

◇ PRECURSORS ◇

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Every old house in our city had stone tubs built into its foundation. I was a young man when I learnt of their origins; and through that, of the Precursors.

New houses were beginning to go up in the Old Quarter by then; but as a poor student, I could only afford to rent an old-time house... One day, I walked into a local hardware store, asking for nails in order to hang an old family photograph.

I struck up a casual conversation with the old man who ran the shop; and learnt that these houses – these two-storey, basalt-and-obsidian dwellings with triangular windows and odd angles; these time-worn adobes that perpetually seemed covered with ashen-brown dust – were not built by humans.

“Ah, those heavy-eyed-ones,” the old man said suddenly lively with reminiscence, “Those Who Came Before People, the Precursors! You know what those tubs are? They are beds, son! Their builders needed occasional baths for their eyes, and to breathe properly. Every night they slept in beds of still water.”

I was surprised – who were these “Precursors”?

“They,” he said, “were exiles from a humid continent. To live comfortably they brought water, even to this parched plateau in this far-off, time-worn corner of the world. Back when I was your age, I made a lot of money converting their old tubs to dinner tables by adding wooden panels on top of them!” the shopkeeper said.

“Heck, some of the mountain peasants who came in afterwards even used them as chicken coops! Of course, you could always ask a stonemason to take a sledgehammer to the things, but the tubs are resilient – the Precursors built them as part of the house’s main structure, and added the rooms around them afterwards... That’s one thing no one can deny about them – the Precursors knew how to build... Our craftsmen are mere amateurs by comparison!

Newcomers, hacks!”

Apparently, only the older generation remembered these Precursors. Then came another casual revelation – that a few of these Precursors were still alive, back when this old man was young... I asked if he could explain further.

“Oh yes, one of them still lived in our neighbourhood when I was a child. Everyone respected the creature, and it respected us newcomers in turn... Respected, and kept well apart. It eked out an existence by weaving silk scarves – before machines, you see, everyone had to make their clothing by hand! Heh! Every week the fishmonger’s kids took it buckets of eels as the shipments arrived from the coast... I remember the green-glow of the lanterns it hung on the doorstep on special nights – my parents said it was some sort of a holy month for them - and I remember the strange, strange flute music it played at the end of the lantern-hanging season...”

“Once,” the old man said, “two brazen youths of the neighbourhood took offence at the monster’s music. They claimed it was blasphemous, and the bleached flutes it played out of the tiny, triangular window facing their alley were made from the hollowed-out bones from children’s legs. No such thing of course – but how could you convince the lads?! They almost broke in and shot the thing – but the whole neighbourhood intervened, and the hot-heads stepped back. But the flutes stopped after that, and so did the lantern-lights...”

“Not that it mattered – the Precursor died a year afterwards,” said the old man, “and a new family – one of ours – moved in.”

“I still remember the body as they took it out of the house – it looked equally like a stork, camel, a human and serpent - and a few other things besides... It looked like a beast, but from the way it rested; you could tell that the Precursor had lived a civilised – if you may call it, a human life...”

“They carried it out of the neighbourhood... Back in those days there was a Precursor cemetery down there – by where the car-repair shops stand now – a garden of jangling monuments... Then the mayor had it walled-off, on the grounds that drunkards and quick-handed prostitutes were taking up residence there...”

“For two decades it stood, that walled-off little plot with cypress trees and blue palms

overflowing from behind the tall, tile-topped walls; in plain sight, and out of mind... Once, after the Depression, a local merchant climbed over the walls and hung himself... His body rotted for weeks – the police only noticed it after all the crows and tooth-birds started congregating at the spot. After the Islands’ War, the place was demolished – and, well... Here we are.”

He concluded his long story with a guttural “cluck” sound.

I was astonished. I had an inkling that such things had happened in the past – schoolyard rumours, parents’ whispers on dinner tables and the like – but meeting someone who remembered was a different experience. I asked the man why no one spoke about the Precursors anymore.

“They are dead and gone – so why bother? Your parents probably knew more about them than they let on – but such is the way of this world... It’s an open secret, and one no one can do anything about... So, it’s best to ignore; everyone plays the blind man’s game, until they really forget...”

“Do you think there were others?”

“Others? You mean other people-things, like the Precursors?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Ooh, almost certainly... The Precursors built the tub-houses – but not those ancient cisterns that crouch silently on street corners, up in the old town... Or those carvings on the hills – with those squiggles and angular letters no one can make sense of... At school, do they still tell you they are the work of the Old... Old... Ah-Old-ermm...”

“Old Kings, yes...”

“Yes, Old Kings! Now, ask yourself; how certain are you that the Old Kings were human kings?”

“...”

I did not know what to say.

“Exactly! And that’s not the end of it! This world of ours is old, son, there used to be others out there, before us all... Layers and layers of lives; like coats of varnish on an old painting! And who is to say there won’t be others after us either, eh? Look or beyond the tallest mountains, kid; or at the Moon; or the stars, twinkling like the eyes of spiders on a night-time country road... There’s bound to be another prince like Alexander the Great up there; one who will do to us as we did to the Precursors, waiting to come down and smash our petty ant-hill of a world...”

“..”

“Eh? But what would I know; I’m just an old shopkeeper! Now, about those nails you wanted...”