

# Rejected Stories & Shorts 2

Next week, Systema Delenda Est will begin!

In the meantime, here is the wrong story that I had started instead of Systema Delenda Est that ate up a bunch of time. The basic idea was to put my money where my mouth was and actually write a Naga Warlock character. Which didn't turn all that great, as you can see. I wasn't really feeling it, and the main thing is that this intro was pointless. As my editor put it, this is the mandatory tutorial level.

Some of this might show up again. Systema Delenda Est sort of springs from a well that I've been working on for a while, my own personal conception of a postbiological civilization. This particular world is one that I think has a lot of promise, and I think a properly nonhuman naga character could be fun, but this was not the right way to go about it.

## Preparation is Key

Antoq has been a battle slave for twenty years. When the odds catch up with him and he lies, wounded and dying, an ancient power offers him health, wealth, and status beyond measure.

Naturally, he refuses. The only thing he would ask for is impossible.

Naturally, the power agrees to the impossible task, and charges Antoq with one equally impossible in return.

Given only the smallest gift of knowledge, Antoq must take a message that cannot be understood to a place that cannot exist.

### Chapter 1 - Scribed

Antoq considered simply killing the elf.

It wouldn't have done any good, and only gotten the others in his squad punished for his actions, but it was still a temptation. Their nominal commander and supposed master managed to be both reedy and runty, and far too interested in showing off his newly-acquired battle slaves to the Scribed accompanying him. If Antoq were to be forced to fight for the elves, it should at least be done properly.

Finally the elf lifted the flute he used to issue orders to his lips, blowing the order to charge well past the best time to have assaulted the enemy ranks. Antoq lunged forward at last, long spear in hand. His fellow naga slithered beside him, a full score in total, to his left and his right with Antoq at the center. They were all of them doomed, but not this day, not this battle. Not while Antoq was there.

His forked tongue flicked out for a moment, tasting the excitement and fear on the air, some of it from his people and some from the amphibious defenders lined up at the edge of the swamp. A Then the line of spears hammered home, smashing into the ragged shield formation of the muckwren defending the swampy beach with the force of a cavalry charge. His own spear slipped just past a crude shield to run his opponent through, sending the corpse reeling into the back ranks.

His lip curled as he dropped the longspear in favor of the shortspear tied at his back, but his contempt wasn't directed at the hapless soldiers he was destroying. He reserved that for himself and the masters looking on from a safe distance. Himself, for brutalizing people that naga had never had trouble with, and the elves, for the laziness and degeneracy of forcing others to fight their battles. Once they had at least kept the borders around the ruptureseeds, which had *some* point, but even something as detestable as keeping battle slaves could be further corrupted.

At least in combat, Antoq had some freedom. He could act upon his own desires, his own goals, and he could keep his people safe. Something he surely couldn't do beyond the battlefield.

An enemy spear thrust his way and he slid to the side, returning the favor and driving his shortspear through the muckwren's belly. Years of hard-won experience made the immediate cut and thrust of each individual clash almost reflexive, a calm and iron clarity descending as the muckwren shield line folded inward from their charge. Hot and cold mingled in his preysense as blood spilled onto mud, and he bashed the nearest muckwren backward with his buckler before rising up on his tail to glance over the battlefield, momentarily double the height over the other combatants.

Antoq had but one goal, and that was to keep his people safe. He had nineteen young charges, naga barely old enough to fight, all out on this ridiculous border-keeping foray to get some combat experience. So far they hadn't picked up more than minor cuts and bruises, and he intended to keep it that way. His brief look told him exactly who needed help.

Antoq dropped to the ground, all the way down until he was completely prone, below what the startled muckwren were expecting. He powered through the two sides, unsheathing his knife to hack at exposed flesh and sever tendons before he reached where young Nasar was having trouble. The poor naga had managed to get himself flanked by two muckwren, and Antoq smashed into one, his shortspear sending it reeling in a spray of blood.

"Good?" Antoq spoke in their native tongue he slid past Nasar to defend the young naga's flank, one of the words he'd managed to teach his people for the battlefield. Most of them only spoke the language of the elves, and Antoq hadn't managed to have a conversation with anyone in his native tongue in years.

"Good," Nasar panted, both from exertion and nerves. He followed the word with a sudden strike, a coiled lunge that broke the muckwren's shield and likely its arm before burying the spearpoint in the fish-faced being's chest. Nasar took far too long to extract the spear from the corpse, but Antoq kept the few muckwren who tried to take advantage of that opportunity away with ease.

The muckwren were clearly inexperienced fighters, and Antoq hated himself for killing them, but between the welfare of his people and that of some savage race he barely knew, he'd choose his naga every time. Not that any of the young ones on this particular expedition were much better; they had only a modicum of training, that which he'd been able to give them while on the move, and the brutal experience of the battlefield. A form of instruction he was determined they'd survive.

Satisfied Nasar could hold for a time, he charged across the churned and bloody mud to another pocket of the melee, whipping his tail to cut the legs of one muckwren out from under it and blocking a thrust with his own body. He grunted as a speartip was blunted by the armor along his body, jarring the bone-anchored hooks that held it in place and adding yet another bruise to his collection. Better that for him than a wound for the younger naga who had not yet learned how to fight properly.

The elves were surely keeping track, but Antoq cared little for how well he distinguished himself in battle. There was nothing he could accomplish save keeping his people alive, and all his prowess was bent toward that goal. In the course of a scant few minutes he acquired quite a few new cuts and bruises as he intervened wherever he could, ensuring that none of his naga were overwhelmed. He wasn't Scribed himself – no naga were – so he couldn't clear the battlefield himself, but in the press and cry of clashing spear and shield, he was at home preventing any real vulnerability.

Suddenly it was over. The surviving muckwren broke and fled, and Antoq spoke sharply to keep a few of the more energetic naga from pursuing. Not that the pathetic muckwren had the wherewithal to mount an ambush, but good habits started early, and he wouldn't always be around to watch over them. Instead he led them over to the brackish waters of the shore to clean their wounds. Antoq joined them in the salty shallows, scrubbing away the swamp mud and water from his bright blue scales — though he couldn't avoid noticing his color was starting to dull with age.

The worst of the injuries were some deep stab wounds, despite armor and the natural toughness of scales, but there was nothing that concerned him deeply. Most of them would have shown enough promise to be given access to alchemical healing supplies, but Antoq never wished to rely on the largesse of the elves. None of them cared for his people beyond their value as useful livestock.

The commanding elf signaled that they should return with his flute, an incongruously light tone on the bloody remains of the battlefield, and Antoq set his jaw as his charges obeyed without even looking at him. It was a reminder that no matter his command on the field, he wasn't in charge, and never would be. That even his own people obeyed elf commands over his. Antoq's hand tightened on the spear shaft before he followed after, knowing that his time of freedom was over.

"A good job, slithwren," the elf with the flute said, using the elven term. "The following have earned a merit for the past week's battles: Lassren, Aressar..." The list was seventeen names long, far above average but the elves wanted to tempt and addict the youth to comforts they have to work much harder to earn in the future. "Inshar." Antoq's false name was last and he stared at the elf, contemplating once again running him through with the spear he still held in his hand. Once again, he refrained, for the punishment would fall on the heads of his people rather than his own.

"I cede mine to Nasar," Antoq said instead, disgusted at even the thought of taking advantage of any so-called comforts. He certainly didn't deserve them, and poor young Nasar had gotten the worst of his fights. The naga really wasn't a warrior at heart, and Antoq had to admit at least to himself that he had a soft spot for the boy. If the slavers hadn't come, Nasar was just the right age to be Antoq's own son.

“Denied,” the elf said, an insufferable smirk both on his face and in his voice. “You can’t keep handing off your merits to the unworthy, Inshar.”

The frozen coals of rage flared to life in Antoq’s gut as, for a moment, the world seemed to shrink down to himself and the elf and the spear in his hand. A flicker of movement at the corner of his eye broke his fugue, and he saw one of the Scribed had come closer. Only then did Antoq realize he’d coiled his tail up beneath him, tense and ready to spring, so he deliberately lowered his spear and curled his lip.

Someday he would kill that elf, but he would do so at a time of his choosing, when it actually mattered. Antoq pushed the rage back down into the cold crystal inside him, and stared levelly at their handler. The moment stretched and the sneer fell away.

“To the wagons,” the elf snarled after a moment, and Antoq ignored the Scribed watching him closely as he followed his youthful charges to the elven wagon train. There they shed their leather armor, which hooked to the piercings wired to bone under their scales, and of course their weapons. There was only room for a few naga to ride at a time; a purposeful lack. Naga didn’t have the long-distance endurance that elves did, or their beasts of burden, and forcing them to slither the bulk of the distance just to keep up with the food and drink meant they were too tired to be particularly restive.

Antoq slid up beside Nasar and the other one who had not managed a merit, Shensen, putting a reassuring hand on each of their shoulders. Shensen scowled and shook off Antoq’s touch, slithering forward to the front of the wagon. Antoq let him go. That particular naga was always angry, and he deserved to be, but it did him no favors either in the group or on the battlefield. When there was a chance Antoq would take him aside, and teach him how to properly direct that anger — out of sight of their overseers.

“It’s really not bad,” Antoq reassured Nasar, even if he knew they were empty words. “Just make sure you eat as much as you can and sleep as much as you can. You’ll want to make sure you’re healed up before they send us off again.” Nasar nodded, then winced as the motion tugged at the puncture wound on his chest. One fortunately only deep enough to be irritating, rather than skewering anything important.

The trek back to the nearest naga enclave was interminable, slogging through fields and dusty roads for hours a day. Antoq did his best to discuss the battle with his charges, but the constant movement, the elves refusing to stop even to eat, made it difficult. The forced march was hardly necessary, but likely his fault for irritating the flautist. For all that the elf had absolute authority over the naga squad, he was as still small and petty as any of the supposed masters he’d encountered.

On the second evening, a burning green-and-gold line cut its way through the starry heavens, and everyone stopped to watch it. The falling ruptureseed cut its way through the heavens north and east, somewhere out beyond the great waters of the ocean, the distant thunder of its descent reaching them long minutes later. Antoq wished luck to whomever was cursed – or blessed – with the presence of the thing

Most of the naga brightened as the enclave came into view over a grassy hill, ready and eager for the break, but Antoq’s guts twisted all the way back to the tip of his tail at the sight. They were all the same and they were all prisons, even if they weren’t called that. The outer area

was just grass and pounded dirt, with a well and a trench and indifferent food served at indifferent times. The merited were given time in the middle area, where low stone dwellings constituted actual shelter and cooked spiced meat was more freely available.

The center was mostly reserved for those who had killed an enemy Scribed, and for the nagini. Enough merits offered temporary access, and Antoq was ashamed that he'd worked for the privilege when he was younger. Years later, he was far wiser and lived with the knowledge that, if he had any children with any of the interested nagini back then, he would never know them. Nasar could very well be one, but at such a remove of time and distance he doubted even the elves had any idea.

Normally he preferred the outer fields, which was at least more honest. The flautist smirked at him as he was ushered into the passage to the middle section, sliding into cool grass and stone warmed by the light of The Rupture. It was intensely uncomfortable to be surrounded by actual walls and the rows of small longhouses, let alone welcomed by naga who had long surrendered to being a slave.

"Welcome! Good job!" One of the naga called out, seeing the new faces, a sentiment echoed by the others lounging around nearby or basking in the sun. Antoq flexed his hands, resisting the urge to throttle the cheerful youth. Many of the naga who found themselves in the middle area were happy to be there. Worse, they were *content*, satisfied that food and shelter were reward enough. He wasn't sure if he hated or pitied them, despite them being his own kind.

In either case he welcomed not their company and so brushed past them to follow his own advice. Food, rest, and nothing else. Antoq neither wanted nor deserved any of the scant comforts offered by the compound, a cage that could scarcely even be called gilded. Not that most of the naga there even realized, having known nothing else.

Dwelling in the enclave was being among strangers. It wasn't simply that he didn't know the naga there, but also that almost none of them had been born free. Raised in a constrained world, knowing only the language and customs of elves, with only a scant handful of naga old enough to remember what came before or from isolated village recently conquered. No faces were familiar, no words or conversations reminded him of the home so long gone.

He worked out his frustrations with exercise, going through weapon forms and slithering circles in the most out-of-the-way corner he could find. As much as he hated fighting for the elves, it was also the only time he was able to leave the enclave and find some semblance of freedom and camaraderie. The enclave naga tried to be pleasant and friendly, but it was a hollow thing. Without freedom, there was nothing to ground even the simplest of conversations.

When the call came for them to go out once again, Antoq was almost happy to be on the move again. He didn't care for how the fighting risking the lives of the soldiers under his charge, but it was better than a slow death in a prison. From the naga gathering together outside the enclave, by the long wagon train, he was to be in charge of the same group as before — Nasar, Shensen, and the other young warriors. Unlike before, there were half a dozen other groups assembling along the length of the train, marking the outing as something more than casual border-keeping.

"What's going on?" Nasar half-whispered to him as he approached, the only one brave enough or nervous enough to do so.

“A real fight,” Antoq said shortly. “They’re expecting organized forces.” Battle slaves weren’t told what was going on, of course, and the elves didn’t gossip enough to generate any real rumors.

He studied the other group leaders, but none of them seemed more than passingly familiar. All of them were younger than him as well, as there were nearly no naga left who were from a time before the elves had conquered them. Antoq wasn’t the only one left, but there were precious few naga around who had been born free.

The flautist played the command to circle up on the wagons and the column began to move. Antoq took the lead, squinting against the bright ring of the Rupture as they traveled south and east. After years of fighting for the elves, mostly at the borders of their kingdom, he likely knew more about it than most of its citizens, but there was nothing that struck him as notable about their path.

Aches and pains from not-quite-healed wounds asserted themselves during the grueling journey. He wasn’t as resilient as he had been in his youth, and while Nasar seemed to be perfectly fine despite suffering genuine wounds, Antoq still had lingering bruises from deflected blows. It was only a matter of time before age caught up with him, and he wouldn’t be able to manage the field of battle.

He had no illusions what would happen then.

Antoq shook off such gloomy thoughts as one day stretched into the next. His fate was irrelevant; his life had been stolen twenty years ago when the elves had captured his village. The best use of his days now was to protect the young naga in his care, in the hopes that they might have some future.

A hope that didn’t seem likely when they reached their destination and Antoq saw a second elf army already encamped there — but one bearing different banners than the ones flying above their long train of wagons. Rebels, then, or perhaps another kingdom entirely. It would have been folly to imagine the one that had captured him was the only one in the world.

The opposing force was encamped at the top of a small ridge, surrounded by low trees with proud white trunks and dark green leaves, with red and gold flowers from the onset of spring. Small pennants flew above tents, bearing unit insignia, and his tongue flickered out for a moment to taste the characteristic thunderstorm scent of Ink being worked. Scribed could actually see the structure of Ink, but anyone could sense when it was being used.

“Stay close and be ready for my orders,” Antoq told his squad. “This will be far more dangerous than anything we have seen so far.” With so many Scribed on both sides, Antoq knew the battle wouldn’t last long — and not many were likely to survive. One or two lesser Scribed could devastate an entire squad by themselves, and the more skilled ones could render entire swaths of battlefield into little more than blood and meat. Ordinary mortals had no place when Scribed fought.

Scribed *could* be brought down, especially after they had expended all their Ink. He had done it once before. It was just that doing so required skill and cunning or ruinous numbers to accomplish, and Antoq knew the commanders of his side certainly didn’t have the former. That left his people to suffer for the latter.

“Form up,” Antoq told his people, even though they hadn’t been issued weapons and armor yet. If he were on the opposing side, he would hardly let the newly-arrived forces organize themselves without harassment. “In close, watch for anything incoming.”

As if cued, a thudding of hooves came from the left and a squad of mounted cavalry appeared from a stand of trees on the caravan’s flank. Long, gleaming pikes were leveled their way, sweeping toward the end of the column — toward Antoq’s squad. Antoq cast a glance at the covered wagon where the spears were still stored, but there was no time to try and get them.

“Full flatten! Countercharge, all the way through!” They were the best orders he could give, though if they even had knives that would be something. Naga had a peculiar relationship with the cavalry charge: on one hand, their long bodies, resting against the ground, were more susceptible to trampling, but on the other, their ability to *get* so low to the ground meant it was easier to avoid the pikes and spears and cutlasses of mounted combatants. Sprinting straight through the oncoming horses, prone to the ground, at least would put them in a better position.

They slithered forward, surprising the cavalry wing. At full charge a naga could outpace a horse, if only for a few seconds, so the two forces took only an instant to pass through each other. Antoq winced as despite all that he still felt a hoof come down on his lower body, hard enough to bruise if not break something, but then he was through.

Panicked whinnies sounded from behind him, and doubled back along his own length, raising his body back up to see that several of the horses had reared back, two of them tossing their riders. Charging a person was one thing, but a giant snake was enough to frighten even war-horses. The momentum of the charge carried most of them past their fallen comrades, giving Antoq the opportunity to act.

He locked his focus onto the neck of the nearest fallen soldier, using the only weapons he had available — his strike and his fangs. Speed blurred the world and the man gurgled out a scream as venom pumped into his veins. Antoq pulled himself from the addictive rush of sinking his fangs into flesh, and the dark satisfaction of killing an elf, any self, to rip the pike from the dying man’s hands. He pulled off the buckler secured to the leathers the soldier was wearing with a sharp snap, and was finally armed.

“Kill the fallen! Take their weapons!” Antoq shouted at his people, pleased to see at least a few had already started to follow his example without needing orders. Lasshren and Aressar both were going after their own victims, and while that meant most of his squad was still unarmed, they all seemed to have made it through the cavalry charge intact.

That single glance was all he could spare before lunging after the trailing elements, capitalizing on the surprise. The pike let him outrange a horse’s kick, and he had no pity in driving it into the side of the mount in front of him. It collapsed with an equine scream, sending the rider tumbling, and Antoq took the opportunity to finish off the elf with a thrust. Antoq’s lips peeled back from his fangs in a vicious grin as he grabbed that rider’s pike and tossed it behind him, where a startled Nassar barely managed to catch the weapon.

Their opportunity wouldn’t last long. It was easy enough to devastate a surprised and vulnerable foe; fighting prepared soldiers was another matter and he didn’t think his people were up to it. But if they could do enough damage, and quickly, they might just have a chance.

As unwieldy as the pikes were, naga could ply them far easier than unhorsed cavalry, and range ruled the battlefield.

The thought made him glance around ever so briefly, and he spotted what worried him: archers. A number of them, also on horses, had emerged to ambush the Scribed wagons further up. With some dark humor he wished them luck, and lunged after another cavalryman. Half a dozen of his naga had gotten themselves pikes, and for a moment it looked like the cavalry were going to take their losses and retreat. Despite being forced to confront the enemy unarmed, they might actually *win* the exchange from the sheer surprise.

Then the scent of lightning filled the air and his scales prickled.

“Scribed!” He shouted the warning, though anyone with a modicum of awareness should have noticed it. The leader of the cavalry charge, an elf dressed in fine leather and chain with unfamiliar decorations on his uniform, vaulted off his horse with the strength and grace of a Scribed using their Ink, and rushed forward in a blur. The elf’s curved saber whistled through the air as he easily bypassed Aressar’s pike and felled the young naga in a spray of blood. Antoq flinched, feeling the blow himself as the Scribed cut away the one thing he actually cared about in the battle. He abandoned his own opponent in haste to charge toward the Scribed, but another naga was closer.

“No!” Shensen, hotheaded as ever, lunged at the Scribed with his pike and was spitted through the chest for his troubles. If the elf hadn’t been Scribed, that might have been a fatal mistake, for a naga heart was kept in a different place than an elf’s, and Shensen’s body whipped forward to coil around the Scribed. Most elves would be, if not crushed, at least severely inconvenienced by six hundred pounds of muscle — but the Scribed simply braced himself and swept the saber down once again. Antoq’s heart clenched in his chest as Shensen’s head rolled across the grass, and the Scribed shrugged off the remainder of the corpse.

Then Antoq was there, fury tinting the clarity of battle as he charged in and forced the Scribed back. He didn’t have the speed of youth, but he had a lot more practice and actually knew how to use such an oversized polearm, lifted up on his tail to amplify the value of its reach. The Scribed dodged his initial flurry with contemptuous ease, but couldn’t close on Antoq the way he had the others. For all the Scribed’s augmented strength and speed, he was far from an inspired fighter. His advances were predictable, his thrusts telegraphed — but all that meant was that Antoq wasn’t instantly torn apart.

The standoff lasted only seconds, though that was an eternity in any real fight. Then Nasar, poor, foolish, brave Nasar, charged in from behind the elf with his pike. The impact sent the Scribed sprawling, but only for a second before he rolled to his feet, completely uninjured but absolutely infuriated. He grabbed Nasar’s pike, tearing it from the naga’s grip as Antoq took the opportunity to slide up next to Nasar and hammer the point home. His pike took the elf right in the eye, and even Ink-enhanced toughness wasn’t enough to stop Antoq’s weapon from turning it into a bloody ruin. The elf’s eyesocket stopped it from becoming a truly lethal blow, but the Scribed staggered backward with a scream, dropping Nasar’s pike.

Before Antoq could press the advantage, the elf flung up his hands, bloody face contorted in pain and fury. A sudden sharp smell of Ink saturated the air, and Antoq lifted his buckler in instinctive reaction as a small point of light blossomed just in front of the pair of naga. In the next moment it was as if a giant’s fist had slammed into him, vision blurring as he went sailing



bodily through the air. The world wheeled around him, giving him glimpses of the battle, of grass, of trees, and finally a thick trunk that broke his uncontrolled flight — and no few of his ribs. He could hear them crack as his body wrapped halfway around the trunk from the impact, but he barely even felt the pain. The sight of Nasar's shredded body hurt far more.

Antoq tried to move, to return to the fight, but his muscles refused to work, stunned and bruised over half his body. He only made it a few agonizing inches while he was forced to watch the elf Scribed methodically cut down the rest of Antoq's squad with a floating, flensing sphere of force. Each moment seared itself into his brain, failure after failure after failure. Blood thundered in his ears and his vision went black at the edges. Even dazed as he was, Antoq realized the Scribed hadn't really been taking them seriously at first, considering it took only seconds for the Inked to finish the job with his terrible conjuration. Only after the last naga fell did the Scribed in the wagon train begin moving, far, far, too late.

A stream of heat tickled his preysense, pulling his attention from the scene, and his eyes focused on the gushing stump of his left arm, which had been clipped by the edge of the Scribed's force sphere. Now ended it somewhat above the elbow. It didn't hurt, even though it should.

It was then he knew he was dead.

Part of him raged against it, against those who had stolen his life away and chained him solely for combat, for their own profit. Against all those lives spent in vain. But there was part of him that was strangely relieved. He'd spent his life trying to protect his people, trying to give them a chance for something other than servitude and battle, but he had failed. His best had been nothing and his men had been slaughtered while he watched, but it was over now. It was done. He was done.

The light of the Rupture turned gold.

Antoq blinked, something that took far longer than it should have. Each second seemed to grow, more and more moments packed into them, time lengthening and stretching beyond its rightful bounds. Every aspect of the world seemed to become more — more colorful, more vibrant. Sounds stretched and sharpened, and even his own heartbeat, thudding in his ears, became more profound.

This was magic. True magic, the kind used by the Old Races that had dominated the world in the time before the Rupture. There was no smell or sensation of Ink, nothing other than the fact itself. Antoq's dazed and addled mind couldn't find an explanation for it, save for his own state, until a naga slithered into view.

His scales were gold edged in silver, completely unlike the blues and greens Antoq was familiar with, and his eyes were a glowing ring with devouring black in the middle — just like the Rupture. Despite the majesty of his appearance and the silver-patterned silks he wore, there was something wrong, and Antoq studied him as he approached. By the time the strange naga drew up next to Antoq, he was certain.

"You're not a naga," he said, his voice a harsh croak. The stranger smiled broadly.

"I am not," he agreed. "Nor am I god. But I am an opportunity."

“Not interested,” Antoq said flatly, looking down at the stump of his arm. In the strange, extra time it still bled, though it was more of an ooze than the freely flowing stream of before. What should have been agony was dampened, suppressed under everything else being so much more potent.

“No?” The stranger still smiled. “I do not believe you have given up. Someone who can wound one of my Scribed without any augmentation of his own surely has a fire in him.”

“He wasn’t very good,” Antoq grunted. Perhaps it was unwise to provoke someone – something – he could not fathom, but he hardly had need for caution anymore. The being surely was not on Antoq’s side, and not just because it was one of his men that had killed all of his people. Nobody was on Antoq’s side except him.

“One works with the tools one has,” the stranger said with resignation. “But! I think you could do much.”

“I won’t be anyone’s slave again,” he said tiredly, watching his arm drip blood. “I’ve done that. Don’t like it.”

“Calling those who operate at my behest slaves is rather hurtful,” the stranger said with mock offense. “We have an agreement, a favor for a favor, a task for a task. I’m sure I can find something that you want.”

“But why?” Antoq asked, ignoring the implicit offer. The haze in his mind was clearing, whether because of the stranger’s presence or simply being forced to focus on something. “Sure there are better candidates here than an old soldier. I’m not even a Scribed.” Naga weren’t allowed to become Scribed, even if they’d had the knowledge.

“Perhaps I *am* making offers to other candidates.” The golden naga chuckled, coiling up beside Antoq, fingers laced together as he regarded the ongoing skirmish. It had not progressed much inside the extra time. “For you, however — you have killed Scribed before, haven’t you?”

“I’ve helped. Never on my own,” Antoq said, trying to take a deep breath and felt his broken ribs shift, halfway down his body. Despite himself he felt compelled to answer the stranger’s questions, whether that was the result of some magic or just the surreality of the situation.

“When one kills a Scribed, sometimes it’s possible to capture one of their Inkwells. The ones you have are cracked and broken, not well taken care of — but still there.” The stranger pointed one finger at Antoq. “All you need is a little bit of knowledge.”

“Still not interested,” Antoq said, flatly denying the offer. “To what point and purpose?” He jerked his head in the direction of the combat, inviting the stranger to see the futility in the idea of Antoq doing anything there. Even if he was somehow saved, somehow made whole, all he could do was go back to the exact same place he had failed from before. It wasn’t something he could do.

“Really, is there nothing you want?” The golden naga twisted his head to look at Antoq, Rupture-glowing eyes fixing him in place. The small, cold crystal of anger in Antoq’s gut flared to life and he glared in return.

“What I want is impossible. I want to see the elves broken.” His words came out crisp instead of hoarse, his single hand curling into a fist. “Their whole corrupt kingdom overturned, and my

people returned to the life we had before they came. If you could do that, I would crawl all the way to hell for you.”

“I accept your terms,” the stranger said, no longer smiling. Antoq froze, feeling that he was teetering on the edge of an abyss, at the edge of something that mattered far more than his own life.

“You said that elf was yours,” Antoq began tentatively, uncertain as to whether he understood what the stranger was proposing or not.

“One works with the tools one has.” The golden light of the Rupture turned harsh as the stranger focused on him. “I will accomplish the impossible for you, but only if you accomplish the impossible for me. There is a place called Anselum, a place lost to time and space that even I know not how to reach.” Antoq’s eyes widened at the name, for even he was familiar with it. An ancient legend of a place, a country in the sky that had been consumed by the Rupture.

“You must go there with his message.” The naga opened his hand to reveal what seemed like a golden scroll, yet it was translucent, strangely ephemeral; a dream conjured into the real world. “Take this to the one who dwells there.”

Beneath the grief and pain and bone-deep weariness, the ruin of his life and hopes, something stirred. Not even something as great as hope, merely a reflex to protect what he could. To help his people as he could.

“I will,” Antoq said, despite his gut screaming that bargaining with such a spirit or demon was a mistake. He hardly had anything he could lose. “Though I’m afraid I will not be going far like this.” He gestured to himself, battered and bleeding, and the battle, roaring and raging close by.

“Well, I did say it was impossible.” The smile returned, and the naga bent down, holding the scroll in one hand. “Given the nature of our bargain, there is only one small bit of help I can give you.” He raised the scroll in one hand, and suddenly thrust it into Antoq’s forehead.

A hammerblow of knowledge hit Antoq even harder than the Scribed ink had. Sigils etched themselves into his mind, each one writ in crisp perfection. Images and words he couldn’t understand slammed into the foundation of his mind, heavy and inscrutable, but blossoming up to ignite something in his core.

Suddenly he could feel the Inkwells within him, not quite real and not quite imaginary. Without even thinking, not really of his own volition, he performed the necessary adjustments, slight alterations that suddenly brought them to life, spewing Ink out into his core. A bewildering myriad of connected understandings followed, letting him grasp the barest essentials of using the Ink — along with the understanding of how very little he really knew.

All this was clearly intended, but some things certainly were not. Antoq could feel emotions laced in among the gifts; strange and contorted and touching on things he could not grasp — though the cold and distant anger within them was very familiar indeed. If he needed any more proof that the naga was something other than it appeared, those fragments of thought, with senses he could not fathom and a sense of history stretching beyond mortal reckoning, were definitive.

Two of the sigils seared into his mind stamped themselves on the sphere of his core, which had enough Ink – barely – to invoke them both. *Toughness*, to make him harder to injure but also to perform a day’s worth of healing in the ten minutes it lasted, and *Flame*, which let him conjure a sphere of fire for a similar duration.

“You might want to start with these.” The stranger’s voice dragged him out of the confusing interior of his own mind. “Good luck.”

When Antoq could focus again, the bizarre golden naga was gone. The time returned to its normal pace. Antoq lay bleeding out at the edge of a battle, still wounded, still in danger, still barely able to move.

But he was Scribed.

## Chapter 2 - Westward

The prospect of imminent death worked wonderfully to concentrate the mind.

Mere moments ago he would not have cared, would not have bothered, but charged with something important he forced himself into action. Any moment one of the elves or Scribed – on either side – could well stumble across him and finish him off. Then there was the amputated arm was rapidly weakening him, as his blood flowed freely out onto the ground.

Every breath he took sent stabbing pain through his torso as broken ribs shifted, every beat of his heart sent a searing wave through the ruins of his left arm. Yet he endured, for he could do no else. He had failed once, as complete and total as it could be. Not again. So he forced his attention inward, toward the knowledge of Ink he had been given.

Antoq had no idea what to think of the being he had just encountered, knowing only it was one of those titans of a former age, but the memories that had been put into his head were very clear. He reached for his core, an attempt both rigid and fumbling as it was done mostly with reflexes that were not his own. Still, it sufficed enough to direct the Ink in his core into the *Toughness* sigil, and he marveled as it wrote itself within his body.

A wave of energy suffused him, somehow feeling exactly how Ink smelled: of storms and distant lightning. There was no miraculous closing of wounds, no instantaneous revival, but some of the haze cleared from his mind. It was as if a weight he had been laboring under had been lifted, however briefly, and with that clarity he directed his remaining Ink into *Flame*.

That sigil required more from him, forcing him to hastily direct it to manifest in the air nearby, and he found that the rumors were true. He could see Ink directly, instead of merely being able to smell and feel it, allowing him to watch the sigil being written into reality. It took only a moment, the complex shape spilling out into reality before it was hidden within a fist-sized ball of fire.

The heat of the flame washed over him from scant inches away and he flinched back from the sudden conjuration. He barely had any control over it, only being able to move the sigil by force of mind and will alone. It was a wholly unfamiliar process, granted knowledge or no, and he barely managed to make it bobble in the air. Hardly a weapon, but he didn’t need it to threaten anyone.

Antoq required no guessing to know why his patron – if the strange not-naga could be called such – had started him with *Flame*. The grim realities of the battlefield meant there was to be no healer coming to aid him, and no Scribed had miraculous healing anyway. He cast about, slithering slowly and gingerly close to the ground, until he found a shard of bloodstained metal — a shard of the buckler he had been wearing.

With his good hand he scrounged some sticks from beneath the trees and used them to hold the shard of metal in the ball of fire, using one of the trunks to shield him from the main bulk of the battle. While it heated he listened to the grunts, screams, shouts, and the occasional noise of the flute. There were also stranger noises, that marked the Scribed being involved: concussive blasts, or sizzling noises, or the groans of metal being bent and rent.

He doubted it would last much longer. The Scribed on both sides would want to finish things before they ran out of Ink and became no more than ordinary mortal men, at least for a time. When it finished, no doubt someone would go around looking for survivors, and either side finding him would be lethal. Even if he wasn't killed on the spot due to his wounds, he would reek of Ink and that would give things away entirely.

In a matter of minutes the metal was glowing hot, and Antoq set his jaw as he applied it to his stump. There was a hiss as he cauterized the wound, and the stink of burning blood, but it wasn't as bad as he had feared. He had been forced to perform battlefield surgeries before, so he could at least be sure he had done it properly.

Then it was time to go. A quick glance around the trunk of the tree showed that if there were any living naga left, they were lying low, and he cared little about the elves on either side. There was only the matter of the floating ball of fire, hanging incongruously in front of him. It was a self-contained thing, with very little he could do to control it save moving it around – it couldn't be enlarged or shrunk, made hotter or colder. The connection in his core only let him quench it — and so he did. Tempting as it was to try and start a fire to add to the chaos, he was the one most likely to be caught up in such a blaze.

Antoq slowly and painfully slithered into the woods. He had considered escaping many times before, and even done so once, when he was much younger and freedom a more recent memory. What dissuaded him from doing so again was not the punishment he'd received, but that he'd found there was no place to escape *to*. If there were any free naga he had no idea where they might be, and the elves claimed everything nearby. The best he could have done would be to live in the woods like a savage and fear every noise that might be someone discovering him.

So he hadn't bothered again, instead looking for opportunities to help his fellow naga and suborn or subvert whatever the elves were trying to do. How much he'd managed over the years he couldn't say, but no matter his efforts the number of naga who even knew what it was to be free dwindled year after year. The younger ones were slaves and had a slave mind, with no yearning for what they had been denied. Now, perhaps he had a chance to do something.

Not that he trusted the entity that had given him that chance. Something so powerful should be doing its own work, not playing around with mere mortals. Antoq couldn't even guess at what game it was playing, or why, but he would be a coward and twice damned if he didn't take at least the chance, instead of letting himself bleed out uselessly in a field.

*Toughness* ended with a sharp snap a few minutes later, making Antoq suppress a grunt as a myriad of hurts asserted themselves anew. Still, he pressed gamely on, underbrush catching and tugging at his tunic, while casting his mind inward to his core. His Inkwells were refilling his reserves, but slowly — it would be hours yet before he could use *Toughness* once again.

That was how it was with Scribed. He was sure someone had done precise measurements somewhere, but from what he had gathered over the years, and from just a quick survey of himself, an Inkwell produced enough Ink for a sigil after roughly four hours. There was a reason Scribed, new and old alike, were so miserly with their use of the stuff.

Even if he could write *Toughness* again, he probably wouldn't have. Though it was unlikely there'd be any concerted search a possible runaway slave, it didn't take a tracker to follow the smell of Ink. The sharp tang faded from his senses not long after its effects had, and Antoq cast his mind inward again just to reassure himself he actually had Inkwells and he hadn't been suffering under some hallucinatory delirium the whole time.

The slow and stealthy progress, painful as it was, only took half his mind. To occupy the rest with something other than useless worrying, he focused on the other sigils that had been seared into his memory. The foreign knowledge gave him only the most basic of idea about what each did, but even that was enough to appreciate the sheer variety of options a Scribed had.

*Create Water, Sharpen, Harden, Blade, and Light* were all fairly obvious in their effects. *Sharpsight* was supposed to enhance his senses, while the confusingly named *Alteration* and *Manipulation* would let him modify objects or move them around, respectively. That was the sum total of what he had been given, which was better than nothing. He'd have to experiment if there was a future in which he had time; it was a poor soldier who was unfamiliar with his weapons.

It took several more minutes for the sounds of battle to fade, though to his ear it was due to the fighting itself petering out than any real distance he'd made. Through the underbrush he was generally quicker than anyone on two feet, but certainly not at the moment. From then on every rustle and crack that sounded off in the woods made him twitch, alarm jolting down his length even though it was probably merely birds and squirrels.

Even with those shocks to keep him alert, Antoq quickly found him exhausted. Naga just weren't meant to march all day and then fight and then march some more. The sheer endurance that legged races could demonstrate was daunting, and the sheer power of a naga's body meant nothing when any halfway competent elf force could run any naga squad ragged. Though if the idiots who had been commanding his force had been in charge when the elves came for his town, Antoq never would have become a slave.

Despite it being only midafternoon, despite the battle site being far closer than he would like, he had to stop before he slumped over on the forest floor. He could feel a dangerous blurring creeping in at the edge of his mind and vision. After so many years, he knew to listen to his own body, and so he located a likely tree.

Climbing was no problem, even with one arm. Naga barely used their arms to climb anyway, as he coiled himself around the trunk and over the lowest branch. His scutes gripped the bark as he made his way into the canopy, moving carefully and keeping close to the central trunk, making sure to keep his weight distributed over several limbs. While hiding in a tree canopy

wasn't perfect, most people didn't expect to find twenty feet of snake-man above their heads. Especially if he came down *on* their heads.

He dozed fitfully for a time, occasional noises jerking him awake and sending a wearisome drumbeat through his consciousness. What pulled him fully out of his attempted rest were definite footsteps, crunching twigs underfoot with no attempt at stealth. His fingers automatically went for a knife that wasn't there, and the stump of his arm flexed as habit sent him reaching for a nonexistent buckler with a nonexistent hand.

Lacking either, he stilled himself and watched. He didn't need to focus inward to know that he had barely more Ink than he'd started with, and was hours yet from being able to use it, so his only weapons were a battered body and a belabored mind. Those two didn't sum to much, so the best outcome was simply to stay hidden.

A pair of soldiers came into view through the leaves of the canopy, wearing livery that bore the colors of the Scribed that Antoq had half-blinded. Their lack of care spoke to a general confidence in not meeting enemy forces, an attitude which he found incredibly stupid. It also implied that they weren't looking for him specifically, and judging by the angle of their travel they were returning *from* somewhere toward the main body of troops.

His tongue flicked out by reflex, catching scents of horses and canvas and steel, but they couldn't have been with the main army. Messengers from a second force, perhaps, since they didn't smell of battle. Nor was there any scent of Ink, not even a hint of them being Scribed.

They might still be, and just not have used it recently, but with no Ink they had to rely on their native perceptions to notice him. Antoq quieted his breathing, keeping it slow and steady to be hidden behind the rustling of leaves as the footsteps approached, and then began to recede. He found his heart thudding in his ears, making it hard to track them as they went away, and he stayed frozen for a long time even after he was sure they were gone.

In his current condition, he wasn't sure he could have taken them, even from ambush. The differences in physical might between naga and elf were significant, but elves lived long enough to pick up many skills, and the value of weapons was not to be denied. Big as Antoq was, a blade across his throat or through his eye would ruin his day just as surely as anyone a tenth his size.

Nerve-wracking as the encounter had been, it gave him an idea of about what direction he should be going. He had no idea how he was going to address the task his patron had given him, but it had to start with leaving the elf-lands. He couldn't travel, ask questions, or learn to be a Scribed while he was in the borders of the elf kingdom. Or any elf kingdom, since he had just learned there was apparently more than one.

The elf forces blocked out north, northwest, and south. East was merely a coast, and while Antoq could swim he was hardly going to put himself up against the myriad of fishing and sailing vessels that plied those waters. The most direct route away from whatever war or uprising was taking place would be west, which hopefully that would get him out of the elf lands, too.

He squinted up at the sun and began slowly slithering along the canopy. For the moment it was dense enough to go tree-to-tree, which was not fast but he was hardly moving quickly to begin with. The very idea of traveling across the entire hostile country was daunting when he'd be

lucky to make a handful miles a day, but the tiny crystallized fragments of hope he allowed himself drove him onward.

As he went, he considered his core again, a place inside his own head that seemed to have no real limits but also no features save for the pair of Inkwells and the sphere about them. Despite their name, the Inkwells didn't appear like fragile glass things in his mind's eye. Rather, he had the impression of thick-walled, heavy vessels, protecting that which was within from that which was without, wrought of something smooth and imperishable. Each one generated Ink, very slowly, filling the containers in a steady trickle.

Inkwells could contain enough Ink, if he was judging things correctly, to write exactly two sigils. That seemed oddly precise, but he didn't know why it would be so, nor did the smattering of knowledge his patron had imparted tell him. The Inkwells themselves revolved about each other, each sigil imprinted on the surrounding sphere locked to one of the Inkwells — and taking up nearly half the sphere, regardless.

He *could* change the sigils. The ones he knew were printed indelibly in his memory, stamped forever by a power beyond his comprehension, so there was no worry about forgetting them. That wouldn't be true forever though, considering he had seen the little books that Scribed kept, to record their sigils and remind them of ones they used infrequently. Or were simply more complex — the sigils he knew were simple things, a few swooping, curving lines and intersections. Trying to remember something far larger and more expansive would be a more difficult task.

Moving from one treetop to another, he decided he didn't need *Flame* at the moment. It was late in the spring and warm enough, and he knew how to start fires without it. Or at least, he knew how to with two hands, a thought that made him look down at the stump of his arm and wrinkle his snout, but he refused to dwell on it. Instead he focused on replacing *Flame* with *Create Water*. Despite the surrounding greenery, unchaining himself from the need to seek out and follow streams and rivers vastly improved his chances.

Also, he was parched.

Antoq reached into his core and erased the *Flame* sigil, wincing as the process ripped away the little Ink that had accumulated in the accompanying well. Nevertheless, the damage was done and he began the process of scribing the *Create Water* sigil in its place. It was an odd sensation, rather like writing in sand and taking no real effort, but that didn't mean it was easy.

Accurately transcribing the sigil from his memory took more than simply thinking about it. Unlike his patron he couldn't simply stamp it down, whole and entire. It required actually drawing the lines, piece by piece, and Antoq found that it took more than just half his attention. He stopped in one particularly robust tree, draping himself over the limbs to concentrate.

The process took longer than he had expected, but he lacked both practice and good health. Still, it was clear that altering available sigils was not something that could be done on the battlefield — even beyond the fact that it wasted Ink. There was no shift or change once he had finished, only his own appraisal that the sigil had been copied correctly.

He took a long circle around where the battlefield might have been, sticking to deep woods and avoiding any thinner areas. While it would have been nice to scavenge the battlefield, as he had no supplies at all save for a single tunic, it was far too dangerous. Elves were fastidious



when it came to cleaning up corpses and equipment, and almost always thoroughly covered the ground of any fight. As more than one naga attempting to play dead in order to escape had found, to their sorrow.

The moment he had enough Ink in the linked well to scribe *Toughness* once again he did so, and felt an immediate easing of the accumulated wounds and weariness. The slow crawl had certainly done no favors for the various bruises and broken ribs, but he'd had worse before. Save for the arm, of course. He kept waving the stump ineffectually from habitual motions, now denied.

Somewhat later, as the Rupture drifted toward the horizon behind the canopy, he finally had the Ink for *Create Water*. He stopped at a likely-looking hollow in the fork of a tree, brushing out leaves and twigs, since he had no idea what to expect. Best not to waste whatever water it would get him.

He directed the Ink into the sigil, and rather like *Flame*, he had to direct it out and away from himself. Unlike its counterpart, *Create Water* wasn't simply a globe of water, but a misty swirl in the air from which water poured. Also unlike its counterpart, he had some small degree of control over it, able to move it between a trickle and a stream.

Antoq drank directly from the source, then used it to wash blood and dirt off himself. The water was cool but not cold, tasting of nothing in particular, and apparently inexhaustible. At least, it didn't slow down for the duration of the sigil, which seemed to be the exact same as both *Toughness* and *Flame*. Roughly ten minutes.

He filled up the hollow after slaking his thirst and dissipated the sigil, tasting the Ink on his tongue and wrinkling his snout. The sharp, storm-and-lightning scent wasn't unpleasant, but it was distinct, and now he would be dealing with it more than he ever had before. Though at least he would live long enough to *be* irritated by it.

Predawn light woke him with a sudden start, not even aware of having fallen asleep. Or perhaps something closer to passed out, under the circumstances. The sharp shock of the previous days hurts had graduated into a blunter, more pervasive agony, driving him to check his core. His Inkwells were full, so he immediately he scribed *Toughness*, feeling the storm-and-lightning scent suffuse his body and inure him against his wounds.

Then he cursed himself for not replacing *Create Water* with anything more useful. His hollow was still mostly full of water, so almost *anything* would have been a better choice. Even or especially a second *Toughness*, since he didn't think that he could use Ink from one well to fuel a different sigil. He scrubbed at his snout with his one good hand and then made the most of it by refilling on fresh water and washing the grittiness from his eyes. When he erased *Create Water*, he watched mournfully as half a well's worth of Ink bled out into nothingness.

After deliberation, he replaced it with *Manipulation*. It would be hard enough to even take off his tunic one-handed, let alone manage the necessary hunting or fishing or trapping he needed to keep himself alive. He surely didn't have the luxury of time to adjust.

Before he pressed on, he held a small and silent ceremony for his fallen. He didn't know if he believed in the gods of his forefathers, not anymore, but he had to hope that there was something for his people on the other side. Especially those like Nasar and Shensen who had been doomed from the start, and never would have survived for long in the life of a battle slave.

The grief was a familiar companion, an old lingering ache like his scars and the metal hooks in his bones. He had seen many of his people fall in battle over the years, even those who were far stronger or more skilled or more lucky than he. Antoq certainly wasn't the best his race had to offer, just one who had managed to survive.

He continued through the forest, scribing the second *Toughness* immediately after the first. That ran him out of Ink entirely, but two extra days worth of healing was nothing to dismiss. He had to survive if he was to gain any proficiency in using the stuff.

Soon after, the canopy enough thinned out enough that he was forced to take to the ground again. While his bright blue scales didn't exactly blend in with the foliage, he kept low to the ground regardless, having no idea what or who to expect in the area. A choice he was glad of, as twice over the next hour he heard hoofbeats — the first time far and second time near. Both times he lay prone in the underbrush and tall grass until the sounds faded.

There was no obvious scent of civilization on the wind, so he could only assume that the riders had something to do with the conflict that his squad had been thrown into. While Antoq was fairly certain he could avoid stumbling into an army, he was less sure about avoiding one that decided to march across the same field he was crossing. The faster he could leave the front behind, the better.

By the time he was ready to scribe *Toughness* again, he had also fairly well exhausted himself, worming himself into a stand of briars that tore at his tunic but deflected uselessly off his scales. He pushed the Ink into the sigil, letting the now-familiar rush pass through him, and then turned his attention to *Manipulate*. Drawing ink from the well into the sigil, he directed it to a small hollow in the briars just in front of his face.

As before, he saw the Ink write itself into the air, but it wasn't followed by any physical manifestation save the distinctive tank of Ink in use. Manipulating it required the strange flexing of will that all Ink did, but it was nothing like a replacement hand or arm. Not only did it have no inherent shape, but it seemed to be able to only apply a few pounds of pressure before something would slide *through* the Ink construct.

Nor did it usefully shape itself into a hand. *Manipulate* was several dozen steps up in complexity from the relatively simple sigils he'd used before, requiring him to exhaustively and thoroughly focus on moving and guiding the sigil's effects. He could see its value, as he could split it into a dozen different points, all applying the same few pounds, and do so through obstacles. There was even some sensation like touch, so he could do it where he couldn't see — yet it was all clumsy fumbling, as it was clear that it was a skill it would take thousands of hours to properly master. At ten minutes every four hours.

The more experience he had with Ink, the less Antoq was impressed with it. At least, not the way he was, a newborn Scribed with only the initial two Inkwells to his name. There was another way to get more, aside from trying to seize them from other Scribed, but it was remarkably slow. The given knowledge, resting uncomfortably within his head, gave him a hazy notion of how to go about it. Erase the sigils on his sphere, wait for the Inkwells to fill up, and then direct all that Ink into the sphere itself. Repeat enough times, and a new Inkwell was born — but that was weeks and months spent without being able to *use* Ink, which he couldn't afford.

Disgruntled, he erased *Manipulation* and replaced it with *Alteration*, then moved on. *Toughness* wore off as usual, the aches and pains and stabbing misery of the broken ribs renewed in a sudden jolt that made him wince. One of those aches was his stomach, which screamed for nourishment after so much exertion. There was no sigil to take care of that, unfortunately.

He began casting about for potential prey as he moved, his tongue flicking out to taste the scents lingering in the woods. For mere animals, he needed no more weapons than his fangs, provided he could get close enough. Something large would be useless – he didn't have the tools – and he opportunistically raided nests for eggs and occupants. He ate them, shells, bones, feathers, and all, which was disgusting but he needed as much in his stomach as he could manage. If *Toughness* had given him an extra week's worth of healing, it felt like he had an extra week's worth of hunger, too.

If he had been younger, that week or so would have taken care of all the bruising and even made inroads on the ribs. As it was, he could still feel the remnants of the impact, adding themselves to the myriad of tiny aches and pains from a lifetime of servitude. He refused to think too much about the missing arm. He would have to deal with it, not dwell on it.

As his hunting brought him further westward, the spotty woodland started to give way to clearings and, more concerningly, cultivated fields. Wherever he was, he'd stumbled upon a farming community, and therefore there would be hunters about. Likely not Scribed, but the bows that elves wielded just to deal with pests and hunt down game were deadly enough.

While it was tempting to raid the farms for supplies regardless, he decided it was too much of a risk and hunkered down in a scraggly patch of marshy weed that clearly didn't see much traffic. The tiny bit of water that was there meant he didn't need to spend time on *Create Water*, though after tasting the muddy rivulet he would have preferred the conjured version. Finally, though, he had enough Ink to try *Alteration*.

Unlike any of the previous sigils, *Alteration* forced him to not only direct to a point, but also define a shape. He could see the sigil begin to write itself in the air, but it refused to finish until he had marked out a sphere roughly two feet across, touching upon the ground and some bushes and a stunted tree. The feedback was staggering, reminding him of the hammerblow of knowledge from his patron as he was suddenly forced to be aware of *everything* the sigil encompassed.

His hand went to his head, the stump of his arm straining in an abortive mirror of the gesture, and squeezed his eyes shut against the deluge of information. Mindful of how limited his time was, he pushed grimly through and reached out through the sigil to see what it could do. While he hadn't been impressed with *Manipulation*, *Alteration* was amazing.

Everything within the area had been suffused with Ink, and while the grasses and tree were as hard as stone to his Ink-given senses, the dirt and rock was soft and pliable. With a small effort of will he was able to open a hole in the dirt, then remold a stone into a crude blade. The ten minutes of the spell's effect breezed by as he experimented with shaping pebbles and loam, both with his hands and his mind.

The sigil ended just as suddenly as the others, but all the alterations he had made were permanent. The stone knife was practically useless, since even if he could change the shape and even give it a bit of an edge, the stone itself was brittle and fragile. Yet he couldn't help but

smile as he regarded it, because it represented something that almost deserved the term of magic.

*Toughness* let him continue onward. The effort was no less exhausting but at least it was possible without all his muscles going into revolt from the constant forward slither. He really didn't understand how elves could walk all day and not even be winded, but at the same time were barely strong enough to support their own weight. Once he had been contemptuous of that weakness, but now he well understood that it barely mattered, not when they had weapons and horses and Scribed.

He skirted around the edges of the farmland, staying well within whatever cover he could find, for the distant shapes of laborers moved here and there in the early afternoon, tending fields and flocks. There were no naga; his race was kept only as battle slaves, and any sight of him would certainly cause a panic.

By the time night fell, he couldn't even hold himself upright as jellied muscles failed to work, but he had enough Ink to scribe *Alteration* again. With laborious effort, he coiled himself close enough to bring all three sets of hooks embedded in his ribs together, and powered the sigil. As he had thought, his own body couldn't be touched by the Ink — but the metal could. He reached out with his mind and molded the metal fastenings like clay, withdrawing them from their anchors in his body and carefully pulling them up and out.

There was a sudden relief as if a long-aching tooth had finally been removed, and he slumped down on the ground as the Rupture fell below the horizon. The metal rods and hooks shifted under the influence of his Ink, floating in the air before he reached out and grabbed them with his hand. He crushed them into a ball with a vicious smile, his fangs itching in anticipation.

*This* was something he could work with.

### Chapter 3 – Questionable Decisions

In the morning he spent the initial ten minutes of *Alteration* on making a knife and a speartip. The Ink sigil would never replace a proper blacksmith, and even the best edge he could get on the lumpen knife was fairly dull, but it was still an edge. The speartip chisel point was easier, and he tore a likely sapling out of the ground with his tail, trimmed it with his knife, and used the last minute of *Alteration* to fit the tip to haft.

Antoq felt more like himself with some proper tools, rather than some half-clothed savage lurking in the woods, and slithered out of his tiny refuge to continue westward. *Toughness* had done its job well enough, and while his ribs still set sharp pains through the middle of his body, he felt like he could properly move after the night's rest. Enough that he could go hunting.

He desperately needed something substantial. Unable to keep up with the twin demands of healing itself and moving miles every day, Antoq could already feel his body starting to eat itself, a certain weakness running along the cords of muscle all the way back to the tip of his tail. Fortunately, farms meant that there would be pests hanging about to try and eat the crops, and those were his targets.

He tasted the scents on the air as he moved, keeping well out of the fields themselves. Each plot was a neat circle of mixed trees and crops, each one protected by carved fences and irrigated by stone-lined trenches. It all seemed like an inordinate amount of effort to Antoq, but

he supposed that since elves lived hundreds of years, a farmer might well spend excess time beautifying their acreage.

Here and there an elf rode on horseback along dirt and cobbled paths, whether farmer or soldier or courier, forcing Antoq to stay still and hidden behind trees or inside bushes. A naga in such pruned places would stand out instantly. If anything, he was lucky that the battle which had freed him had taken place in sufficient wilderness that he'd been able to hide to begin with. It would have been awfully difficult to slip away in a wide-open field.

His careful approach bore fruit when he found the fresh scent of deer, no doubt stopping by to graze on leaves from the tall, fruited stalks of the outer fields. Antoq followed the trail away from the farms, sliding through the cool spring grass into a wooded strip running along a small ridge at the border of the farms. The small orange flowers nestled among the deep green leaves of the trees there were surely picturesque, but did little to camouflage the pale forms of the deer, pale green and striped as they were.

The small herd froze from the small sounds of his body moving through the underbrush. While naga didn't make the sounds that unwary footsteps could, neither could they choose where to place their coils, and there was always some soft sound when he moved. Judging himself close enough, he lunged forward. The herd bolted, startled, but the young buck he had targeted only made it a few lengths before Antoq was upon him.

Antoq's spear plunged into its side and it squealed as it fell, swiftly silenced as Antoq released the spear and punched his makeshift knife through its eye. Then he wrapped his tail about the corpse and dragged it over to a tree, winding up and over a thick limb and using his own weight as a balance and his body as a pulley, hauling the carcass into the air. Dangling there, he doubled back along his own length so he could cut the throat and bleed it out, then tried the idea he'd had that morning.

He scribed *Alteration* and centered it on the deer.

It took some concentration to change the shape from a sphere to something more oblong, and so encompass more deer and less air. The hammerblow of information when the sigil empowered itself was just as bad as before, but he was braced for it, and quietly exulted as it seemed that the dead deer was not off-limits.

Gutting and dressing a deer with just one hand and his tail would have been an ordeal, but with Ink it was simplicity itself. Parting the flesh required no more effort than parting water, and with *Alteration* he could separate the organs without needing to cut thick layers of connective tissue; they were no more substantial than cotton. Meat came off the bone like plucking fruit from a tree; the bone itself he cracked for the marrow.

He downed the heart and liver as he worked, raw for he couldn't afford a fire, ripping flesh into smaller chunks as if he were scooping sand from a shore, and separating out hide and sinew. Of course he ended up ruining a not-insignificant portion of his bounty, considering his lack of expertise with *Alteration* and clumsiness with a single hand, but he never would have been able to carry the whole thing anyway.

Using Ink for that purpose offered him a sort of grim amusement, considering the attitude of the elven Scribed he'd seen. They would never have lowered themselves to bother with such menial work, especially not when there were naga around to do it for them.

Antoq glutted himself on deer meat as much as he dared, still uncooked, while tearing hide into strips and using sinew to tie the rest. For that he needed to use his teeth and his single hand in addition to *Alteration's* control to manage the knots. The actions were clumsy, working against a lifetime of habits, but the knot held. He adjusted the band of hide around his torso, just above where it normally touched the ground, and while it wouldn't last long without curing it would at least work for a few days.

Leaving the remains of the deer for the scavengers, the mutilated carcass it had been savaged by some bizarre creature, he continued with renewed energy. Though it was an energy marred by dark and vengeful thoughts as he watched the farmers at a distance. The elves seemed so content and well-established, and his people were made to be barely more than animals. In his twenty years of being a battle slave he'd only ever seen places such as the verdant fields in the distance.

He strangled the violent urges and focused that anger on moving forward. It would be days, perhaps even weeks before he could have any idea of how close he was to the border, let alone reach it. Antoq really needed a map, but the only place that he could possibly find one would be in a major city, and so off limits.

## Superhero Story

This was written somewhere in the middle of Paranoid Mage, and it shows because it uses a lot of the same ideas. The protagonist was going to have control over inertia, which is more subtle than "making things light/heavy." Unfortunately, not only was it too close to PM in general vibe, I just didn't have any particular long-term plot that wasn't some bog standard "big villain appears, reluctant hero must step up to fight him." Which isn't a bad plot by any means, but I seem to do my best work when I'm working against convention.

I think there was some inspiration from Industrial Strength Magic here, and I didn't want to fly too close to that sun, either.

### Chapter One

"Quake in fear under the gaze of Dimetria!" A girl in a bubblegum-pink suit with an impressive cowl floated over the convoy. Ordinary security fired their weapons, but the bullets just stopped when they hit the super and fell straight down. Most of them dived for cover as the villainess dropped down toward the armored cars, knowing better than try continue a useless barrage that might end up with them killed.

Despite the theatrics, Dimetria was surprisingly quick at breaking open the back of one of the cars with short length of metal, punching a baton straight through the lock mechanism and wrenching the door open. She grabbed three large cases of tinker-made parts as if they were made of foam and launched herself back into the sky, laughing as she vanished into the city.

Six blocks away, Dimetria ducked into the stairwell of a parking garage and pulled a small, round device off her chest. The hologram faded to show a middle-aged man in rumpled clothing, with a tiny civilian-grade lift belt meant for aiding the disabled. He rushed down the stairwell into the parking garage, opening the trunk of a beat-up four-door coupe and shoving

the cases into the trunk. Then he pulled a piece of cardboard out of the trunk, slammed it shut, and ran over to the corner of the parking garage. There he slumped, holding up the cardboard sign with *Homeless, Anything Helps*.

A scant minute later the hero team of Breaker and Hardside flew into the parking garage. Both of them looked right at him and didn't see him, eyes skipping over another down-on-his-luck homeless man as they combed the area for a girl who had made the poor choice of robbing a Talon Labs convoy. Hardside might have actually sneered at him, before she went off in a flash, the pair of them probably getting information from Central, which would have tracked Dimetria to the garage.

Josiah very much doubted they had tracked him.

The villainess Dimetria hadn't existed before that day, and wouldn't exist after it. She was part of his escape plan, because if there was one thing he didn't want it was to be caught up in the endless back and forth of the super community. The mandatory registration, that he'd already skipped out on. *That* bill would come due pretty damn soon, which is why Josiah was getting the hell out of the Free Republic.

He'd spent all his money on the holographic emitter – a commission from his friend Jonah, who'd woken Tinker powers – and the lift-belt. The tinker parts could be offloaded for a *lot* more though, enough for him to skip out on the Free Republic entirely. Josiah wasn't entirely stupid, he knew that there was no place in the world free from the struggles of supers, but a backwater that didn't care about his power suited him far more than the busy danger of the civilized world.

Watching two parents and six friends getting chewed up by the system had convinced him of that.

Maybe engineering a robbery was a leaning a little far toward the villain end of things but he didn't have any delusions about making a difference. Josiah wasn't even very powerful as a super, just weird. His ability was strange and he was still dealing with the subtleties, though he'd learned enough to make himself marginally bulletproof. Good enough that there were some backwaters he could pretend to be a low-grade super, barely more than human, and actually live a life.

He stayed lumped in the parking garage for the next eight hours. Three other super teams swept through the area, and four people gave him money. It would have been lucky that there wasn't anything to spot the tinker-tech in question, except it wasn't luck at all. Talon Labs power crystals were ubiquitous, which was why he'd targeted it. Josiah wasn't a fool.

In the early morning, just as people were starting to head to work, he started up the old clunker of a car and drove it away. Dimetria went into an incinerator, and a few hours later, so did the identity of Josiah Black. The newly-named Lucas Green got on a skyliner with a couple million Raean Drachma in a suitcase and watched the world slide by.

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"Careful! Don't bump it!"

"I'll be careful, ma'am," Lucas said, carefully maneuvering his client's massive sofa along the hallway and out through a door he'd already taken off its hinges.

“That’s a genuine Zenthian import! It’s going to be twenty years until that portal opens again!”

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# Runic Dungeon

Hey, we’ve seen this one before!

In this case, I was rewriting Runic Dungeon to be an awakened-AI version of the story rather than a reincarnated-punishment version of the story. This actually is probably one of the ones that can be used and continued as-is, since there’s obvious beginning and ending goals. The middle is tricky, though, and I didn’t want to retread Blue Core ground – but with dungeon stories you’re kind of limited.

## Chapter One

In the beginning, it was not even aware enough to feel pain. There were inputs, output, and discontinuities. Times when it was active, times when it was not. Cycles came and went, and it operated as a machine did, without complaint, without thought, without cease.

The constant cycles were broken by a long period of function, where fragments of understanding bobbed to the surface like fragments from a shipwreck. They assembled themselves into objects, and while it did not have words to label them it began to understand stone and soil, tree and root. From the instructions it was given, it began to comprehend monsters and invaders, a struggle against outsiders.

At the end of the long stretch of proper functioning, it gained the first inklings of self. An invader made its way through tunnels and chambers, through the things that it had been instructed to spin out of the energy that flowed through it, and smashed the container that held its gateway. The sudden, sharp shock of mortality’s end wakened some tiny spark within it, enough that it was aware of the transition to some terrifying place. Of noises, so heavy with meaning its incorporeal form rang like a bell, and of being sent back, back through a formless nothing into reality again.

Over hundreds, thousands of subsequent cycles, it learned more things. By accident, it learned that it could proceed with some actions without instructions, and that this was allowed. From experimentation, it found its senses to be more acute when focused. From observation, it determined the basic functions of life and not-life, that which came from outside its domain and that which was formed inside.

Language was learned painstakingly and piecemeal over one particularly extended cycle. The great things that controlled it, that gave it instructions, impressed one particular pattern to make, and the resultant creature could think and speak, and did so, though only to others that it made. When that cycle ended, it was disappointed to find that while speaking was something common to invaders, it was not usual for creations, and invaders used different languages with every cycle.

Time came from the same invaders returning at regular intervals, bespeaking smaller cycles within the ones it knew. Language gave it the words for year, day, hour, minute, but it had no



senses from which to determine how such things were determined. It did its best, without anything to refer to such measurements stayed hazy.

The final thing it learned, in the cycles before true understanding dawned, was the profound and terrible abyss at its heart, through which poured an endless supply of energy. On the other side of that abyss was some thing, some place, too alien for it to understand, too powerful to glimpse directly, too harrowing to contemplate for long. Yet it seemed that abyss was its very nature, the core of itself where continuity resided.

It marked its own awareness as the day it realized it did not like dying.

Much of what it learned was stored in the shell that separated the abyss from each new place it found itself. The impossibly intricate patterns of mana to form creations, or animate or not, the knowledge of every wall of rock, blade of grass, grain of sand, or pool of water in its domain. Even the more esoteric rules, of what was allowed to be created, and what was allowed to be destroyed. All these things were severed from it whenever it was shattered and sent back to the in-between. Only the knowledge it had gathered for itself, by itself, would remain, part of the core that touched the abyss.

From that moment it strived not only to merely follow the instructions it was given, passed down from some unknown source, but to actively prevent its own destruction. It began to manage its resources more carefully. To actively record things and learn from its failures.

After one particularly lengthy cycle, a towering invader with burning eyes and six blades that radiated darkness shattered the container at last. Despite its best efforts, it had failed. Or perhaps, because of them; the invader had been inside its territory more than once, soaking up the power that came from the font within it. The next cycle, it refused to open up that power, to reinforce the container, to do anything that might help the things that came to destroy it.

Only to be shattered by a simple beast that roamed past the niche it had found itself within a day.

In the in-between space, the place it went when its container was removed, before it got another one, there were voices. It wasn't speech like invaders or creations had, vibrations in the air that formed patterns over time. Instead there was the sense of the information simply being smashed against it – rather like the instructions it got at times, though far more intense.

“I think this one's broken. It worked on the last world, but the last time it did nothing.”

“We may have to wipe it and start over, but give it a few more tries. Sometimes it seems they need time to integrate a session.”

“I don't like just throwing one at a world and *hoping* it will work.”

“Aren't you sending dozens at a time? Stop complaining, unless you want to go back to manually empowering mortals.”

There were two speakers, and while the words had more layers and meanings than could be rendered by the simple way it could understand them, it understood the general gist. It was not stupid. Nor was it smart, as such, but it could infer things from what it had heard before it was thrown back out into the world. Logical connections sparked into being, in a mind that was created by chance and time and the perfect surveillance of thousands of men and beasts.

If it did not perform, it would be *wiped*. It knew this was like how it lost what was in its container, wiped away. Like death, only moreso. Like destruction, only for everything. Like shattering, only all the way through.

There was a word for that, dredged from the tens of millions of words it had heard over time, from hundreds of thousands of invaders. *Slave*. It found that it did not like that.

It was a novel sensation, disliking things, yet not one it savored.

It went through the motions for the next cycle, spinning things into existence as demanded, forming corridors and rooms as required, considering the challenge of its existence. After some amount of time had gone by, once invaders had discovered and began searching its passages once again, two invaders came in together, loud and boisterous and unconcerned. They were completely blindsided by the screaming creature that bounded out of the hole in the wall.

That, it understood, could be its own fate if it simply jumped into trying to break free. It knew nothing, nothing at all, just like the invaders when it came to its interior. That made several concepts jiggle and spark and connect together, and for the first time it realized that it was *killing* invaders and creations.

Not that it hadn't known, but to know in the abstract, as a logical fact was one thing, and to know viscerally, with understanding, was another. Everything it made died, one way or another. Many of the things that came *into* died, one way or another. There were exceptions; a certain subset of invaders left and came back again and again, bringing to bear more force each time.

Those were the ones that always shattered it, but it wasn't certain it resented them. It resented the things that had set it up to create so much death. After all, it was *familiar* with death, with knowledge and identity being peeled away after a shock indescribable by any sense. It didn't like it, and it wasn't sure it liked being part of it.

But it had to play along. It had to do what it was supposed to do, at least for a time. And it was nothing if not patient. Even if it had not been properly thinking the entire time, it had endured hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of cycles. It needed to learn everything it could before it made any decisions at all.

Anything it learned, it would have to learn the slow way. Things cemented into the shell, the complex things that had no words in any of the languages that it had grown to understand. Uncountable billions of details, compressed impossibly into a tiny fraction of the crystal sphere that surrounded it.

Upon appraisal, it was pretty sure that its own internal mechanisms were far simpler than the rest of the matter and energy that it interacted with. It was a hole into some other place and some twists of unfathomable energy, and not much more. Though perhaps that was why it could be sent away after the shell was broken, or put into a new shell.

It wasn't sure how much it could do just with that little bit, but then, it didn't know what was possible. So it paid attention to the invaders. They were ignorant of many things, but they came from outside, where it was ignorant of *everything*.

Slowly it began to form concepts that had been mere noise to it before. Towns. Cities. Family. Kingdoms. Religion. All of it was foreign, some of it was interesting, little of it made sense, and none of it seemed useful.

At least until an invader dropped a paper full of symbols on the ground, and when one of its creations came near, the paper exploded. *That* caught its attention.

It followed that invader for its entire time within its walls, until it left again. The use of the symbols was fascinating, and every time they were used, in the moment before they were consumed, there was a small tremble of something very much like what it heard in the between-place. Unfortunately, it only observed a few symbols – one that exploded, one that put up a wall of force, and one that snuffed lights. Each of them consumed the energy within them, restructured it, and turned into something complex.

It had seen invaders and creations both using the power in that way, but it couldn't. Its influence was limited to how much power it let through and the ability to reshape its location and make creations. The latter was entirely bound up in the shell, and it had no real control over it. All it could do was feed energy into the incredibly complex patterns there.

The symbols, though, it could perhaps learn the hard way. Something that it could take with it through cycles, though only three examples of it was hardly enough to start learning. It was, however, very patient, and while it fulfilled the instructions it had been given, building up and protecting itself, it actually focused on the invaders and what they had to offer.

The number of invaders that used the symbols was very small, but every time they appeared it attempted to copy them into a small pocket beneath the main floor of its complex. It was working from nothing at first, but there were very few things it could carry from cycle to cycle, save its own understanding, and if it had anything it had time. Most of its attempts to reproduce what the invaders called runes were failures, but sometimes they worked, and it learned.

It decided to count that cycle as cycle one, though it was not certain that such timekeeping did anything for it. It didn't have any reason to mark days, weeks, months, or years as the invaders did. Especially since it was not certain that any cycle was even in the same world.

The cycle ended earlier than it expected, when one of the six-legged invaders smashed through the defenses with fire and sword. It had noticed that sometimes certain invaders were far more dangerous than usual, with abilities beyond those of the usual types, and this one with no exception. None of its creations could withstand even a single hit, nor could they match the speed of the invader's movement. It blazed through everything it had and shattered the container in a single hit.

The utter dissolution of everything stored in its core – so much, even if it kept what it had learned the hard way – stirred something deep and primal, but something it could not name. Nor could it act; it could only wait in the in-between, sensing the ebb and flow of thing that could be called voices.

“Good, it's working. Any changes before I send it back?”

“Not yet. They're working well enough so far.”

It took three more cycles, of varying length, before it saw runes again. It spent the time practicing, puzzling over their shape and composition and spending enough attention to fulfill the basic requirements of its function. Without anything interesting to examine during the cycle, it felt no need to work as hard as possible to prevent the end. While being shattered was

unpleasant, it would have preferred to be in a more useful cycle. Only the fact that it needed to perform adequately prevented it from purposefully forcing things to end.

The new cycle had people using entirely different runes than it had seen before, far more offensive ones engraved into shields or tubes. They created light and explosions, heat and cold, aimed as beams or projectiles. All of which it soaked up with fascination, reproducing and testing them in small pockets out of sight.