

THE QUARRY

The Quest for Sky

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No longer do the heavens cast their gilded light in so broken a place. A place where great grey tendrils reach perilously to the lost skies. No longer does the grass shoot greenly in the fields, shrouded in ever-lasting cloud. Here, the rain tastes of poison and the trees bear ash in place of fruit. Their soil crumbles and their tools are fashioned with more rust than steel. None alive has known of Spring or seen a Summer Sun. The people here return to the Earth before their time, whether through famine, pestilence, or a harrowed heart. Beyond their fields is naught but decay, and the Sun that was once gold.

This place is called Middlehaven. No longer does it live up to its name.

Algild leant out of the shack window, mindful of the metal shards about his pale arms. Though beyond the naked eye to count, they were lesser and duller than when he was a child.

A morbid part of him wished to test the edges. To see thin blood trickle down the faint canvas he always wore. Mindful of the cuts and bruises that would accrue on his journey, Algild refrained.

He stayed his taut brow an inch from the daylight which filtered through the monochrome clouds. Even the night skies wrinkled like a blanket as they billowed from the east. Algild's crimson eyes granted him the darksight, yet blindness by day. To all it was a curse, save his mother. She thought him special.

'Algild? What are you doing?' Her son shook away the premonitions haunting his mind as he continued to squint into the day.

'Preparing, mother.'

She walked to the room and paused under the lintel to gather her resolve.

'You don't have to do this, which you know.' She quelled the shudder in her throat. 'If you'd known your father—'

Algild released a chesty *hmp* as he searched for the setting Sun. She continued.

'He... he wouldn't want me to convince you to stay.' Her son ground his teeth and gripped the sharded sill with bare hands. They yielded no blood.

'Comforting.' Algild turned to her as the world turned dark. 'I'll keep that in mind.'

His hard face eased when his nocturnal eyes saw what she was holding. A fist-sized jar of salve in one arm and an archaic, scrap-iron pitchfork in the other.

'Thank you, I suppose.. He leashed his confrontational nature. 'But the Stone Forests hold little to harvest.'

'You must forget to sow and learn to reap.' She passed her gifts into his winter-white arms and left. Her feet were her final goodbye.

The rear of his skull seared as he fingered the jar. He hadn't applied the substance in many years, preferring the protection of night. One jar remained in the house, though Algild had always thought there a second. The secrets of their making had been lost with much else in the fall of the old world.

For all her gifts, he could only return the favour with one. He knew not why he had taken his mother's place. It was not to know, but to feel. No gift should leave a mother childless, nor turn a wife into a widow. The very thought drove his heart to his throat. The

only gift he granted was an unspoken promise of his return, and to apologise that it had not come sooner.

He watched over Middlehaven, heart gripped by lunar light as it trickled through the clouds. Each month, Algild admired nightfall under it, merely suspecting that the Sun's pale twin was at its fullest behind the smoky shroud. His last night upon the broken window was like the last night with a lover. Short, yet comfortably silent. He dreaded the next day and the world beyond the wall.

For now, it was sweet dusk. This moment was his alone.

The stone-faced guards stood clad with mechanical bows slung upon their backs. Algild emerged from the Great Eastern Gate into a dead world. What green he knew, was left behind him. It was death in the shape of a rainless expanse. Rods of rust, floors of dust, and endless mountains of motley grey greeted him on the horizon. He took the first few steps and felt the ochre ground crumble and decay before blowing into the meagre wind. It swept up beyond reach and into the merciful heavens. The thin overcast provided sparse cover from the blinding Sun. Another step. More dust. Soon an ochre tail licked from his heels. The impressions of his feet faded as soon as they appeared.

The Grey Forest seemed no closer with every laboured push, so he cast his eyes to his shadow. The days came and died more times than he bothered to count. Perhaps a week had passed before he made details of the distant landscape, as the ruins of the lost world neared.

He granted his screaming skin a treatment, applying the better half of the jar. It soothed his form, though weakened him within. Algild raised his weary head and was pleased to see that he had paced true.

A curious shape emerged at the fringe of the Grey Forest. Its base was rigid and rooted, yet the upper body swayed freely in the growing breeze. Despite his pulsing eyes, Algild saw the unmistakable green of a plant in bloom. The apparent fountain held little water, as roots wove through its basin and culminated into a verdant tree. The marble base was off-gold except for the grey and black crevasses which marred it. He projected shade before him and

knew the Sun hung high in the sky and was soon to fall. Unwanted warmth poured on his back. He ran towards the beacon, cursing the sweat which washed the salve away.

Algild buckled under his weight and fell upon the lip of the pool. The water was browned by root and soil which peeked from the sundered base. It tasted sweet despite its warmth, though hints of iron lingered on his tongue. With tunnel-vision subsided, the exile took stock of his surroundings. He huddled in a jagged square the size of a Middlehaven crop-field, flanked by dying skyscrapers and shadowed by petrified trees. The rough road had eaten away at his soles and his pitchfork was smattered with sweat.

As Algild lay upon the edge of the basin, a faint wail spoiled the air. He jolted up and snapped his eyes to the source, weapon in hand. Fresh blood painted the ground in specks, trailing from the ancient fountain towards a statue weathered beyond recognition. He prowled forth. The branches overhead rattled like bone chimes and bent like the legs of a dying spider.

One of the wooden limbs snapped. Rising winds and beige light rushed through the empty space, illuminating a foetal figure on the ground. A man. His skin was leather and his bloodied eyes sat sunken beneath a burgundy-drenched blindfold. Droplets escaped the cloth and split across his face. Fevered dreams wrangled his head between the heavens and the hard concrete. His spine fractured and twisted into a question mark. His very being marked the limbic divide between the living and the departed.

Algild shook the wretched thing with the blunt end of his weapon. The body shuffled to face the sky. Fresh wounds sputtered through the old man's clothes, tearing him from slumber. Great gashes ran across his chest and arms. His robes, far nobler than Algild's, were repurposed into a motley of bandages. His near-human face contorted as it formed words. The tightness of his jaw and the sporadic movement of muscle were sure signs of rust poisoning.

'I am no one any longer,' the false corpse croaked, 'though I know you.' Algild leant in, moving his arm to see if the man's eyes followed. They did not. 'It is my duty to know my subjects, even if they refuse to know me.'

'Are you... ' Algild damned himself for not seeing the sword under the ravaged cloak. 'Are you the Wiseman?'

'I thought myself the blinded one.' A laboured chuckle parted his cracked lips. 'Yes, my child. Cast out many Moons past on the Quest for Sky. Middlehaven claims to have no need of me, save a weary exile in my likeness.'

‘What do you mean, Wiseman? You stepped down. You volunteered to leave.’

‘Is this my legacy?’ His face grew long as the blood was sapped out of it. ‘I was made obsolete, removed from our people like a festering limb. I volunteered merely to perish on my own terms.’

‘So, the Quest is for naught? The world beyond is but a grave?’ Algild took a knee by the old king’s side.

His flesh turned deathly pale. ‘No, child. Heed my dying words, for all is not lost and others shall come in our stead. In my youth, we were chosen by a council of the wisest, then by the will of the people. You feel the Quest as mere exile, as punishment divinely wrought. Heroes of the Quest never come to be as they did of old, for the weak are sent to preserve the strong.’

‘But I came in my mother’s stead so she may die in peace.’

‘And live in pain. Such is the way of this cruel world.’ The Wiseman gazed blankly at Algild through the bloodied rags. ‘You grant a dying man comfort in being Chosen to find power within. Press on to the peak where the black clouds breed. Defeat the Beast to sow Dawn’s seed.’ His head fell limp as his right hand reached for the sword.

‘Wiseman!’ the younger cried. ‘What is this Beast? Where is—’

The elder had no words, for he had no breath. Only his mangled sword arm moved, thrusting the point to the sky before dropping it squarely at the feet of Algild. His left forefinger pointed to a passage through the rubble, past the Stone Forest fringes.

The boy lay there until the Sun left him and the heavens turned to black. The now-waning Moon gave him the strength to stand and follow the signs deeper into the dead city. It rebirthed his waning shadow, which buried the corpse alongside Algild. By midnight, the fallen king slept under a concrete cairn with sword placed squarely along the chest.

Algild was not concerned with the Wiseman’s sword, despite being wary of the beast which had killed the man. No weapon, no matter how sharp or swift, could serve him better than his ancestral pitchfork.

Passing through the narrow gap, he discovered the source of the ever-cloud. A great tower was buried under a mountain of city and from it billowed a smoke darker than black. A shriek murdered the silence as Algild neared his destination. It was almost human, yet its mere voice shook the very ground.

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The base of the rubble pyramid was labyrinthian. Metal vines coiled and jutted from the Earth's skin. The landscape was mottled with monochrome Man-stone. Dozens of pathways proved false, before one led to a promising steel door. He approached it, feeling the first few raindrops of an impending storm. The shrouded dawn was yet to arrive and night reigned. The door barely moved, having bent half-open under the weight of a crumbling mountain. Every sinew in his farmer's arms bulged, yet for naught. His mind suddenly turned to the pitchfork, which wedged smartly in the gap. Lightning rended the skies as he put all into the task at hand. With a resolve worthy of high-carbon steel, the wood held its form and pried the door from its ochre hinges. Algild stepped through. Under a city of rubble, the room within was in a permanent dusk.

His devilish eyes attuned as his ears warned of a predatory rumble. He shuffled through the concrete hallway before him. At its end was a staircase which snaked endlessly into the concealed heavens. Algild pressed all his weight into each step, forcing his limbs to move despite every urge to turn back. The beast grew louder with each lunge. Shrapnel protruded from the walls and lay strewn about the floor. Even with nocturnal boons, only a faint glimmer gave it away. Hours passed as his initial stride devolved into an infantile crawl. He brushed aside the debris, allowing some shards to find flesh. The pain kept him awake and felt red in the black-white darkness. Soon it turned to orange. Then to hot white. His heart had deceived him, though his eyes knew the truth. The light was real and came through a door left ajar at the highest accessible level. Algild swung it open with a bloodied fist.

Beyond was a room with desks, chairs, and electronic equipment strewn about the shattered walls. Blackened clouds encircled ahead. Rain poured around the building, though not onto it. The roof had crumbled and fallen long ago, allowing the opaque smoke to rise from a gargantuan furnace sat in the centre of the room. It was tyrannical in stature, forged of the darkest iron, coated in both the sheen of soot and slicks of blood. The liquid gore ran from the mouth of the foul contraption towards a pile of broken bodies in varying states of decay. Algild was not in the eye of the storm, but rather its mangled gut.

Amongst the cadavers, a lone figure lurked. A ten-foot horror. A corrupted mass of flesh and steel. It cradled its bulk upon two meaty stalks, walking almost as a person whilst it

slung a corpse over its iron-plated shoulder. The body wore attire unlike Middlehaveans, though others in the mound were vaguely recognisable to Algild. He watched the thing lurch towards the great furnace. He saw the glass teeth in its maw and the poison seeping from its eye. He heard the crunch of bone and loose flesh hit the white-hot metal, the sudden boiling of fat and deep cough of smog into the choked heavens. Though, he was mostly chilled by what he did not see. A shadow. The beast cast no shadow. Algild looked to his own shade and came to realise that it did not need one. He knew that the fiend's shadow lived within its ashen skin. Frozen, he dropped his weapon and watched the beast turn to him. It raced towards Algild with ochre claws extended.

He jumped to the side and kicked the pitchfork ahead of him, towards the cadaverous mound. It charged through where Algild was, catching naught but its quarry's shadow. The Middlehavean rolled to the far side of the infernal burner, snapping up his weapon on the way. The beast was upon him within the second. It flung wayward organs out of its path, with crimson eyes locked. Once again, it overshot as Algild ran along the furnace's edge. His face cried for salve as it burnt and fell onto the concrete floor. He jabbed blindly behind him, feeling a faint connection whilst he fled from the hellfire.

It turned once more and Algild closed the gap with another dodge. The iron prongs merely glanced off its sinewy flank. He prepared for a final joust with his back to the metal pyre. The creature made its battle roar and charged without compromise. Algild stood fast until the last moment and drove the weapon into the beast's throat as it crashed into the furnace and toppled forth into Algild. The iron cried and bent. Flames shot from the contraption's wounds as both man and beast fell into the fresh cavity.

He felt no pain as his skin charred and his hair turned to grey, then dust. The last he saw before leaving this broken world were the skies brightening. The ever-clouds faded to thin white and scattered to the winds. Algild's mortal being perished atop the grey mountain, bringing gold once more to the skies.

Shafts of light brought promise of a new dawn. Promise of an age of prosperity to Middlehaven. The promise of a son to visit his mother every day, until the day she returns to the earth, where eternal dusk brings eternal sleep.