

Two - Exordium Two

## The Laird of the Hoop

Costa glanced down to the scrolls at his feet. *They could be rugs,*

***They're papyrus, numbskull.***

*Papyrus or papyri?*

***Both. It's countable and uncountable. They're ancient scrolls.***

*For what?*

***Ask him, already?***

*For the millionth time, he'll tell us when he's ready.*

***For the billionth time, you're pathetic.***

"Polyhistor."

Costa looked up from the papyrus/papyri directly into the Kampion's gaze. "Yes, Hlafweard."

"Before he takes on the cognomen of Dred Laird," the Werre uttered the name with all the sorrow its history embodied, "you will recall, Laird Lordag is Baron of the Hoop."

"He is."

The only person still alive to have known the Dred Laird as Lordag of the Hoop, smiled. She was washed with his kindness. The famed, triple-lined cicatrix on his upper cheek caught her eye.

*How can a person, so renowned for their deeds in battle, bear such warmth?*

***It's because-***

*It was rhetorical, thank you very much.*

***It was rhet-***

*Do not.* Costa wriggled the fingers of her left hand as a warning.

***Alright, God damn it.*** It took every ounce of restraint for Cascadia to not come back with the appropriate mocking quip.

*Very good.* Costa let her fingers rest.

"Polyhistor, may I make a personal suggestion?"

"Of course, Hlafweard."

"Make friends with yourself."

He had looked straight through her as though she were a pane of glass. "How should I do that?" was her stunned answer.

"Follow the Eightfold Path."

She laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Sorry, Hlafweard, but you sound like--"

"Chosen Zebina?"

"Exactly! You do understand, unlike my close friend, the Chosen, I have no belief in Samsara."

"Practice has no need of belief."

***He's right.***

*You're agreeing with him?*

***I don't know why you didn't think of it eons ago. If it works, who cares why.***

The Kampion laughed with pure joy. "She has a very good sense of humour."

*He's reading our-*

"I'm not reading your mind."

"Then how?"

"Inferred facial gestures through the inferior longitudinal fasciculus."

**Which does not ex-**

"Proven to exist through water diffusion in tissue."<sup>1</sup>

**How'd Hologram-boy do that?**

*Duh, he's a polyhistor. Hah! You forgot. The mighty Cascadia-*

**I did-**

*Lie and you'll shatter ever rule of cosmic trust.*

Cascadia froze, trapped in her own axiomatic laws of thought. Costa was right. Cascadia hated it when Costa was right. But, in this case, it was true. If Cascadia lied, all valid deduction would become irreducible. The laws of identity, contradiction, and the excluded middle would vanish in an instant.

*Go on, do it, I beg you, lie. Do it and I'll never have to listen to another word you sprout.*<sup>2</sup>

**Alright. But you thought he was a hologram too.**

This was true. All of Botah believed the Kampion was long dead, or a holographic myth. All of Botah was wrong.

Rising from his chair, the great seer moved to a series of tapestries hanging on the far wall. "Before we can entertain the creation of the Chasm of the Unexplained, Polyhistor, we must contemplate the rebellion of Laird Lordag of the Hoop, and how this led to the Eruption of the Quakes."

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<sup>1</sup> Now I have to deal with two smarty pants?! The ILF is a pathway of white matter that runs from the front of your temporal lobe [BA38] to [BA18] the extrastriate cortex at the back of your occipital lobe. It processes facial emotions in a visual way. [codicil]

<sup>2</sup> Holy shit! She got me. Those three laws are the very basis for ontology - the study of our very being. Estoy jo dido! I cannot tell a lie.

"A logical progression, Hlafweard."

"So glad you concur."

"No, I—"

"She's right."

"Who?"

He gestured to Costa's skull. "Does she have a name?"

"Name?"

"She should."

***I should.***

*Cascadia.*

***That's a description. I should be an Alana, or an Anwen, or—***

*You're not getting your own name. You are me. I am you. We are one, Costa and her Cascadia.*

***Speak for yourself.***

*I am. And you. Us.*

"What is 'she' right about, Hlafweard?"

"You need to learn how to chill."

A cackling "**Booyah!**" burst forth from Costa's lips as Cascadia erupted in delight.

***He's a friggin' genius!***

"Hlafweard, I—"

Laughing, the Kampion held up his open hand to prevent the apology. "No need. Walk with me.' They walked. "Do you know how Laird Lordag fell from grace?"

"I do not, it is redacted from the record."

"Would you like to?"

*He knows?!*

***Sometimes I wonder why I bother. You think we're here for shits and giggles? Of course he knows.***

"Conjure your powers, Polyhistor," he pointed to her skull, "hers too, for should the Edict of Stocha be invoked, you will become the sole guardian of what I am about to unfold."

The very thought thrilled her to her toes. "You have 'our' undivided attention, Hlafweard. Upon my word," she eagerly responded.

"I have no doubt. It's why I chose you." He smiled, warmly.

***You chose- Why you sly old fox!***

Deeply honoured, she shared his warmth, polyhistor to polyhistor. Together, they crossed to a group of tapestries marked 'The Eruption of the Quakes.' The first of these panels was of a gigantic catfish woven in the Zeppen style of painting known as 'images of a floating world.' The humungous fish was being set upon by a swarming mass of peasant men and kimono-clad women armed with sticks, brooms, bottles, samisen, and knives. The Kampion gestured to the image. "The Yamato people of Zeppen believe it is the catfish, Namazu - thrashing to be free from the rock under which he has been trapped by the sumo-wrestling Brave-Mighty-Thunderbolt-Man - who causes the quakes."

"I have Halfmile's *Masks of God* committed to memory, Hlafweard."

"You know the myths of the quakes?"

"I do."

He gestured to the row of tapestries hanging along the wall.

"All of them?"

"All," she replied, slightly embarrassed.

"That's remarkable." Looking to her face, he spontaneously erupted in laughter. "Brilliant!"

"Hlafweard?"

"Which end did you turn off, semantic memory or body recognition?"

Again, Costa unleashed Cascadia's cackle. **No flies on you, old man!**

"The extrastriate cortex."

"Utilizing anterior cingulate modification of endogenous attention?"<sup>3</sup>

Again, Costa cackled. **I'm in love!**

"I'm so sorry, Hlafweard."

"Why? It's genius, borders on divine, if there were such a thing."

**OMG! He's as bad as you.**

Chuckling at his own quip, the Kampion moved past the line of 'myth panels' to an embroidery bearing the title 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb.' It showed a collection of barefooted, long-robed monks kneeling before a red altar surrounded by winged angels. Upon the altar stood a sheep spurting blood directly from its heart into a golden chalice. "Speaking of divinity. The Bishops of the Kirk believe, or they 'persuade' their congregants to believe, the quakes are a consequence of collective sin. Being an exemplary atheist, you, naturally, have no time for any of this."

"Correct, Lafweard."

"Thus, agreeing that mythology and religion are mere smoke screens as to the true aetiology of the quakes, I have a question.

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<sup>3</sup> *These two brainiacs are in a league of their own! [BA19], the occipital end of your ILF, is used for body recognition. By turning it off he can't read her face. That he caught it is so hot! [BA24] is the 'collar' around your corpus callosum. It tells you when you've made a mistake, whether to get in a fight, and where to pay attention. [codicil]*

She felt her chromaffins squirt just enough adrenaline to make her heart pump faster, her carotid bodies up her blood pressure, and her intercostal muscles increase her breathing.<sup>4</sup>

"Hlafweard?"

"In scientific terms, why are the Chosens able to reduce the destructive effects of the quakes and the harbor waves, yet they cannot eliminate them?"

He had posed the ultimate riddle all Botah longed for Costa's brilliance to illuminate.

*What do I say?*

***Don't panic. Tell the truth.***

"I don't know, Hlafweard."

He nodded.

*Crap, I blew it! Why did-*

***Calm down. You got this.***

"Yet."

The Kampion smiled. "Perfect."

*What the-?! He's testing me?*

***He's not going to just hand it to you.***

*Right. You're right. Of course you're right, you're always right. What was I thinking? I have to earn it.*

***There you go. And don't forget.***

*What?*

***I'm always right.***

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<sup>4</sup> *Why she can't just say she's nervous is beyond me. Ah, the joys of being a polyhistor. [codicil]*

"Polyhistor?"

"All yours, Hlafweard."

Moving on, they next came to a panel depicting a very handsome, coronet-wearing baron, in black armour, sitting proudly on a large black horse, caparisoned in black velvet. The handsome baron bore a black shield, upon which were painted seven ostrich feathers argent, and the inscribed motto 'Serviam.'

"Who is he?" she asked.

"That is Lordag of the Hoop."

The revelation took her breath away. "That's the Dred Laird?"

"He will become him. Before his fall, as depicted here, Lordag was the most exalted of all the Lairds of the Council, and, as you see from his shield, Baron of the Union of the Seven Tribes of Limbus, the Hoop."

"Why did they combine?"

"An excellent question." Turning, the Kampion pointed to a tapestry diagonally across from where they stood. "You see the image of the man emerging from the egg?"

"I do."

"It represents the primordial Age of the Unfolding merging into the Age of the Obscure. You see the seven coat-bearing shields around the egg?"

"Yes."

"They're the heraldic arms of the seven tribes: the Ammon, guardians of the salt; the Prunus of the almond groves; the Diencia, wardens of the chamber; the Arca, inventors of the lyre; the Horma, daughters of the atelier; the Albi, recorders of the chronicles, and the Fens, the purveyors of pleasure."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *For the truly geeky-freakies amongst you, comme moi, go to [codicil] numero dos, tells ya all about the Seven Tribes.*



He paused to allow her to lock each of the seven tribes into her parahippocampal gyrus.<sup>6</sup>

"Each tribe was ruled by a monarch. Each monarch coveted the land and power of their neighbour monarch. War and treachery were rife."

"A dark age?"

"The darkest."

The Kampion next pointed to the portrait of a distinguished-looking old man, whose long white hair was fused with the hair of his long white beard. "Until the Bastard came."<sup>7</sup>

"That's Emperor Piero?" Costa whispered, in awe.

"After he became a hermit and an artist. It was Piero who united the seven tribes, giving us the Imperial Age, and the ancient insignia I bear on my chest."

"Have you been to the Hall of the Five Hundred?"

"I have."

"The Lost Bastard?"

"I did not see it hanging there."

"'Cerca trova'. It is under the Scannagallo."<sup>8</sup>

"You know your art."

"My father was a painter."

"I am aware."

"Why do the abused stay?" she asked with a heart-breaking, childish innocence.

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<sup>6</sup> *Part of your limbic system, around your hippocampus. Hers is gigantic! [codicil]*

<sup>7</sup> *There's a gallery of all the paintings in the [gallery]*

<sup>8</sup> *Some say under this fresco there is a lost portrait of Emperor Piero. [gallery]*

"Stultifying shame, crushed self-esteem, and a desperate yearning that your abuser will change. A forlorn hope that, one day, the viciously cruel Hyde will walk out of your life and leave behind the charming Jekyll that first drew you to them."

She stood stunned as she watched the Kampion open his heart and draw her pain from her. "How are you doing that?" she asked.

"Never judge, never shame, never hate, never blame."

Her head down, Costa gently nodded.

The Kampion let her be.

After a moment of reflection, she looked up, "Please carry on, Hlafweard."

He smiled. "Very well. As the Imperial Age of the Bastard evolved, so arose our five clans of Telen." The Kampion gestured to the pertinent panel for each: "the always neutral Islanders of Reil; the musicians and writers of the Thuringi; the visual artists of the Gennari; your tribe, the logic-minded People of the Wall, and the brutally ambitious LeBoe. The five clans, along with the militaristic Folia, and the Union of the Seven Tribes, formed the Empire of the Hoop.<sup>9</sup> Too wild and lawless to be tamed, the Badlands of Lemniscus remained bad. They still are. Now, to everyone's astonishment, upon his inauguration, Emperor Piero, desiring a more democratic form of governance, abdicated his throne. In his place, he assembled the first fourteen Lairds of the Council of Montoac, leading to the creation of the Stands of Seven. Piero spent his remaining days painting and inventing, leaving us such a legacy we now consider him to be the greatest polyhistor to have lived."

Costa looked to the portrait. "He's my idol."

Head tilted down, eyes raised, the Kampion gazed at her.

"Apart from you, Hlafweard," she quickly added.

They both laughed.

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<sup>9</sup> *Calling all nerds, geeks and freaks. Head for [codicil] two now!*

"Polyhistor Piero's final act was to appoint the title of Warden Baron of the Hoop to an outstanding young Laird of the Prunus."

"Laird Lordag?" Costa guessed, pointing back to the handsome black baron.

"Correct. But, sadly, under Lordag, the Seven Tribes came to resent the growing strength of the five clans. The tribes wanted the return of their monarchies. The clans refused."

Walking on, they came to a vast mural depicting brutal hand-to-hand combat between two cavalries. "Then came the betrayal known as the Battle of the Creep. The Creep," he pointed to the depiction of a squadron of spear-bearing infantry, "like all visan, are pockmarked, grey-skinned pygmies, vicious to the core."

"Ugly brutes."

"Far more treacherous than Terobac."<sup>10</sup>

"Unbeknown to the Council of Lairds, Lordag invited the Creep of Enamus to enter Necrandy and form a community in Meckel's Cave.<sup>11</sup> He promised, if they would fight alongside the Hoop, and reduce the five clans to their former state of servitude to the seven sovereigns, the Creep would be granted colonisation rights in Upper Necrandy. The Creep eagerly agreed to this. And so, Lordag sent a troop of his faithful Horsemen of Ammon to escort their new ally into Necrandy. Fortunately, the marching columns were spotted before they reached the Lina Wall, and a regiment of Rouget Riders dispatched to intercept them."

She smiled as she pointed out the tapestry of the young Kampion leading his famed Riders. "You were handsome pre-scar."

"I never imagined I would command my regiment to engage the Horsemen."

In the tapestry, riding his beloved Babieca, the youthful Kampion's left hand gripped his targe shield, whilst his right

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<sup>10</sup> *The despicable Terobac and Visan tribes are nomadic, war mongering, evil little shits, constantly invading our realms. You'll meet the buggers a lot along the journey.*

<sup>11</sup> *Along Route Five in the mountainous region of Southern Thuringia. Don't be that 'I know where we're going,' husband, go peek at the map. [codicil]*

hand buried his poison-tipped Camp dagger into the neck of an unmounted Horseman of Ammon, desperately trying to use the 'beard' of his skeggex axe to rent the Rouget Captain from his mount.

"The Horsemen are fierce, courageous warriors, Polyhistor, brutally loyal to the honour of the Hoop tribes they once comprised."

She pointed to the depicted battle. "You overpowered them."

"Barely. Their axes cut down as many of my gallant troopers as our daggers dispatched of theirs."

"And the Creep?" She looked to the depiction of a terrified huddle of disfigured spearmen being set upon by a mounted Rouget.

"One touch of our daggers and they withered. With the Ammon Horsemen in retreat, we rapidly routed the Creep infantry, all the way back to the yellow-seamed cliffs of Enamus."

"There is a rumour, Hlafweard, that a column of Creep infantry made it to Meckel's Cave. It is said they await the Dred Laird's command to rise up at the End of Days."

"I have heard this. Only time will tell." The Kampion moved further down the wall to the depiction of a courtroom where a row of thirteen, cloak-clad Lairds sat along a long marble bench. All of the 'judges,' except the one in the middle, held up hand mirrors in their right fist. "When the Council of Montoac learned of Lordag's skulduggery, and the Horsemen's treachery, the Hoop were put on trial. By a unanimous twelve mirrors - as always, the Reilian Lairds did not vote - the Hoop and Laird Lordag were found guilty. Exiled for ever, the seven tribes were assimilated into the clans of LeBoe, Thuringi, and People of the Wall; the Hoop no longer existed. With the extinction of the Hoop, the Stands of Seven became the Stands of Six. For his treachery, Laird Lordag was dispatched to a prison deep on the moorlands of LeBoe."

"The Decagon," Costa commented with disdain.

"Yes. It is here that the disgraced Laird lived in barren exile, until the advent of the Chronicle of the Chasm of the Unexplained.

"Excellent."

"All good so far? All catalogued?" he asked.

"Every fable, fact, and figure, Hlafweard."

**Go on, try me. Hoopian history for a thousand.**

"I am most impressed, Polyhistor. Continue?"

"Please."

"Though imprisoned on the barren moors of LeBoe, Lordag refused to surrender his belief that one day he would return the Seven Tribes to their all-powerful monarchies. But before he could do this, he had to find a way to escape from the dire darkness of the Decagon."

Costa gestured to the tapestry of The Battle of the Portcullis and Manukarnika of Omos. "Hence the Nagle Invasion?"

"Yes. And now you understand Manukarnika's importance. There is no doubt in my mind, had General Pam broken through the gates of the Portcullis that day, we would now be the oppressed imperial subjects of the Empire of the Dred Laird."

"Was the Nagle invasion fortuitous or fortitude on Lordag's part?"

"That chapter has not yet been written."

**What?! How can he not know? No, no, no, no, know, know. You have to know. I gave you, my love.**

"The discovery as to the true identity of the Traitor of the Wall will, I believe, become your legacy."

**You have got to be kidding me.**

The left side of Costa's inferior frontal gyrus fought like cat and dog to inhibit recognition of this undesirable piece of information whilst her hippocampus scanned all memory banks for a recollection that would allow her to reject the unwanted expectation outright.

Finding nothing to counter the Kampion's confession, the neural networks of her *pars opercularis* of the inferior gyrus were forced into forming the sentence, "You do not know the identity of the Traitor of the Wall?"

"I do not."

***But you're-***

"-the Kampion, you know every-"

***-thing.***

"I am not a God."

It was a mind-blowing revelation. Upon later reflection, Costa believed it was the most powerful lesson she learned that day. Too often we forget that those we rank as mentors and legends still breathe and eat, love and fear, get it right, and get it wrong. Too often, we ourselves forget what it is to be humble in our achievements, and honest in our failures. She would never forget it.

***So, how the Hell did the Chasm form?***

Costa looked down to the scrolls. *The answer's lying right there, isn't it?*

***Don't you know it.***