

## Words and Blades



Ahead of Lapis moved the ghostly shape of Muosh. If Lapis turned his head to the right, in the corner of his eye, he could see the ember of the Sun and the sliver of the Moon far, far behind him. A hand's-length above them shone the tiny speck that was the Star. Back when he lived beneath the Sun, Lapis had taken the heavenly lights for granted. The Sun would always rise over the mountains and set into the sea, the Moon would slowly revolve away the seasons, and the Star was always there, straight above, unchanging. But out here, five-hundred days journey behind the Tower of the Sun, everything revolved around darkness. Day was like midnight, and night was like blindness.

The Sun, Moon, and Star behind, and ahead Muosh's back, leading away. These were all that interrupted the darkness. The horizon was a perfect smooth line. Above it was nearly-black-silver fading upward into smooth inky black, and below it was the pure black of distance fading down into the almost-black grey sand at their feet. The sand was packed smooth and hard, and rippled very gently, with the troughs and crests never describing a depression any deeper than a footprint.

Out here Lapis had to walk by feel and by faith, as Muosh had done his whole life. Even if Muosh had been facing him it would have been too dark for Lapis to see his eyes, but Lapis knew those eyes would be closed. In the Empire Behind the Sun, men used their eyes like men under the Sun in Sornavu might use their tongues. The ear, and the hand, and the foot, these were the masters of the senses.

Suddenly Lapis's foot struck something hard in the sand and he stumbled. As he fell, he could feel other hard things with his knees and his hands. A change in the jingling of Muosh's bangles showed that he had stopped walking and was turning back. Muosh must have stepped over these hard things instinctively. Lapis was angry that Muosh had not warned him. He should know that Lapis was a newcomer to the darkness.

"Are you harmed?" asked Muosh.

"No. I am fine." said Lapis, rolling over into a sitting position. He brushed the sand off his hands, and inspected his knee closely. It felt bruised, but it was too dark to see if it was really bleeding.

Muosh jingled, turning, and continued walking.

"Wait!" shouted Lapis angrily. "Can't you wait for one moment?"

Muosh turned back. "You said you were fine."

"Well I am not." said Lapis. He reached down and pulled the thing he had stumbled on out of the sand. It was light like wood, but the texture didn't feel like wood, neither did it feel like stone. Lapis realised it was a skull.

"Bones!" Lapis exclaimed, reaching down and feeling the other hard things in the sand.

Muosh returned, and kneeled next to Lapis. He jingled as he felt about with both hands. "Truth!" exclaimed Muosh, "A man has perished here."

"I wonder who he was." Said Lapis. he held the skull between his face and the distant sun. He could make out the contours of the teeth, the rim of the eye-sockets, and across the top of the forehead was a deep cut, and the tiny trickle of light flowed through it, invading and illuminating the sinus cavity. "Look at this." said Lapis, and even before he heard Muosh exhale he felt foolish. "Feel this." he corrected, offering the skull to Muosh.

Muosh took the skull and turned it over in his hands. "This man lost an argument" he said.

"It must have been quite an argument," said Lapis, "To split his head open like that."

"A man who means the words he speaks must always be ready to die for them." said Muosh solemnly.

Lapis dug up a handful of sand. There was a bone in it. He let it fall, and took up another handful, this just sand, and let it trickle between his fingers. As he had been so many times since he started this journey, Lapis was overwhelmed by the emptiness. There was so much emptiness here, stretching onward and outward into infinity, that it seemed to reach into him, invading his body, making him empty also.

"What would make a person live in a place like this?" Lapis demanded angrily. "What would any man care enough about to die for in a place like this?" He flung down the remainder of the handful of sand.

Muosh settled into a more comfortable sitting position in the sand.

"There is nothing here! What is there to argue about? What is there to believe in? What is there to live for? What to die for? Just so that your bones can provide a little texture in this forsaken sand?"

The skull made a hollow noise as Muosh tapped on it with his fingertips. "This man was on a journey." he said. "He strove to change the future. He strove

to do great things."

"How—" started Lapis.

"This man tried to change the world." Continued Muosh. "All change stems from the acts of but a single man. No two, no three, no legion, have ever changed the world. Change dwells only in the one, as it dwelled in this man."

"How do you know that?" Asked Lapis. "Do you know who this was?"

"I know him not." Answered Muosh. "I knew him not. But are these things not true of all?"

"No." Said Lapis.

"Are these things not true of all who fight and die?"

"No." Said Lapis.

Muosh jingled. He was shaking his head. "All those who fight and die for what they believe?"

"No!" Lapis spat, bitterly.

After a silence, Muosh made a short humming noise. "It is an empty world you must live in. Empty beneath Light-of-Sun."

Lapis looked up. His gaze had drifted down into his chest. "Empty!?" He said angrily. "There is life there. There is everything. Sea and sky, mountains and valleys, rivers, forests, roads, cities, people. Life!"

Muosh chuckled. "You and I mean different things when we speak the word 'Empty'. To me this place is not empty at all. We are here. Our words and our thoughts are here. Many feet have trodden this sand before us, and many will tread it after us. What other voices will ring out here? Words and Blades have collided here. A man has died here. There is much here."

"But there is nothing here now." Said Lapis.

"The past is here. The future is here, and so also are the things which only might have been. This place is filled with journeys."

Lapis was silent for a long while. So also was Muosh, but for the slight jingling of his breathing. Lapis would have stretched out on his back to think, had he not known the sand was strewn with bones. After a time he stared back towards the Sun Moon and Star.

"Why did you come here?" asked Muosh.

"I don't know." said Lapis. He realized that although he was still staring towards the sun, his eyes were closed.

"One does not travel a thousand days into the darkness without knowing his reasoning."

"Three hundred and eighty days," corrected Lapis. "Three hundred and eighty." He stood, dusting the grey sand off of his clothing.

There was a grinding as Muosh gently pressed the skull back into the sand. He stood with a jingle and a sigh. "Let us leave this man to his sleep. We have our own journey to attend to."

They walked in silence for some time. As Lapis walked he was amazed at how clearly he could sense the point in the sand behind his back where the bones of a man who had lost an argument rested.

"Why are you here?" asked Lapis, breaking the silence.

Muosh's silhouette changed shape in an instant as he turned his ear to Lapis. "I was born here, what do you mean?"

"No, not just you, I mean why were you born here? Why are your people here? Why is there an Empire out here?"

Muosh said nothing for a few footsteps, and Lapis thought about how hard it was to interpret body language when you could hardly see the body. He wondered if he was offending Muosh with his talk. They had been travelling together for many, many days, but today was the first time they had spoken of anything other than practical matters.

"The Empire was founded in the Second Turning." said Muosh. "We have known no other home."

"But your ancestors came from 'Beneath the Sun', didn't they?"

"Yes," said Muosh. "Before the First Turning, before even the Starting, my first-fathers left behind the Land Beneath the Sun."

"Why?" asked Lapis.

Muosh stopped walking. Lapis stopped also.

"You love questions more than you love footsteps!" exclaimed Muosh, "I had misjudged you. You will indeed be welcome in my home!"

Lapis flinched as he felt Muosh's hand on his face, but he immediately recognized this as a friendly gesture. This was the equivalent of a hearty handshake, or maybe even a big bear hug. Lapis awkwardly raised his hand, not sure if he was supposed to return the touch or not, but Muosh's hand drew away, and with a jingle he was walking again.

"So many tens of thousands of days have passed," said Muosh, "so many have lived and died, that no one remembers for certain. It is said that there was a great evil under Sun Moon and Star, and our people fled it. That was the Starting. They walked into the darkness for generations, until the light was only a memory, and then only a story. And there was a division between those who thought the evil was gone, believing it was safe to return, and those who wanted to continue forever."

"What was the evil?" asked Lapis, curious.

"I do not know." said Muosh. "Those who wished to continue and those who wished to turn back parted ways, and this was the First Turning. For generations more, my ancestors traced back the footsteps of their ancestors until they saw the light again. Then there arose another division among them, for they could not remember what the evil was, and if they could not remember what it was, how could they know if it was gone or not?"

Lapis nodded. "Doubt." he said.

"So some turned back, and returned to the darkness, and this was the Second Turning. But most stayed here at the boundary between sunlight and darkness, and their children became a nation, and their children's children became an Empire."

They walked on.

Lapis laughed.

"Speak?" said Muosh.

"I think perhaps I know why I am here." said Lapis.

"Wait until we reach the Empire before you say." said Muosh. "Better things than fear brought my people here, and better things than doubt make them stay."

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