

II.

No matter where you look, you see.

- Great Pile adage

Excerpts from A Brief History of the Great Pile and Other, Lesser Piles: Abridged

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The Great Pile, as it is known in this day and age, originated from the scattered layperson support network that formed around the Enclave of Pilus in [Year A - 340]. Prior to the formation of this layperson network, the Enclave of Pilus was little more than a way station for idealist monks, a literal oasis in the southeastern quadrant of the Khadramele Desert. For nearly two hundred years, the Enclave of Pilus had a symbiotic relationship with the burgeoning trade hub surrounding it: in exchange for water access, monks extracted a small tithe from traders and businessmen who exploited the advantageous trade route connecting [City A] to [City B] through the Khadramele. As the Pile's population grew, and demand for water increased, the monks progressively carved deeper into the bedrock to gain better access to the wellspring that originated the oasis. This two hundred year digging process, coupled with the concomitant construction of a vastly complicated system of pumps and aqueducts, produced the Enclave of Pilus as it is today, though its water distribution system has gone unused for a century.

The Great Pile, namely the boroughs, markets, and several districts, with a population of roughly two hundred thousand, began to emerge in full force in the ten year period following Master Accelias' report that the Pilus wellspring was slowly declining in force in [Year A - 122], whereupon magistrates from [City A] and [City B] convened to discuss alternative means of watering the pile. Several suggestions for magical intervention were vetoed by scholars from the Academy of Erngastron due to concerns that mana leakage caused by artificial rain could induce severe, magical mutations in both the desert fauna and the populace of the Pile, as had been documented by Il Josep in [Year A - 580], precipitating the Seventh Cleansing. Instead, at great human cost, prison brigades from [City B] diverted the Mele river from its course along the southern border of the Khadramele, passing close enough to the Pile for irrigation efforts to succeed.

This irrigation effort signalled the end of the Enclave of Pilus' stranglehold on the Pile's water, and simultaneously marked the beginning of the Pile's modern ascendancy as the largest known, ungoverned populace within Erngastron territory. To date, the city has repelled no fewer than *three* attempts by the Erngastron Crown to gain control of trade between [City A] and [City B]: first a tax was levied in proportion to merchants' sales in [Year A - 80]. This was found unenforceable, due to the total lack of Erngastron military presence in the Pile. The second was led by Marquis Offreid, a puppet governor of the Pile installed by agreement by both [City A] and [City B], under immense pressure from the Crown. However, the Marquis soon found that the Pile contained little to no governing *apparatus*. Bureaucracy and policing were totally foreign to the predominantly anarchic populace, and the Marquis' decrees were met with total disregard, in much the same manner as attempts at taxation. Offreid was assassinated in his bedchambers by his own security detail less than two years after assuming his title.

Crown Prince Eliasmith II, infuriated at the inability of peaceable methods to gain control of trade *within Erngadstron*, marched on the Great Pile in [Year A - 73] with a contingent of five hundred dromedary brigadiers and twenty Academy mages from the capitol. The journey took two months and to his horror (as his meticulous diaries relate), upon arriving in the Southeastern Quadrant of what had by now become the Khadramele grasslands as we know it, his troops were met with leagues of rolling dunes, parching sun, and no sign of the Great Pile. For weeks his troops searched, day and night for signs of the Pile's perpetual fires and general clamour, to no avail.

Desertion within his ranks became the norm, and the Crown Prince, fearing mutiny, fled his own campsite in the dead of night with twenty trusted men, leaving General Nabad, a seasoned native to the Khadramele plains, in control of the remaining forces. Daybreak found the Crown Prince at the mouth of the Great Pile, along with a trade caravan bearing textile manufacturing equipment from [City A] to [City B]. “It was as though a veil had been lifted from my eyes, and the Pile had been waiting patiently for us all along,” Eliasmith writes. He was denied access to the mouth of the Pile by a militia of two hundred men and women, merchants by trade, who took up sword and spear alike in defence of their profession. The Crown Prince returned to the capitol in shame, followed two weeks behind by General Nabad, who lost over half of his forces to defection and thirst. Since these events, there have been yearly reports of over-large caravans becoming lost in the rolling sands of the long-forgotten Khadramele desert, but trade through the Great Pile has continued largely unimpeded.

Eliasmith’s Folly has been commonly attributed to the meditations of the idealist monks of the Pilus Enclave; their reputation has stoked the flow of donation to the Enclave over the last several decades, despite the steadily decreasing contribution of their wellspring to the Great Pile’s water supply.

II.

Three illusionists grace the Great Pile: the least fools others, the middle fools himself, and the greatest fools the gods.

- Great Pile adage

Carts rolled by lazily, their wheels scattering flecks of iridescent dust, sparkling blues and reds and greens in alternating hues. Pedestrians lurched between the carts, heavily overburdened with reinforced packs, tottering and speaking angrily in alien tongues. Haim curled up in a pile against the curved arch of a doorway as though he were nestled in bed, smiling out at the market’s insanity. Two weeks of unshaved fuzz girded his balding pate; dirt and spilled wine mottled his robes; his sandals were in tatters. A policeman walked by and gave him a respectful nod, bouncing with each step a foot into the air as though supported by pneumatic springs. *He must be on the journey*—Haim could hear the man’s thoughts, even when he could barely hear his own against the background clatter.

Little birds began to gather about his feet, chattering in their own private language, eyeing him dispassionately. A few picked at small fragments of stone around his feet, and he kicked at them lazily. A slightly larger bird shuffled to the front of the gaggle, and began picking at the stones, directly where he had just kicked. Haim took another swig of his wine, and felt the lukewarm liquid slide all the way down his esophagus into his stomach. The corners of his vision began to blur and vibrate in strange colors. *Nearly there*. He swiped his foot at the bigger bird, and the tip of his sandal brushed its feathers. *Fuck you*, the bird thought. *So you do speak my language*, he responded. The bird twittered something unintelligible to its compatriots and flew off.

We all do, whispered the stones, in their rumbling, laconic voices. *We’re all here with you, we always have been*. Haim smiled to himself and snuggled closer to the stone arch next to him, feeling as though the universe was embracing him. “Just one more and we’ll be there,” he said to no one in particular, as he reached into his threadbare sack and produced another berry. “Where?” Startled, he turned to find a small girl with opaline eyes gazing at him. “Everywhere, of course!” The girl seemed unimpressed. She stood up without breaking her gaze and watched as he plopped the berry into his mouth, savoring its chocolatey flavor, and rose. “Can I have one?” “Only initiates can have these, and besides, it was my last one.” He took another swig of wine, and fumbled in his bag for another sticky patch, which he carefully affixed to the pock-marked skin along his left flank with

the others. "You can have some wine if you want though," he said, offering the ceramic jug down to the girl, who he only just realized wasn't there.

The patch's chemical electricity surged into his veins and it was night but it wasn't the market anymore and there weren't streets, but rather only night and he smiled to himself *because I made it, even when those other fuckers couldn't and they said it wouldn't work* but he rather tried to smile because smiling doesn't mean much when you don't have muscles and he tried to think but thinking doesn't mean much when there's nothing but thought *and what's the difference between your thoughts and anything else when there isn't anything there in the first place. When the barren substrate of consciousness envelops your being and drags you down with a vestibular lurching horror that is no longer yours to control and the sensation and smell and character of vomit enters your being and becomes what had previously been you and the blackness itself vibrates with malevolent hatred at the horror of the abuses you have inflicted upon yourself, when emptiness itself reaches out and grasps your throat and shakes you violently and screams into your face at the abject disgust of your condition, what's the difference between your thoughts and anything else in the first place.* Wake up. I need you.

Haim awoke on the market cobblestones looking into the faces of concerned passersby, their thoughts no longer intelligible. He felt shockingly sober and surprisingly fresh, given that his robes were coated in a green vomit that vibrated in faint yellow-purple overtones.

III.