

THE INLANDS III:

The Traveling Man

RYAN CHRISTENSEN

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Email: edwinkrollup@gmail.com

<http://www.ryan-christensen.com>

Illustrations by Matt Low

*For my Dad,
who liked this one best.*



PROLOGUE

Every world finds its immortality in stories.

An old man sits in front of a computer. His hands rest idly beside the keyboard and he waits. He watches.

He stares at words. They are just words right now. Words coherently strung together to form sentences...sentences clumped into paragraphs. He's talked to other writers before and he's asked them if the process is the same for them...though he assumes he's always been quite presumptuous, for he really isn't a writer. These words...these sentences and paragraphs...they've been waiting for many years to be finished. So he's aspiring if he's anything, but he's concluded the general consensus among most writers is the same: They don't write, they see.

So he waits to see. He waits for the monitor to open like a doorway into what he calls the Storyteller's Network. He waits to be shown what to write. The imagination is always shown.

The blinking icon mocks him; he taps his finger against the side of the keyboard. He is noticeably sweating. He looks up at the map he drew years and years ago, when he was just a boy. When he was first shown this world. Back then it was much easier. Now there are too many headaches.

And dreams.

He shudders. When he feels the connection starting, that hole forming between himself and the computer he finally sees. It is a world unlike this one. He supposes most are, for what would be the point of escape? He types. Not fast, but efficient.

And he hears the voices.

He reaches for the bottle beneath his desk and drinks.

The voices stop.



PART I

MOLLOCK

*If the Doors of perception were cleansed,
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.*

William Blake



CHAPTER 1

LAST STAND

1

Dashun was bent over on the stoop, a nail pinched tightly between two fingers as he flexed his thumb over the cool iron of his hammer tack, shoved atop a wedge of wood he and his brother had split themselves. The boards were lopsided, some of them shorter than others, but it was the boys job to rebuild the deck behind the house which, after the chicken coop exploded two days ago, had begun to sink in the mud and split.

He struck the nail and the board tightened against the stud beneath. Dashun could feel his weight register on the board with a slight creak; he stomped twice to check the stoop's sturdiness, dug another nail from the bucket, and scurried backwards two feet in order to establish tidy intervals. The deck wasn't pretty, but father said randomness was really only uncertainty in one's job, and uncertainty was ignorance. *Poor father*, he thought, as he smacked the nail into the board, the timber splitting near the end where fissures had cracked nearly all the way through the slat—*groveling at Zolla's feet like a beggar*.

Pais handed him another board and he nodded at his brother.

"What is that? Out in the field there?" Pais pointed to the north at their strip of land, forever diminishing from their name. Dashun dropped the hammer to have a look. The field was a long stretch of acreage broken by fences to the north, west and east, and patterned only by a distant garden their mother kept, surrounded mainly by surefire crops the soil could upkeep. Come harvest, the Harucks reaped and sowed their crop with an imminent pride that was the result of land ownership. In a world with so

little hope, it was nice to brandish material belongings that would, for your time at least, remind you that you had left your mark on the world.

But there was something out there, Dashun noticed, and it wasn't just his younger brother pulling some gag to help pass the hours. Both of them had seen roamers before. Sometimes the critters would jump the walls and feed on weeds and grass in the fields, and the boy-folk, permitted by their fathers of course, would grab their slingshots and speed out into the fields to salvage whatever crops they could before the quadrupeds had their way with the strip before moving on like locusts. Dashun had been lucky enough to practice his aim on many occasions, and twice was able to tag a dinner which fed the family for a solid week. But these animals weren't stopping to feed.

They were running.

There was a herd of them, tufts of dust billowing out behind them like pennons. Some of them were inside their field, and others were in the field beyond, their frames noticeable in the daylight but concealed partly by their wheeling muscles. The fence into the neighboring farm was broken in spots where the roamers hadn't just jumped the wall, but rather drove through it by hunching their muscular shoulders and snapping the posts with their momentum. Dashun noticed a couple of roamers heaped at the base of the partition, animals that had broken the posts but had collapsed from the exertion and fell victim to the stampede.

"There're hundreds of em," Pais said. Other folk were on their porches watching too, unable to do anything but wonder what might drive these animals into such a frenzy. They made a noise as they ran, a noise Dashun would never forget; it was a high whinny, one which Dashun recalled hearing once as a boy when a swarm of crickets infested their field. They sounded the same.

There were birds in the sky, packs in specks against the clouds, flying from east to west, toward the mountains where, Dashun supposed, they too felt obligated to worship.

"Come inside." It was their mother's voice. She didn't even acknowledge the stampede which was tearing the northern field, but when Dashun turned to look into Hola's eyes, his own perhaps still shaded by pure shock and curiosity, he would notice at once the extremity of his mother's emotion. "It's your grand-da."

The door closed behind the boys, and the roamers were left forgotten.

2

Koff was still east today, finishing his damned errand. Merd Haruck was lying in a tense pose that pulled his old arms out in the air, exposing thick veins and sinews that pulsed beneath his cragged skin. He moved left, then right, in jerked convulsions that convinced Hola, at first, that he was having a heart attack; she didn't want to handle this right now, not with Koff gone bargaining their namesake's land.

Merd's eyes rolled back to the whites.

"What's wrong with him? What's wrong with him?" Pais yelled.

Merd sat up, clenching the wet sheets to his chest, his cotton shirt practically translucent under a glaze of sweat. For a moment the whites of his eyes bulged out from his drooping eyelids, themselves rolled back so that his lashes were tickling the underside of his brow, and then his pupils dropped from their fixation at the back of his head.

"It isn't time, is it? Is it?" Merd shook. His voice was strained, but his eyes were concentrated on Dashun. "Gather every man we have, an put what ye must in his furred fists, for they will march on the temple with little regard for human life; they will show no mercy; they will burn the children and slaughter the women. Whatever it is we do in life, men, we do it for our right to live!" There was a strength in his vocal pipes that hadn't been there for some time. His eyes remained fixed on Dashun, and the boy felt compelled to move aside, to allow the old man a firm grasp on whatever it was that was taking him from sanity.

"What is he saying?" Pais asked, but Hola ignored the boy.

"We will see their torches, and we will approach them before they approach us, for the space between them an' the temple is a distance we will forever defend." He raised his right hand in the air and screamed. This scream was hearty; it wasn't meant to portray fright, but rather a hint of bravado. Pais stumbled backwards when Merd hollered, knocking over a table and shattering a mug. "Show the wolves no mercy, and fight for your bloodline; fight for the brethren who won't live the night; fight for the brethren who defend the righteous; fight for Mystic!"

Merd fell back at last, his head comfortably nestling in the groove sculpted in his grimy pillow, his breaths followed by long snores; his nose was runny, and the snot catching on his upper lip was intermingled with blood.

Hola ran to wipe the mucus from the man's face.

"'Twas a dream," Dashun finally said, watching his mother tend to his grand-da. "He wasn' awake at all."

“I don’ understand,” Pais said.

“Happens often with old folk, dear, specially those that might have been here during the stand that built this town,” Hola said, without turning. “Edin sits on the foundation of our ancestors’ blood; ye’ll have nightmares if ya ponder it. Go on back an’ work on the stoop, both o’ ya, an’ I’ll make sure grand-da wakes up healthy. Jus’ a dream is all.” Hola was shivering.

3

Nokke sat with his bow, enjoying the sun, enjoying the weight of the golden horn on his chest, hinging his past with his future like some liminal talisman. He was in the More estate, upon a gold chair embedded with few emeralds that traced the ornate armrests into circular wisps which finally disappeared behind the chair. The trees bordering the mansion (*more like engulfing*, the Watcher figured) constructed cross hatched shadows over the long deck, one with canopies hung like awnings from the house, but he had found a particular spot on the stoop where the boards were unaffected by darkness.

He brought his mug to his lips.

He had been thinking non-stop about that old man and Isabella; thinking of what the both of them had done at the fork, and recalling the utter guilt in the old one’s eyes as he stammered over the few words he could find to establish a lie. Nokke was no fool; he was born with the instinct of a hound, sniffing the very depths of human understanding, and he realized it was in the old man’s eyes that he found no outward expression, nothing that might determine his emotions and sympathies.

“Something doesn’ feel right, not a’ all,” Pungere said from behind his younger brother, sniffing the air. That was just it, Nokke considered, something didn’t feel right today, as if the air had been stilled by some much larger force.

“Where is Zolla?” Nokke asked.

“Still jabbering with the beggar. Reckon he’ll buy the poor fool out an’ toss his hide to the rats.”

“Good. We’ll leave out back.”

“What are ye talkin’ bout?” Pungere asked, himself sober for the first time in days.

“Just grab yer sword, brother.”

“What is this?”

“Look at the birds,” Nokke pointed to the north fields, beyond the hunching pines that had been shedding needles into piling bunches at the trees’ bases. Zolla’s land occupied the northwest corner of Edin, separated from the land beyond by a fifteen foot stone and mortar wall built decades ago by his father and grand-da. In the sky, not quite high enough to mask the reality of such an image, were flocks of birds, flying from east to west in a flight parallel to the horizon; there was a loud collective caw and flutter that became a part of the wind.

“I’ve ne’er seen the Longuns in such multitude,” Pungere said, his face expressionless. He slashed his chest with his forefinger, a custom he had just picked up, but which encouraged him to practice by instinct.

Nokke remembered the birds pecking at the fresh carcasses at the fork and shuddered. He stood up. He could feel the hum of the temple, and that, combined with the provoked certainty of the bird’s flight, seemed to compel his baser instincts from the footholds at the back of his mind. “We have to leave. We are being told something.” The thudding of the temple’s bass deepened until he could feel it in his gut.

“The fork is gone from us,” Pungere said.

“So we must protect the road from the fork,” Nokke continued.

“The road goes many ways, but in the end it always leads back to its heart. Soul of th’ Watcher, eye of th’ still-hunter.”

Nokke closed his eyes, succumbing to the suggestion of such a proverb, listening to the birds and understanding there were other animals beyond that wall, running in a collective force *away* from whatever chased them.

“We are here for duty, brother, we are here as Watchers. Nothin’ else.”

Pungere reached for a dagger he had clasped in a scabbard concealed by his waist. “And as Watchers we shall die,” he said with a grumble.

“The fork is open to them. They are coming.”

4

Dashun and Pais returned to the stoop as their mother had suggested, but neither of them could allow the memory of their grand-da’s lapse leave their minds. Dashun even missed the nail he was aiming to hit three times before stopping all together to take a breather.

And then Pais affirmed a thought he had had for a second, one which requested he further debate on the plausibility of such tales he’d heard in passing, tales of flying steel dragons and rock homes which stretched

hundreds of feet from the ground, covered in glistening windows that reflected the sky like a painting.

“Do you think it had anything to do with grand-da?” Pais wasn’t certain why he asked the question, but both incidents seemed unique in that neither boy had ever seen them happen before, let alone both in the same day, the same minute even.

“What?” Dashun said stupidly, trying his hardest to keep his mind on the duty at hand; he hammered the nail into the slat.

Pais tucked the nail he was holding into the back of his hand, concealed mostly by his sleeve, and he arched his eyebrow; it was a look he had picked up from their father, and Dashun knew it well. “The roamers. Ya think grand-da maybe dreamed, ya know, to warn us bout somethin’?” His question wasn’t too far out into left field because Dashun had thought the same thing, but besides the virtue of the righteous and the blessings of Mystic, the supernatural in their world was only hearsay, fragments of grand-da’s stories.

Dashun looked at the sky, and the few remaining birds still gliding in the distance. It was midday. The sun was high and Mystic’s shadow stretching. If, for any chance, there was a connection between grand-da’s lapse and the animals’ exodus, he didn’t believe the old man would just go on and fall back into a coma, especially not without justifying his cryptic narration.

“Nah, jus’ a dream o’ the past, like what mom said; ‘tis an anxiety bout the present, you can be sure. Comes with age.” Dashun smiled and grabbed the nail from Pais, who shrugged with a smile also.

But Dashun didn’t believe this. He wiped the sweat from his brow, and he thought of what Cole had said, when he first met the boy, the boys who had seen the wolves from the north, seen them and survived. *You might see them soon*. Those were the burnt boy’s exact words, and the startling clarity of the memory would forever haunt Dashun because he believed him; he believed him with every inch of his soul.

“You okay?” Pais said, collecting the nails from the ground.

“Fine. Just fine,” Dashun said. He wiped his brow again. He wasn’t sure he could keep himself composed, especially well enough to trick Pais; he was a right judge of character. “I’m gonna check on mother, see if grand-da is alright. Could use a drink.”

“The well is o’er there,” Pais said.

“Nah, not water, youngun, not today, mayhaps drown m’self in the ale.”

“Let me come with you,” Pais added.

“I will only be a moment,” Dashun said, looking out into the field, at the dead roamers who in an hour would become festering corpses, signaling the immigration of a colony of insects from the mountain’s caverns. “Lay some boards. We can show father which were yours, and which were mine.” Dashun handed his younger brother the hammer and walked inside, letting the screen door click shut behind him as he wiped his brow once again.

5

“How is he?” Dashun asked. Hola was wiping sweat from the old man’s brow, her longing gaze out the window; she wanted to be out there, Dashun could tell that much, but he was raised in a world where women were subjected to the primal rights of man, and her place was beside grand-da until he either rose from illness, or succumbed to it. A part of her probably wished for the latter so she could forever wash her hands of such duty, sitting by his vile body, allowing his stench to overcome her as she held the same ratty cloth day in and day out, her pallid flesh exposed only to the light which streamed through the thin pane beside the bed.

“Still asleep. Are ya hungry? I could make the lot o’ ya a platter of taters. I jus’ skinned some potatoes, n’ cut em into wedges.”

Dashun shook his head. “Has he said anything else?”

Hola shook her head.

“Has he ever done this before?”

Hola didn’t answer.

“Answer me, please.”

Hola wiped the old man’s lip and set the cloth next to his body. “Wasn’ ever so long. Usually jus’ slurs a few words. Always bout the wolves though, those damned wolves. Mercy Mystic why the throne would contemplate such a disastrous breed.” Hola hadn’t yet cleaned the mug which Pais had broken earlier, and while she spoke she tried to avert her eyes from her son’s. She didn’t know why, but she found his glare uncomfortable. She bent down and picked up the biggest chunks of glass and set them on the table next to Merd.

“Does father know?”

“Bout his lapses? Course he does. Don’ know right what to do bout them; just wait out the sick an’ hope the man’s mind overcomes it.”

“Why did ya call us in this time, then?” Dashun’s unhinged eyes and the wavering tone of his voice compounded his curiosity.

Hola fidgeted for a moment, tracing her fingers along the broken glass. “Didn’ feel right to have to hear it alone, is all.”

6

Pais nailed a couple of slats and stood back to look at them. They weren't as nice as Dashun's, but he figured his father would be proud. He followed his brother's pattern, and nailed every few inches.

Then he heard the loud carriage coming from the west along the main road. There was a singing voice coming from the compartment, one he could hear quite clearly despite the distance between him and the road. Pais ran round the stoop to the front door, holding the banister with shaking hands, the hammer dangling from his curled fingers.

It was Zolla More's chariot, built from the loveliest timber and encrusted with jewels that formed the family's coat of arms, weaving into folded purple linens that were draped at the sides of the chariot. Pais figured the man would stop in front of the house and trot to the door with his cape drawn aside to reveal his healthy girth, and have one of his men knock on the door instead of scuffing his own rings, which amassed each finger in a glistening array of gold.

But he didn't. He drove past at the same speed, his horses galloping ferociously, men out running their errands forced to jump aside, both for fear of their lives, and to show their unfortunate gratitude to the head councilor.

And he was singing. Pais could tell that much for sure. The man's voice was elated; it even made Pais long to join with him in chorus, but the words of the song didn't whet the boy's appetite at all. As far as the boy could tell, Zolla was hollering (and not in harmony, mind you):

HAIL TO THE KING! THE KING HAS RETURNED! MARK THE REBELS, THE CROWN 'S BEEN EARNED! HAIL TO THE KING! THE THRONE IS FILLED! MARK THE DISSENTERS, ALL DOUBT 'S BEEN STILLED!

Over and over again, each verse the same as the last, until his voice disappeared with the flume of dust trailing his carriage.