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The Cycle

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"Sir Nereid awoke beneath a sanguine blanket."

First

Sir Nereid opened his eyes to see a great silver tsunami riding the gold ocean of grass, rippling in the biting October breeze. The Ionian invasion swept across the battlefield and toward the waiting army of brave but greatly outnumbered Casseopians. He viewed the approaching tidal wave with more interest than fear. If he was fated to die in battle, he would be glad to die in this one, fighting to defend the last remaining land of Lord Hargon, his king. He simply waited, and watched Death approach to pass the time.

His fellow knights were also fixed on the horde of hated Ionians. Some feared death and some foolishly believed in victory, but all anxiously awaited combat and would willingly give their lives for their king. The Casseopians stood on the shore of the grass sea, a rocky hill called God's Brow. Just beyond lay Hargon's Grove, radiant with xanthian fall glory, which burned brighter than the blazing sun descending into its branches. It seemed that the sun was returning to its birthplace.

A different fire than that of the life-giver burned within their hearts. The Ionians crashed on the Casseopian shore, making God's Brow red with blood. What victories the Casseopians had, the Ionians won back with sheer numbers. Twenty Ionian warriors fell to the gleaming blades of each Casseopian knight, yet the Ionian onslaught quickly vanquished the dwarfed Casseopian defense. Before the sun had disappeared into Hargon's glorious grove, the last Casseopian was dead or dying.

Sir Nereid fought as if in a dream. He felt nothing when the Ionian force reached his countrymen from across the ocean of grass, when he cut down one foe after another. He hardly believed that he was there at all. Even when an Ionian spearhead pierced his

lung and exited his breastplate, Sir Nereid did not cry out in agony, he merely fell to the ground, as if he were floating, and slowly closed his eyes. He was waiting for this.

"The same vision that started Nereid's second dream was also the end."

Second

Sir Nereid woke beneath a sanguine blanket. Images flashed before his eyes. He pushed away the cold, lifeless bodies piled on top of him and around him. Flash. One poor soul had a spear through his chest, stabbed in the back. Flash. Nereid drifted back to his castle. He found it deserted. Was he the only one left?

Suddenly he felt that he had died. Flash.

He wandered into the forest and noticed shapes drifting between the trees. The Ionians were seeking his king. Flash. Sir Nereid drifted deeper into the forest, the shapes resolving themselves into human forms. He recognized his lord, tortured. Flash. Nereid rushed to save King Hargon. He was willing to die for his king.

"Why is this happening?" Hargon's only daughter wondered plaintively to herself. Princess Elleroche, held captive by one of the Ionian giants, helplessly watched as the warriors tortured her captive father. Two Ionians had lifted King Hargon a few inches off the ground by his ears, one warrior holding each ear. Still, Hargon refused to surrender his honor.

After the Ionian army vanquished the last of the Casseopian knights, they traveled to Seres Hall to force Hargon to surrender his kingdom. When they arrived, they did not find what they were looking for. The Ionians had wanted Hargon to surrender his kingdom to them, but instead they acquired it without opposition. This was not how they wanted it to happen. The remainder of the Casseopians had fled their castle to Hargon's Grove, and hidden themselves deep within its shadows. Hargon, his daughter Elleroche, and several lords and ladies were accompanied by ten knights who did not go to the battle

on God's Brow. These knights stayed behind to guard the king. They had set up a small camp in the heart of the forest to wait, watching Death approach to pass the time.

Despite the multitude of warriors, it still took three days to find the fugitive king. The Ionian army had divided itself to search for the king in his fiery grove, and eventually discovered him and his remaining court. The last of the Casseopian knights was easily vanquished by the band of Ionians who discovered them. They were willing to die for their king. The Ionians lost twenty-four of their warriors in the battle with Hargon's ten remaining knights, but still had many more warriors than Hargon had members in his court.

"We will give you a choice," said one of the giant Ionians. "You will become our slave along with your daughter and these others, or they will watch you die a slow, painful death when you are nailed to this tree." The tree he was referring to was thought to be the first tree in the forest, from which all the others grew. It was the tallest, largest and most gnarled of all the trees in Hargon's Grove.

When he refused, the Ionians continued to suspend Hargon by his ears. He had called their bluff. Before long, the Ionians tired of this ineffective method. Hargon refused to surrender his honor, his last remaining possession. The Ionians already had taken his kingdom, his daughter, and all of his knights. If they were to take his honor, he would have nothing left. He was willing to die for it.

The Ionians did not want him dead. Nor did they care much for Hargon's kingdom or the fiery grove at its edge. Their own kingdom was many times larger and more grand than Hargon's mere village and fields. And Hargon's knights made no match for the huge Ionian army. The Ionians thought nothing of the pitiful Casseopians. They were hunting for sport.

Silently, Sir Nereid stepped into the clearing by the great tree. The heart of Princess Elleroche leaped into her throat. She had hoped it would be her love, Sir Nereid, yet this man looked nothing like him.

"Release him," he declared to the startled Ionians. Rage burned within him. The hand of one Ionian reached for a sword but before it got there Nereid had sent a dagger through his forehead. He did not hunt for sport.

"Release him," Sir Nereid said, louder.

"Looks like we missed one," said the Ionian who was questioning King Hargon, indicating Nereid.

Like a rush, the Ionians in the clearing moved to Nereid, expecting one more triumph. Sir Nereid was a flash, cutting down one Ionian after the next. Soon, not a single one remained in the clearing. The Ionians who survived did so by fleeing the clearing, taking Hargon and his court with them. As they fled, the leader cast a dagger at Sir Nereid, in pursuit. It caught him in the neck. As he fell beneath his lord's tree, Princess Elleroche, slumped beside the grand tree, formed the first image of his second dream.

"Nereid's nightmare had just begun."

Third

The same vision that started Nereid's second dream was also the end. Princess Elleroche leaned up against the tree, sleeping peacefully. Nereid moved to her, and shook her gently. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

She slowly awoke to the face of a stranger.

"Who are you!?" she screamed, "Stay away!!"

Princess Elleroche tried to back away from Nereid, but was blocked by Hargon's great tree.

"I am Nereid." the confused knight tried to explain, "I am Nereid, my love."

"Lies!!" she screamed, "Nereid died on God's Brow. I felt it."

" Do you not feel me now?" Nereid implored, touching her softly.

"You do not look like him." she argued.

"I assure you, it is I." Nereid whispered. "I will never leave you, my love."

The princess looked deep into the stranger's eyes. She recognized something she could not explain. "Could it be? How is it that you have returned?"

"Death may change a man, but Death cannot destroy a noble man." Sir Nereid replied. He noticed a corpse near the edge of the clearing. A dagger protruded from the neck. There was no blood. "I never left, my love."

Princess Elleroche looked up at Sir Nereid. She smiled weakly, and collapsed in his arms. Her nightmare was over.

"Sir Nereid opened his eyes to see a great silver tsunami riding the gold ocean of grass, rippling in the biting October breeze."

Fourth

Nereid's nightmare had just begun. He lifted his sleeping princess carefully and headed out of the forest. As he walked, the sun climbed above his head, the leafy canopy blazing. He reached the edge of the forest at noon. From where he stood, he could see God's Brow and the grass-sea beyond. He started toward castle Seres with a renewed sense of purpose.

When he arrived, the castle was as empty as when he last visited. His fellow knights had not returned. The princess awoke in fear. She recalled her last moments in the castle, being carried off in the night by the strange, giant Ionian invaders.

"Let us leave this place" she whispered to Sir Nereid, shuddering.

Nereid turned and silently left his lord's castle. Outside, Princess Elleroche asked that she would be set down. She had regained the strength to walk by herself. The pair walked to the village near castle Seres. Neither visited the village often. They did not socialize with the peasants. Nereid was relieved to see that this village, all that was left of

the Casseopian people, was untouched by the Ionians. They could at least be safe here for a while.

The pair entered the tavern in the center of town. Immediately, the townsfolk bowed to their princess. She commanded them to rise, for she was nothing without her father, King Hargon. One man asked what had become of the king, to which she replied "God only knows."

"We must save the king!" cried the man to his fellow townsfolk.

"Be cautious, brave sir," warned Sir Nereid, "the evil that has taken our king is powerful indeed."

"It is unimportant." replied the man, "I will die for my lord."

A cheer echoed from the men in the tavern. They, too, were willing. Princess Elleroche turned to Sir Nereid. "You won't leave me again, will you?" she begged, "Please stay. We can make a life here. I won't be able to stand losing you again."

"I always return." Nereid replied simply.

In the morning, after he had dined with her, Nereid was gone, just as suddenly as he had returned. With him had gone every man of fighting ability in the village. The wail of their wives withered the fiery leaves on Hargon's trees that morning. Nereid's nightmare had just begun.

"He was waiting for this."

Fifth

Sir Nereid opened his eyes to see a great silver tsunami riding the gold ocean of grass, rippling in the biting October breeze. His army of villagers marching ahead of him had grown since he left Seres and crossed God's Brow at the beginning of his journey to liberate his king. The bloody stain on God's Brow was disappearing.

Nereid recalled that battle, remembering how he had killed twenty of the Ionian

giants before they put a spear through his shoulder blade. He knew that he had improved since then. It was only a matter of time before the Casseopians would dwindle their numbers low enough to reclaim their land and ruler.

The Ionians met them halfway to their kingdom. They were in a sporting mood. This time, the Casseopian army did not wait, watching Death approach. They charged. Sir Nereid was silver lightning striking through the defense of the Ionian line. His gleaming sword sliced through armor on both sides of his path. He cut down two men at each swing of his weapon. However, the Ionians, with their large numbers, had the advantage and eventually won the battle. Their casualties numbered thirty times the number of Casseopian warriors at the start of the battle. Not a single Casseopian escaped death, but all died for the honor of their king.

Sir Nereid, while trying to free his sword from the abdomen of the Ionian general, felt his kiss of cold steel when the tip of a lance pierced his back and protruded through his stomach. He had killed fifty of the giants before they could touch this solid warrior. He was not afraid. He was waiting for this.