered feast. A living library, drawing shapes and violins from the contents of the pages gathered. A trio of combatants, whose goal in the tower was never discovered, but there, among the belongings of that group of intruders, the party found a map of Hieron marked with small colored crystals, including one at the Tower of Severia, the tower that they stood in then and there. That's not all they found, though. There was a mask and a crown. Stop me if you heard this one before.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: You... can't help it, JACK. Even though you have a big old orc face, you just... the thing that's weird is that this mask doesn't have any eye holes. And you just wanna know how is it that you can see?

KEITH (whispering): Goddamn it. I was gonna put that shit on.

AUSTIN: And you put the mask on your face and it just sort of locks to you and without saying much, you begin to walk to the hallway.

ART: Wait, which hallway are we talking about?

AUSTIN: Sorry, the hallway to the right, to where the other two bedrooms are? These are bedrooms, these other two rooms. And then up towards the war room. Let's go to Hadrian at this point while JACK is... cut right, this shot is --

ART: I'd forgotten about the Spout Lore move and wanted to use it on this thing. I assume I have time to do this before he bursts in here.

AUSTIN (overlapping): Yeah we're gonna do that. JACK, to be clear, you were compelled to do this.

JACK: Yeah, no, so like when I said "What could go wrong?" I, hm, I was not expecting possessed by a [unintelligible]

[KEITH laughing in background.]

AUSTIN: So in the other room that, that Lem is currently walking towards, Hadrian, are you Spouting Lore on the... is that what you're doing?

ART: On the crown.

AUSTIN: Yeah, sure. Go ahead.

ART: Five. (as Hadrian?) I hope they both don't possess us and turn us into evil creatures.

LEM: Great, Hadrian, we can be friends. [Laughing.]

HADRIAN: Yeah, we can be friends on the other side.

[JACK laughing.]

AUSTIN: It's almost a dance. Lem enters the room and kneels before you and in an instant, you've placed the crown on his head. Lem --

ART: ... on *his* head.

AUSTIN: On *his* head.

ART: Great.

ALI: Oh *no*.

KEITH: If I have to kill Jack I'm gonna be so mad.

AUSTIN: His face is *beautiful*.

LEM: Whose face?

AUSTIN: The man you're seeing. It is... he's a... boyish good looks. Pale skin, bright blue eyes, and a crown like the one that you're --

KEITH (interrupting): Like a Doc Holliday.

AUSTIN: Like a Doc -- no, no. Fluffy, kind of --

[KEITH laughing.]

AUSTIN: Not fluffy, but like, wavy and voluminous blond hair down to his, his shoulders and a crowd of people chanting. "Samot, Samot, Samot." And he turns back to you... or like, you can see over his shoulder, you can see these people, and he turns and makes eye contact with you. And whispers,

SAMOT: Is it time already?

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: Pullin' themselves away from the power of that relic, Lem, Hadrian, and the rest found their way to the top of the tower where they found the cause of the violent tides - a magical book marked with the old tongue built around a powerful spell, somethin' that could give motion to the inanimate. Somethin' that could bring to life the immobile. There was... let's say, a dispute about that book.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

NICK: So Fantasma addresses Hadrian and says,

FANTASMO (in the goofiest possible wizard voice): The book itself is not evil. The spell itself is not evil. Magic is neutral. The things, the things that the beings of this land do with the magic are potentially evil or not evil. Magic is no more evil than the wind. I'm keeping this book.

NICK: And then he turns to Lem, and he says to Lem,

FANTASMO: Your pattern magics, while sometimes impressive, do not dictate how the entire world works. This book does not need to go back. The only reason to put the

book back on its dais is if we wanted to resume the spells that were happening here. We got sent here to find out what was happening and disable it if possible. We've done that. And we have this book now, I suggest we take off.

LEM: The waves will stop if we put the book back on the, on the dais. (pronounced differently) Dais?

HADRIAN: I don't know if that's true. How do you know that that's true --

AUSTIN: Nick thinks -- Nick thinks... Fantasma thinks that's true based on the study that you did before that again... previous to very recently, the waves hadn't been a problem. This is ancient, you can tell this is pre-Erasure, and I think that even... you're...

NICK: But --

AUSTIN: You think at this point, you think --

NICK: Not putting the book back on the dais --

AUSTIN: Yes.

NICK: Isn't gonna turn it back on either.

AUSTIN: Right, the thing is, as long as you know, you keep this book protected and careful with it, you believe that the waves aren't gonna come back. That's the... yeah.

NICK: Yeah.

AUSTIN: That is what you think.

KEITH: The only thing is if he's away from the waves it's not gonna work on the waves.

ART: Hadrian lets out a sigh. Like a deep... sigh.

HADRIAN: [sighs] Of *course* the wind can be evil. Everything can be evil.

[All laughing.]

HADRIAN: You know, such is the way of the world.

KEITH (overlapping): I hate paladins *so. much*. I fucking can't stand the whole thing that paladins are about.

HADRIAN: But, but I'm not, I'm not... I'm not willing to fight you, I'm not willing to, to kill you over this book but I'm *done*. And I walk downstairs. I'll be figuring out how much gold I can carry.

NICK: Fantasma just shrugs and says, "Great."

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: I know what you're thinkin', Glass-Eye. If that book is with Fantasma then there's no way to put the spell back into place. And if you can't put the spell back into place, well, that's a problem. That's what you might call a vector of attack for our oldest foe. Things would have been easier if Hadrian, follower of Samoths and skeptic of strange magics, had his way, huh? If the book was just back at the Church in Velas. Instead, the wizard Fantasma secured the tome and led the group back to the city. And when they reported their findings to the Velasian council, the group was split in half. Those with ties to the established cities' high society - Hadrian and Fantasma - were given a new task. Seek out the other spots marked on the map and retrieve any dangerous artefacts and recover any information about those sites of power. So that pair, along with their snow elf guide, a man named Throndir, moved east towards the Mark of the Erasure, a spot that resisted the very act of mapping. A place out of time, a place out of *place*.

The group's outsiders, though - composed of the orc semiotician Lem King, the halfling naturalist Fero Feritas, and the Ordennan mercenary Hella Varal - they were content to drink away their pay at various pubs in Velas' working class Fish District. That is, until they found themselves in conversation with the charming elf named Gregalos who hired them to travel to the spot on the map that was marked in the woods south of Rosemerrow. He gave them a ring with a special sigil on it - three vertical lines of different lengths - and he told them that if shown to the right people, it would bring them hospitality and the resources necessary for their journey. They had two options for their travel - slow and safe over land or quickly by sea, allowing them to skip past the wilds and head straight for their destination. Despite the protests of Fero, the group chose the sea, convincin' the man that they knew as the boisterous and drunken Captain Calhoun to lend them his services, his boat, and his crew. It would be fun, they said. *A boat party*. But by day's light, out on the waves, they realized the sea had its own dangers.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: Worst of all, Hella, who's doing her job well, sees off in the distance... you notice another ship. It's flying a red flag with a bright golden crown. You recognize it as the lead ship in the small armada of Brandish, the Pirate King.

FERO (whispering): *Fuckin', there's -- I fuckin' said to go on the roads --*



AUSTIN: You... you might remember Brandish, the Pirate King, but if you don't because it's been a couple of weeks at this point, let me read from Hella's first love letter.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Do you remember what happened?

ALI: I defeated him right?

AUSTIN: You did... you did but then you didn't take his head.

ALI: No.

AUSTIN: You left his head and instead took a strange map which pointed to a mysterious spot on your home island which we should return to, and you took this spyglass. So here --

KEITH: When you're saying she didn't take the head, are you saying she didn't cut off his head? Or she didn't... she didn't take the head with her after she cut it off?

[MUSIC underneath - "Autumn Not Winter".]

ALI (laughing a little): That's a really good question.

AUSTIN: That's a *really good question*.

FERO: Yeah.

LEM: Hella?

FERO: Okay, undead pirates, *fuck* boats.

[JACK laughs.]

FERO (exasperated): *I said no boats.*

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: To his credit, Fero *did* say no boats. The two ships did battle, and for all the black powder or wicked magic, the fight began to drag on. That's around when Lem King met his match in the pirate Emmanuel. And I don't mean a "two men enter, one man leaves" sort of match. I mean... well... what's that phrase you folks use? "Meet-cute"? Only thing is, not every pirate was as taken with Lem's bardic flourishes.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: Lem, you've been... you and Emmanuel have been fighting this whole battle... this poor pastry chef and you, this Archivist bard are, kind of... there's something about this that feels, like, play-fighting for both of you? Not that you're not... that your hearts aren't in it, but like, there is something about, like, other people dying all around you, or dying for the second time in some cases, that it's a very surreal experience to just be stuck among open combat this big. And like, having fought with this person for, at this point, probably a couple of minutes. And I think you can sense in him a brief moment of resignation. What do you do?

JACK: I'm gonna sheath my weapon and I'm gonna take a couple of running steps up towards the, the what's it called? Where you? The helm.

AUSTIN: Emmanuel doesn't actually attack you but some of the other pirates on the ship do and you kind of deftly duck and dive out of the way. You make it up there safely. So what are you doing? Just tell me what you're doing, don't tell me --

JACK: What I'm doing is that I'm shouting very loudly and I'm saying --

AUSTIN: Okay?

LEM: Okay, right, this has gone on far too long. This stops now.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh.

LEM: We need to stop fighting. We have killed your captain, we will continue to kill your crew, this is not gonna go well.

JACK: I'm sort of making an appeal to the resignation that I saw in Emmanuel and also the fact that Hella is a built human fighter?

AUSTIN: You've made that, that, kind of claim, you've made that pitch, and then from behind you, you hear two loud steps and a loud voice that's kind of... you look over your shoulder at this and see that it's, it's a man holding his throat closed so that his voice can be heard.

JACK (laughing): Oh, god.

BRANDISH (in a gnarly pirate voice): I ain't dead, ya ninny.

Austin: And he pulls his hand off and draws his blade, wet from the ocean.

Keith (overlapping): Am I gonna have to throw this motherfucker back in the water?

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: The pirate Brandish, captain of the Kingdom Come, was formidable. And despite a brave effort from that crew of outcasts, they found themselves outmaneuvered. You wanna know what type of woman Hella Varal was back then? Back at the start of all this? Well. Nothin' tells her story more than... how everything shook out with, uh, with *Captain Calhoun*.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: You have the sword to her throat. I think I can run with this because one of the things is that the GM will offer you a worse outcome, hard bargain, or ugly choice. And he says... he looks around his ship.

BRANDISH: We ain't gonna have much a hard time gettin' more soldiers. Ya left us the bodies for that. But leave us Calhoun and you're free to go.

AUSTIN: He gives a little smirk to Calhoun.

[Ali makes a noise of distress.]

AUSTIN: I think at this point Brandish is definitely addressing *you* more than anyone else.

ALI: That's fair.

AUSTIN: As the person who's beaten him in combat, so --

ALI: I really don't wanna give up Calhoun and if there's, like, the possibility that we can go back and save him then I'll take that, but as far as, like, this bribe that's being put up, she can take that, that's fine.

AUSTIN: So she does wanna leave Calhoun.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Brandish nods and sheaths his sword and does a similar hand motion to the one that, that Calhoun would do when he shouted, "Boat party!" He does not shout "boat party" though, he says,

BRANDISH: Let 'em go. Leave the bodies. They're ours.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: That's... that's one of them moments where I wonder how things woulda gone differently. More and more I think about those - those pathways diverged. And the scary thing is, sometimes, the alternatives don't look much better.

For Hadrian, Fantasma and their snow elf guide, Throndir, the problem is that the path had been decided and walked long before they arrived to the icy woodlands that led them toward the Mark of the Erasure. After overcoming the familiar dangers of the forest - an angry owlbear, the senseless goblin horde called, of all things, the Nameless, the paralyzing cold - the group began encountering stranger things. A man made of living ice, a strange blush of cherry blossom leaves. They sought refuge with an old goblin, Mee Kosh, who still remembered his words - not like his kin. Mee Kosh revealed that there was a time when things were different, when the goblins and the snow elves weren't rivals but allies. Friends, even. But things changed when the Word Eaters came.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

MEE KOSH: I ain't seen a snow elf in, mm, a long time. Long time. Used to live with them.

AUSTIN: He's like talking to you about this, Hadrian, as, like, you both sip some of his, like, herbal tea. This is also before the braying of the animals outside.

[Long pause.]

MEE KOSH: Used to live with them.

HADRIAN: Oh.

MEE KOSH: Taught them a lot.

[Long pause.]

MEE KOSH (slowly): Big fight. Long fight. I don't...

AUSTIN: He looks confused for a second.

MEE KOSH (extremely slowly): I don't remember... big fight, but... we left and... mm. They were not so good. They did bad things. They did very bad things. (Long pause.) This one seems okay. He seems alright.

DRE: Do I hear any of this?

HADRIAN (overlapping): Yeah, I, I agree.

AUSTIN: He's very quiet. You'd have to, like, be listening in, you know what I mean? This is like... you guys are in the corner poring over books and trying to put together what the *fuck* The Nameless are.

[DRE laughing.]

ART: Which is, like, oddly rude in its own right, like, he says something and you're like... "we're gonna go read for several hours and then we'll be back."

[AUSTIN and DRE laughing.]

AUSTIN: It's a... but it's a very... yeah. Mm.

[Pause.]

MEE KOSH: Kindrali remembered.

AUSTIN: He says.

HADRIAN: Who?

MEE KOSH: Kindrali. He Who Remembers The Day? Kindrali remembers. Well...

AUSTIN: He sighs.

HADRIAN: Is that a person or a deity?

AUSTIN: Good question. Do you ask him that, or?

HADRIAN: Yeah... is that a person?

MEE KOSH: Yes.

AUSTIN: Do you also ask if it's a deity?

HADRIAN: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yes.

HADRIAN: Excuse me, sir, I have the market cornered on people who are also deities right now? And please stay in your lane.

[AUSTIN and DRE lose it.]

MEE KOSH: We left and started building again. We knew... we knew it would not be good. We needed to start building again. We needed more.

HADRIAN (slowly): O... kay...? You know these orcs? Lem would love to meet you.

MEE KOSH: They...

AUSTIN: He kind of, like, gestures with his hand to outside.

MEE KOSH: They were with Kindrali. We were building. And... (Long pause.) Then they stopped building and just *took*.

HADRIAN: Oh...

AUSTIN: The braying starts. You find out what the Nameless are. He sighs. The cattle are heard further and further away. A sharp yelp. He doesn't do anything. He lets them go.

HADRIAN (?): Yikes.

MEE KOSH: Kindrali...

AUSTIN: He speaks louder now. I think at this point everyone is kind of gathered together.

MEE KOSH: Kindrali... he lives in a cave. Big cave. (Pause.) They came for him. The Word-Eaters. They took his words. They took his name. (Long pause.) Sleep?

HADRIAN (tentatively): Yeah... yeah... I think we've all had a long day.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: They're shadows, you know. The Word-Eaters? Sent to Hieron by the Nothin' that came before. Heat and dark that tear language whole from minds and culture and replace it with void. When they attack openly they're easy to deal with. But when they're coy and subtle, they can erase whole civilizations. That's how they split the goblins and the elves, made them forget those old words. Trust. Friendship. The greater good, and all that. They stole other words, too. Warmth. Love. Coolness. And twisted them into their most extreme and dangerous forms. So, in order to stop the Word-Eaters and resume their journey east, the party tracked down Kindrali only to find that the old ogre-king had been killed and replaced by the leader of those shadows. And when they found it, it grinned the way murderers do. It toyed with them like a large cat. It seemed

like a fight was at hand except... the Great Fantasma had other ideas. And he had a story to tell.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

FANTASMO: I told you to be quiet. I am not finished with my story.

AUSTIN: He, like, bows to you.

FANTASMO (with gravitas): This was... before I was... the head of the most powerful magical university in the land. This was before I had enrolled in that university. There was one thing... there was *one driving force* that led me to this university. That led me to knowledge and magic. Do you know what that was?

KINDRALI: What was it?

NICK (kind of laughing): I get up on my tippy-toes as much as I possibly can, and I whisper at him,

[AUSTIN laughing.]

FANTASMO (whispering, slowly and dramatically): *Ignorance.*

NICK: And as I'm saying it, Fantasma is recalling the fear and the powerlessness that he had as a young elf watching the world crumble around him and not knowing anything to do about it, watching his elders die, watching magic as he knew it drain from the world. Just this complete, crippling fear of the unknown and emptiness of ignorance.

AUSTIN: He *how/s* at you. And you feel... you feel a wealth of knowledge, you feel words pass through you for just a brief moment - things that you, that no one else knows, things that, you know... knowledge that even at your height, even when surrounded by your books, things from before the, the bad times, pass through you briefly. All of you in the room feel this. For a brief moment, Hadrian? Ah, I'll come to Hadrian last. One second. Hadrian's is important in a big-picture way.

Thrandir, you see... you see Auniq and it's at its glory days when the goblins still lived there and you see people working hand in hand to raise crops that will live in this bad weather. There's a point at which the weather changes and they have to figure out shit, like we're prepared for what the climate was supposed to be here before the Erasure and this is not what it is anymore, so how do we deal with it. And it was some harsh times but then they get through it and there's friendship and, and a real intermingling of the species. And a friendship, and like, these pass through you, and they're gone in the next second.

Fantasma, you feel a deep connection to the amount of knowledge this man had for as much... or this thing? Excuse me. It swells up in you for the brief moment you... there's something seductive about that much knowledge which you are already familiar with that sort of seduction.

NICK: Mhm.

AUSTIN: Or that sort of seductive power. And you see far away places and you see the kind of magical theory that was so powerful as to be forbidden even to people at the highest level of the university, you know? Like, the kind of nuclear reactor level shit that's kept behind lock and key flows through you for a brief moment and it's gone. You don't... you remember a *touch* of it.

NICK: Fantasma falls to his knees --

AUSTIN: Okay.

NICK: -- like, gripping his staff as that washes over him.

AUSTIN: You can also remove the "stunned" state as you get your invisibility spell back and your prestidigitation. (with glee) Haaadrian. They're there. All of them.

ART: All of...

AUSTIN: The old five?

ART: Yeah.

AUSTIN: The old five.

ART: The old five.

AUSTIN: The pantheon that used to rule this place.

ART (overlapping): The *pantheon*. Uh huh.

AUSTIN: And you don't know their names but you see the Boy-King again, with his blond locks and his distant view. And you see the iron sun, the iron king who you worship, Samoths, and his name comes back to your lips and it is a beautiful thing to have again. And you see her with her shield, defending the continent against the waves themselves. And you see her, the pirate woman at the head of her ship moving down across the coast, her ship filled with refugees. And you see a man? A tree? A thing in-between. Jolly, playful, watching the world burn and not being too sure what to do about it. And then they're gone but you see them for that second and you'll always have that second.



He drops to his knees as he's howling at you and begins to take fire, take flame in the same way that the other things did - not the big fireball one but, you know. As they were defeated, so to speak --

NICK: Yeah, like the blue --

AUSTIN: The blue --

NICK: Burning at the edges, yeah.

AUSTIN: Yes, exactly. Separating from here. And he smiles at you and he says,

KINDRALI: I still have... I still got one.

AUSTIN: And you feel it slip from you, however slightly. That you've lost just a bit of your pride. Just a little bit.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: For all that theater, though, the group did not defeat *all* of the Word-Eaters. That's important to remember. In fact, I think you've seen one of them. You know. The one that spun up as a gigantic winter storm, the one that fled westward back to Velas.

Hella, Lem, and Fero, on the other hand, decided not to flee. Instead, they gave chase after the undead Captain Brandish and towards that strange city in the foggy coastal cove. They stowed their ship outta sight and made beachfall under the safety of dark. The group attempted to move quietly through the city where they hoped to rescue the imprisoned Captain Calhoun. Only thing is, not everyone, or *everything*, agreed to be quiet.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: Speaking of weird things, the second your foot hits the ground your blade comes alive.

[ALI squeaks.]

AUSTIN: And you hear it first, but it's not too long before Lem and Fero do too. They're chanting, a choir of voices, "Tristero, Tristero, Tristero." And they're *shouting* it. "You enter the realm of death itself," they say, in unison. "Turn back."

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: They were warned again, too, by the pirate-turned-chef Emmanuel, who offered a vague but important addition - either leave now, or stay forever. Those who remain in Nacre for more than a day, well. They never leave.

Despite that, the group did not turn back. They stayed and discovered that that city, Nacre, an ancient seaside resort town, was protected from the Erasure by the seeming abdication of the divine power of my kin, Tristero, Lord of Death. The living and undead of Nacre stood side by side under the city's alabaster towers and in its fragrant markets. They're provided by with food and supplies developed through the hard work in the city's manufactories and caught in its fisheries. Plus, with whatever Captain Brandish and his fleet of pirates could bring in through their sea-doggin'. And it all happened under the protection of Adelaide Triste, Queen of Death, Empress of Pearls, the Reluctant Savior of the Longest Light, Blessed by the Far Sea. My kin's daughter. My niece, I s'pose. And the woman who took the throne because her brother wouldn't. Her brother, Angelo Triste, Lord Tristan the Ninth, the Ivory Crown, the Prince of Pearls, the Emir of Alabaster, the Reluctant, the Betrayer, the Coward, the Wretched, the Abdicator of Hope, The son of Tristero, Lord of Death. Or, as he was goin' by those days, Captain Calhoun. Even with that knowledge, Hella, Lem, and Fero continued their search for their captain. Unfortunately, in the Tristero Suite of Nacre's finest hotel - the place where the Lord of Death came to stay on vacations, you see - Hella found herself on the end of Brandish's sword. Well. Not really on the *end* so much as on the hilt, the blade pierced cleanly through her chest.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

AUSTIN: Dying here is a trip backwards through your time. You remember vividly, you're in... you're kind of embodied in various moments of your life. You remember cutting Brandish and just not pushing hard enough to take the head from his neck. You remember the first raft that you traveled on as a bodyguard. You remember being gifted the sword. It was lifted from a pile of trinkets and blades that meant nothing to the people that gave it to you. You remember hearing the clanking of the miners digging out the metal that's made Ordenna so rich. You remember your parents, you remember your friends from childhood, you remember the first time that you swung a sword. And then, you are in a space of bright white. The walls are, are gleaming here. It is the sort of white that communicates not peace but dominance. You see a man sitting in a throne - the throne, the throne is the center of this room. It is built into the ground in such a way that the ground itself rotates and the throne rotates to face you. It's a marble throne. And in it sits a man with grayed hair and a well-groomed beard. His eyes are a sharp blue and he wears black and red. They're kingly clothes but they're also practical. He isn't extravagant but he knows that his place is to exact power. And his voice booms,

TRISTERO: Hella. Approach.

ALI: Which I do..

AUSTIN: Which you do.

TRISTERO: You've picked an odd time to die. Are you ready to move on?

HELLA: No.

TRISTERO: Hm. I thought not. There are others, though, who should be by my side. I will let you live, I will give you back your life, and you will be my blade. You will return those to me who left me in life. You will begin with my son. Not many people could do this for me, Hella, but you have just the tool for the job.

HELLA: Your son is important to me, but if that's what this takes, then I'll do it.

TRISTERO: He's important to me, too.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: Hella was given her life back, but not her freedom. First of all, she was imprisoned by her promise to Tristero who, finally tired of being trapped in the immaterial space between Hieron and Nothingness, where the dead pass through. In the old days, remember, he could have just rewritten things such that he never died, but, without his divine authorship, well, he'd been trapped in between life and death for too long. Only an heir would free him, and the only way his heir could take his place was if he were killed. Second, of course, Hella was imprisoned literally, along with Lem and Fero, all of whom were taken to the dark tower where criminals were held. All the criminals, including Calhoun. And it took a little doing but she split off from them, made her way up the tower, and found him there, alone in his cell and scared. My nephew. Out of reach in that city of fog and ivory and gold. Hoping that someone would come to help him.

[FLASHBACK to Autumn in Hieron.]

HELLA: You asked me, before, if I came here to help you, and I... I really did. I get angry and I get distracted and that's what happened when I let them take you. Um. I can't, um. (With false cheer.) So! I... I don't have my sword, so, so I guess I... we could- (Deep breath.) I met your dad.

CALHOUN: Excuse me?

HELLA: I met your dad. (Laugh-crying.) Um...

CALHOUN: My father is dead. I killed him.

HELLA: Yeah, no, but, he's... he's... you're from Nacre, you don't know how this works?

CALHOUN: I don't know what you're talking about but I think you should leave.

HELLA: I just --

CALHOUN (calling): Guards!

HELLA: No, no, he wants... he wants me to kill you.

[CALHOUN laughs sadly.]

HELLA: And I don't want to, but if she's going to then why don't I? If you're gonna be tortured --

[KEITH laughing wildly in the background.]

AUSTIN (laughing in disbelief): He stands up and is, like --

[Intermingled noises of distress and disbelief from everyone.]

AUSTIN: He's like, looking over his shoulders.

CALHOUN (resigned): You threw me to the dogs and now you're gonna kill me. This is what's gonna happen right now. All right, fine. Let's go. Why not here?

AUSTIN: He starts crying.

[FLASHBACK ends.]

SAMOL: And so she delivered a punch and then she reached out with her hand. She didn't have her sword now, remember, that Blade in the Dark - it had been taken away from her when she was imprisoned. So she reached out with her hand and wrapped it slowly around his neck and she *squeezed* and she watched as he died. And then she watched again. And a third time. First a man, then a mass of animated flesh, and then a spirit. His spirit. Even now, I don't know... I don't know if I forgive her for that. When he finally died, her hand. It *closed* in a powerful clap. That's how hard she squeezed him. How tightly she held him. Back then, Hella didn't know how to hold anyone close to her in any other way than with violence.

[MUSIC underneath - "Inside".]

And back east, as the sun set behind Hadrian, Fantasma, and Throndir, its light was caught and shaped in the branches of the trees, and it formed a divine signal that pointed them further eastward toward the massive fallen Tower of Samot. Hadrian still believed, then. So sincerely he believed that it was Samoths who guided him. But we know better than that, don't we?

[EPISODE END.]