

Bring Me the Head of the King

1. The Twin Lives of Viesh & Shevi

Back in the old, old days there lived two daughters, one older by mere minutes, but both so close in kind that no one could tell them apart, not even their parents; this was the beginning of Viesh & Shevi.

At first, both sisters enjoyed the company of one another. Often, one was the other's best friend and this led to a healthy dose of competition between the two sisters. This youthful, perpetual outdoing of each other eventually led to actual feelings of jealousy and dissemination between the twin girls, which one day manifested itself in the form of a zestful wager in name of the local goddess, Mnemesyne.

In the course of the contest a quarrel broke out between the two young women. Though there were many witnesses to the physical altercation, not one person could say for sure which sister murdered the other. Standing over her sister's lifeless form the victress announced to the shocked masses, "Do not judge! For you people know nothing of the anguish and punishment that has befallen my sister and I. We are Nieasghiean, we are free."

However, when the crowd saw the ferocious and bestial way in which Nieasghiean destroyed either Viesh or Shevi, they turned upon the victress. With bone and stone the inhabitants of the old, old days drove the lone twin out of their city and cursed her name.

For a few generations Nieasghiean was publicly disposed and vilified as the evil of the two girls. Just a few generations later times changed in that very way it does, and suddenly Nieasghiean became popular again and was allowed back into the city. Even after all these years Nieasghiean still looked young and vital, and so encouraged the calling of the area's most available bachelors. The town decided to hold a large celebration in the town square, followed by a parade down First Avenue, followed by another large party on the courthouse lawn downtown. It was at this event that Nieasghiean planned to promise herself to a mortal man.

2. The First Son

Unbeknownst to even the father, Viesh and Shevi's mother gave birth to another child; a son, Mordred.

Mordred was raised in all the ways considered correct by the elite. He was tutored at an early age and forced to spend hours upon hours studying. His mother expected him to take over his father's throne and rule with a philosopher-king's wisdom.

Alas, Nature's dream, along with Mordred's fate, was satanized when her twin daughters both fell victim to vanity. Nature spent the next millennia weeping for the loss of one daughter whose true name she did not know.

Chaos soon swept over the tumultuous land and passed judgment on the people without concern. Fearing for her newborn's life, Nature hid Mordred in a place not even her husband, Chaos, could look. She hid the young babe in a black hole. Hundreds of thousands perished as Chaos made his sorrow felt, but in all his wrath Chaos never learned of his only son. Chaos was never the same again, and in his melancholia he let the universe fall to the wayside.

One day though, Mordred heard mention of his sister's plan to marry a mere mortal. Having been raised in the height of Olympian education he considered this a sinful and punishable offence; one that would not escape his ironclad will. It was on the night of his remaining sister's engagement that he planned to execute his vindictive coup.

3. The Death of the King

It was a beautiful ceremony. Vaulted walls four stories tall gushed ornate velvet and silk. Peasants, slaves, and hand-maidens were compacted into a small room to help ready the bride. Similarly, the groom's best men were huddled like apes in a tiny cage to help resolve his will to wed. Ultimately, both overcame their selfish concerns to begin the march down the aisle.

Nieasghiean was dressed in a solid crimson silk corset. She slinked past the rows and while doing so, stole the hearts of all the men in attendance. Her husband, in his human ignorance, strutted down the aisle, smiling at the cat calls of the women in attendance. Both had no sooner said, "I do," however, than Mordred, son of Nature and Chaos smashed the principle window above the alter.

Dropping down further than any man could safely fall, Mordred landed between the bride and groom. He spent no time with the mortal man. He quickly beheaded him and shoved his body back down the marital staircase. It was then he turned his anger upon his older sister. Forcing her to her knees he tore out the eyes of his sister. Holding both trophies above his head Mordred proclaimed his divine providence over the entire land.

Over one hundred cycles of human reproduction happened and Mordred's empire grew. With the empire grew the military, the economy, the history, and the people's pride. Mile over mile the empire stretched absorbing all cultures it ran into.

Mordred passed his ideas on to his son, Mordred. And Mordred, in turned, passed his ideas on to his son, Mordred. Thus it ran from father to son, the law of Mordred until one day, on the third cycle of the moon of the new year. On the mid-day of this month, the great king was struck down by many blades held by many men. Mordred's flesh, though protected against divine will, was easily pierced by the knives of men.

So, for the first time in Chaos's reign he lost power as Mordred's blood flooded the street of the capital city. Nature was so upset that she lifted her last child's body into the sky and made him into a set of stars, what we call constellations.

For all time after this humans have ruled the universe and believed themselves to be the height of all things. In this, humanity was not totally wrong.

4. The Birth of Nations

There began one man among many. It was this man who began the long and painful climb upward. Adam was the child of an indentured family working off their expensive pilgrimage from the *dark-lands* to the lowlands. Adam's family was enslaved to another family, one of great wealth and social standing, the owners of the small rural area on which he worked.

For generations Adam's family had worked for the family without making a noticeable difference in their life-debt. This was until the youngest son of the master whipped Adam's mother to death in a corn field one sunny afternoon. Adam, who was only five, did nothing as his mother was extinguished in front of his eyes. It was this memory that Adam kept with him when he was sold to another family at the age of twelve. It was this memory of his mother, begging for her life in howling cries of pain, begging to be left alive to take care of her children. The young man on the horse neither understood nor cared. He beat her mercilessly until her crushed skull finally silenced her terrified screams. It was because of this memory that Adam rarely slept.

During a bout of fierce insomnia Adam was taking a midnight walk in his current master's corn field when he heard a scuffle a few rows over. Being out illegally, Adam almost turned and fled back to his hut. Instead, against his better instincts, he crept quietly across the rows. Pulling the last few stalks aside he found himself witnessing the rape of an extremely young female from another nearby slave hut.

The assailant was one of the master's sons. Adam couldn't tell which, but it hardly mattered. With fury and will unseen in a slave before Adam pulled the son off of the child and beat him to death with his fists. Searching wildly, he grasped a rock and with it smashed the aggressor's head and brains into a fine pulp.

The young lady, horrified at what had befallen her that night, fell silent and never spoke again. Cradling the young victim Adam returned to his hut village and placed the child in the center of the huts, near the central fire.

"Brothers and sisters, our gods have done this to your child. Our gods have done this to us and our families for all known time on this world. Tonight, I take no more!" but try as he might Adam could not convince even one man to take up arms against the master's family.

So it was that Adam, rock still in hand, silently entered his master's unlocked house and murdered every single member of the family. Young and old, corrupt and innocent, Adam murdered them all, and in one fell swoop freed all the slaves of the plantation.

Over the next few weeks the question arose, "What to do now?" The slave families had plenty of food to sustain them through the winter, and with their skills of the soil hunger was not a foreseeable problem. With full bellies the inhabitants of the villa began talking of the possibility of helping other nearby slaves. Night after night the villa's men stole away while the women watched over the children. Each morning more and more people became free with nothing but hate, food, and time on which to feed.

In a short while the tiny hut village of Adam became known as the *Villasombra* or House of the Shadow, named after the dark, liberating people who dwelled there. As history passed the entire area surrounding the Villasombra fell under its chthonic ideals.

Calla after calla began to align itself with the strength of the growing village until the entire empire was known as the *Vallesombra*, or Valley of the Shadow. Thus was inducted the Shadow Empire, led by one man, the original free-thinker Adam, or as he was now called Caesar Adamicus, the man-king.

Adamicus waged war on all non-Sombran lands and the Shadow Empire grew into its name. The entire planet eventually abandoned all their gods and called themselves residence of the Vallesombra, whose capital was of course the now flourishing metropolitan city of Villasombra.

The creation of the city-nation-planet was considered the greatest achievement of all humankind. A colossal, cyclopean accomplishment never before attempted in the entire known world. The Sombrans wrote poetry and songs proclaiming the greatness of their civilization and for a long, long time the Vallesombra ruled the entire world, but one day a sight never before seen in the Vallesombra appeared.

Starting as a shimmering new star, astronomers and sky-watchers alike noticed the startling suddenness with which it appeared. One night a patch of empty sky, the next: a fire in the sky brighter than anything the observers had, indeed, observed before. Though incredibly small in the dark heavens, the new star shone with visible intensity. Two nights later it gleamed so brightly it caused every inhabitant of the Vallesombra to keep their eyes fixed solidly on the ground.

On the fifth night the star sputtered and went out. The dark shape above, however, continued its downward fall. Only seconds before impact the dark form halted just inches about the ground. Its presence was not missed though. A deep vallequake tore through the planet and woke every Sombran. As the entire world watched, the xenomorph began to shrink and in doing so became easier for the frighten citizens to see. A ship of some kind, built to fly through the heavens above had landed, and just like that, the idea of Sombran supremacy was crushed.

This was how New Rome announced its arrival on this planet. Wave after wave of robots flooded out of the heaven-ship. The Sombrans fled underground and hid as the robots scoured the planet, buzzing and clicking at each other in some other-worldly language.

5. The Matriculation of Caesar

Swarming over the planet with previously unseen speed the robots observed, calculated, and reported on all aspects of the Vallesombra. The Sombrans noticed that the robots made time each day to pause and meditate. During this time their heads would raise toward the sky and the air would be filled with a heavenly hum. The air felt alive to the touch. These creatures, if not gods themselves, at least spoke directly to them, and when these creatures prayed the gods listened and responded.

Still fearful, though, the Sombrans continued to live underground until the day the robots stumbled upon a large metal plate buried in the earth at the edge of an abandoned hut-city. Blasting through it the robots found a vast hadeske network of tunnels running deep into the planet. In no time the robots had overrun the underground city and captured the leader, the man-king, Caesar Adamicus. For weeks the robots controlled the Vallesombra using Adamicus as no more than a societal

megaphone. Adamicus, under threat of death, gave away the knowledge and wealth of his homeland.

Deciding to flee the city in the dead of night, the robots planned to haul away all the riches and murder the man-king before escaping the city. However, try as they might, the robots could not kill Caesar Adamicus. Neither blade nor bullet would pierce his flesh, though their metal fists would blacken his eyes they could break neither his bones nor his will. It was decided that Adamicus would be taken as a slave to be presented to the ruler of New Rome.

Blindfolded and gagged the man-king was packed aboard a heaven-ship and taken away from the Vallesombra. It was during this time of travel that Caesar began his induction into the nation of New Rome. His eyes swelled and observed much they had never see before. He learned that the buzzes and clicks of the robots were indeed a language, but far more complicated than he could possibly have imaged. The audible sounds were just the very surface of the ocean that was communication in this new culture.

These robots were able to pass large and labyrinthine ideas back and forth with such speed and clarity! Adamicus was only able to grasp a small amount of information and only after repeated analysis. The man-king slowly became aware that a much larger thing, called the *universe*, encompassed his entire world and more. The Vallesombra was but a small, tiny place inside this other mega-world. He began to understand that the robots, rather than being creatures of divinity, were simply the slaves and whip-holders of New Rome's true rulers.

Caesar Adamicus began to see that whoever he was presented to would be no god, but a creature of similar intellectual sentience and sapience. That no matter what it's form, the robot-king was no more alive and aware than he himself was, and so, before even reaching the shores of New Rome, Caesar understood the mind of his enemy.

When the heaven-ships landed Adamicus was rushed to a large vaulted room. There he remained for five days while he was "made presentable" for the Roman emperor by his new robotic entourage. One sunny afternoon he was finally presented to the robot-king in his imperial garden. Flashes of bright lights and mini-supernovas sparked across the faces of the robots as tiny bits of his soul were transferred into digital bits and stored in their logarithmic brains. Millions upon millions of cybernetic eyes stared him down like a wild animal as he was led down the aisle until he stood before the greatest robot of all, the Analog Robot.

Clearing its throat the robot standing next to him spoke, "We present to you, Caesar del Villasombra—," but no sooner were the words out of its voicebox than Caesar seized his chance. Stealing the sword of his nearest guard he cut his bonds and leapt onstage along with the robot-king, but try as he might, the blade would not pierce its metallic hide. The sword scraped and deflected around the body of the Analog Robot harming it none. With the mob closing in Caesar Villasombra turned the weapon upon himself intending seppuku, but found that here in New Rome the sword would not harm him either.

The Analog Robot threw up his arms and the mob parted like a holy sea. Across this land-bridge Caesar made his desperate escape. Fleeing through the giant iron-rot double doors the man-king found himself alone on an empty street. Disappearing into the shadows of New Rome City he swore his revenge.

6. The Reaction of New Rome

The citizens of New Rome City, dressed in their finest evening wear, gocked as the iron-rot chamber doors slammed shut.

Was this anyway to treat the very people who had rescued this man from the underworld; these fine men and women who had sent an armada of spaceships across millions of lights years like Charon crossing the Styx just to find this one man? They had spent months scouring the new planet, stopping only to transmit their findings once a day back to New Rome.

On the return trip the shadow-man-king had made great progress. He was very bright and the New Romians thought that within the year he would be fully *out-of-the-cave* and ready to embrace the ideals of New Rome, but after the assassination attempt on the Analog Robot murmurs of dissent began to scuttle themselves about the room.

Was this Caesar Villasombra fellow going to be able to make the leap over *Second-World* and into New Rome? Programs of doubt began to run through the minds of the robots in attendance. Two plus two didn't always equal four, but it usually did, for they all knew the old saying: once a pest, forever a plague.