



## *At the Café d'Heure Noir*

### **Temple Section, The Marketplace**

**February 33rd, the year -SquareRoot(pi) (or not...)**

Nelomar was running late. His charge was waiting for him at the Black Hour, an otherwise unremarkable cosmic café but not for its Abyssal Espresso, coffee so black, it was routinely pulled over and shot!

"Who am I kidding? How can you run late in Eternity?" Nelomar wondered aloud, thumping his melon-head. He slowed his pace, and approached a Newzie. He inserted a 1 MC coin, and dialed it up as follows:

Plane = Tolerien, Continent = Fornae, Domain = Isthmus of Forever, County = Guardian Keep, Age = 4, Year = 2313.

The Newzie played a jingly High Elvish folk tune, dropping a +1 newspaper into the delivery chute. Grabbing his purchase, Nelomar began reading as he made his way casually to the Black Hour.

Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon, barely an apprentice, fidgeted under the blank sun (sun?) of The Marketplace. He did not understand Fr. Nelomar's gifts. He was completely unsure he made the right decision to warn The Champion away from the Keeplands. How many lectures had he received from Fr. Nelomar on meddling needlessly. "If you're going to meddle," echoed Fr. Nelomar in Thale's mind, "you go to the source, and that's the Golden Boar. Otherwise, it's hands off, and no exceptions! Not even for j'Rel!" In fact, it was safe to say, Thale did not understand Fr. Nelomar at all. Winged toads? What was the message? Toads = warts, wings = peace? Peace warts? What in the name of Jehosephat's Goat could he possibly mea---

"Good morning, Thale."

Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon snapped erect in sheer terror, then realized the Custom of his Order was to stand in presence of one so great as Fr. Nelomar, which he did, a bit too hastily, and he banged his knee on the leaded glass table, sending it crashing to the ground. The winged toads ribited their discontent at being forced to take flight on such short notice, and floated lazily over the broken remains of what was once a quaint café table.

Nelomar went to pieces inside, but managed to keep his composure. Not that Thale would have noticed. The boy's head was dumb on one side, and he couldn't think out of t'other. But he was damned persistent! The Kjornuk Folk of Old Tolerien were of a hardy stock, appearing higher in the Network than most other humans of that world. Nelomar theorized that the isolation of the Kjornuk Folk over the millennia allowed them to remain, as they might say, "in the Hall of the God of Balance." It just simply never occurred to Thale to give up, and this was absolutely necessary to survive in the greater

Multiverse. That he had the wits of a wet dishrag was a challenge, but Nelomar was fairly sure it could be managed.

Fairly sure...

For the umpty-squath time, Nelomar reversed time a few moments, to the point where the table went down, grabbing it in time to set his newspaper upon it. The winged toads landed ungracefully, and began to sing to Nelomar with sweet little reedy voices, a jingly High Elvish folk tune.

"Thale, meet Toad One and Toad Two." Thale Thalethon had no idea what to do, which was evident by his blank stare. The toads ignored him.

"It is very important you get to know them, Thale. They are the Multiverse and its Maker. Thale, your father was a sword smith. Yon *crapaud un é crapaud deux* are both Sword and Smith. Only much bigger. Insane, crazy bigger! And aren't they just the cutest things you've ever seen? Yes you are, yesh you are, boo-b'boo..." Nelomar continued in this fashion for a bit, petting the toads, causing them to coo suggestively, and spawn right there in front of God and Country!

All Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon heard was "wah wah-wah father wah-wah sword wah wah crazy wah wah." He sighed, clearly miserable.

"Cheer up, son!" encouraged Nelomar. "You did exactly as I asked. You safeguarded these precious ones until my return, and you should be proud of yourself."

Thale nearly tinkled himself in relief. He always expected Nelomar to run him through, but he never did. Thale could only guess why, and he was not so good at the guessing. He had gone with his companions to that huge, profane maze called New Zian, but he would go no further, longing to return to his native lands, and his family. Like so many passages on Tolerien's seas, Thale's ended badly, and he remembered falling into the icy waters, fully expecting to see Dokoort Himself. Instead, he woke up in Fr. Nelomar's temple in this wonderland known as The Marketplace. Fr. Nelomar told him he had been "blessed," and pressed into service, though exactly whom it was Fr. Nelomar served was a mystery, as he did not pray, or really do any religious things at all. But, Fr. Nelomar was a good and decent man, and he had been very kind to Thale. With typical Kjornuk tenacity, he enrolled himself completely in Fr. Nelomar's Order, whatever it did.

The drinks arrived in tall, slender horn-like jet black goblets, each carved with tiny skulls. The waiter, a crippled old drider, touched both cups with its feeble feelers, uttering a single word: "Javico!" The cups began to steam, and bubble. Soon, the black ooze of Abyssal Espresso welled up from Below, and ran down the cups. The skulls suddenly came alive to lap up the excess. Nelomar took his cup, and began to lick the sides.

"The trick," said Nelomar between laps, "is to suck it up faster than the Damned. Believe me, their mugs wouldn't be on these mugs unless they had done something really bad."

The color drained from Thale's face. There was absolutely no way in..in...well, wherever he was, there was no way in it that he was going to drink *that*. Sensing this, the drider removed Thale's drink, rolling four of its eyes in annoyance. Fr. Nelomar continued to lick noisily at his coffee, setting it down from time to time as he glanced through his +1 newspaper. After some moments, Nelomar focused his attention on Thale, and intoned the formal speech which began any Multiverse Assessment:

"Time is an Ocean."

Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon sat erect in his chair, his years of training taking over, his awareness extending outward towards Fr. Nelomar, as he gave the formal response:

"It is also a Ham Sandwich."

"Excellent, Thale!" said Nelomar. "Now, consider your recent events, and Name for me The Aspects and Roles." So began The Questioning. "In prose, if you please, Thale," added Fr. Nelomar.

"...And so it was," intoned Thale, establishing the ritual response, his voice growing in depth and breadth, "that in the year 2,313 of Tolerien's Fourth Age, the Champion Nefari, his Companion Thorjorn Arkonae, his Priest Fr. Delvin, and his Finster Borgulf, began their Agency with their interaction with the Stone of Mohg, and its Maker, establishing the Champion's Authority." Thale had taken great care to memorize their names, as they changed so often.

"The Roles have been assigned. Now, Thale, was it the End of Ends?"

Thale sat and thought for a moment. He had no idea what the End of Ends was, but he did have a sense that it was not the right time. He knew, through his training, which Roles went with which Aspects, but he simply failed to grasp why. He groped for the ritual response, and said:

"No. The Four (often Five) Riders of the Hypocalypse will not come until the Spheres fall, and The Champion gathers The Gift, offers The Body, and invokes The Seal."

"Fine, fine," said Fr. Nelomar. "Iterations?"

It had taken Thale a great many years to realize that "iterations" meant those events which move the Agency forward. Thale started with the obvious: "The return of the Gift-shard allowed the Spheres to rise, protecting the Gift as it will be assembled."

"And what of the Meddler?" asked Nelomar in an arch tone.

Thale didn't much care for Tha'akrash Oldenheart. He seemed all busy-body and no action, a mare's tongue in a stallion's mouth, as they say. But his Role could not be ignored; he figured in All Outcomes, and had survived All Resets. His Aspect in 2,313, however, had expired. "With the Meddler mute, no Agency can be assembled," answered Thale. "The Restoration of the Gift-shard was incomplete."

"We're almost done, Thale." said Fr. Nelomar. "Counterindicators?"

Thale knew from very early on that this meant, "what did we fuck up?" Again, Thale started with the obvious: "Raising of the Spheres will concentrate and focus knowledge, while confining wisdom. Interaction with the Stone of Mogh summoned The Interference; had Delvin's people brought him back, they would have noted the Mark of his Agency, and rejected him forever. The Interference was demanded such that the Delvin's Order will remain pure through Delvin himself. Market travel also occurred prematurely; there Delvin gathered the Enforcer. Revelation of the Z-Coordinate to the Champion's Companion clouds key Outcomes; isolation and termination protocols would seem to apply."

And thus, The Questioning came to an end.

"You're smarter than you think you are, Thale," lied Nelomar shamelessly. Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon beamed proudly, nonetheless. Nelomar rose to leave, and the toads floated into the air around him. "Continue to monitor them, Thale, and if Nefari gives you any bunk, just show him the newspaper. It will explain nothing, but the gossip is really juicy!"

Sub-Acolyte Thale Thalethon rose, and the two embraced, Brothers of the Order.

"We aim to Please," intoned Nelomar, the formal parting. "You aim, too, Please." responded Thale.

Fr. Nelomar then left the *Café d'Heure Noir*, toads in tow. "Soon," he wondered, "we'll get another reset, and then maybe, just maybe, I can get out of this insanity!" Nelomar stopped briefly at the temple of his Order, entrusted the winged toads to Fr. Delomar, and left for New Zian, where he reset the Golden Boar per Tha'akrash's instructions. "When the Spheres rise," he said to himself, "he should pick up pretty much where he left off."

Fr. Nelomar then left on an adventure that would keep him away from The Marketplace for twenty-odd years. "Z-Coordinate my ass," he harumphed. "This has the mark of That Old Fart, sure as little green toads gots wings!"



## *City of New Zian*

**May 10, 2,313**

**Fourth Age of Tolerien**

Tha'akrash Oldenheart tended bar on what would be his last day in existence. The Golden Boar, now black with the texture of balsa wood, was out of mana. 2,313 years ago, he had been cut off from the healing powers of The One when the Gift was used to destroy The Monastery of Ages, consuming both Eye and Nexus in a terrible holocaust.

"23 centuries was a good run," he said cheerfully. It was not in his nature to conserve the Boar's power, but to live each day in the hopes some Avatar would bumble along to continue the Story.

"You look like shit, and smell worse," muttered Montmoran, Tha'akrash's only customer this day. The Golden Boar Inn was in critical disrepair, its proprietor unable to maintain his namesake. To mortal men, his demise could not be perceived, as it proceeded slowly at first. Now, at the end, he was bent, old, and all he could concoct were Old Fashions in which most of the fruit had gone to the Dark Side.

"I'll have a beer," ordered Montmoran, a rather venerable, gnomish-appearing figure dressed in the green robes of a druid. His diminutive stature required a tall stool for him to reach the bar, where a truly obscene Old Fashioned awaited him. At his side was a leather satchel that seemed to contain some odd-shaped object.

"What do you think will happen when I give them this?" asked Montmoran, touching the satchel. "They have not been exactly kissing cousins of late. In fact, have they not set aside their roles as Guardians altogether?" Montmoran waved an ancient hand over his foul drink, and it turned into a jolly pint. His strength was barely enough to lift the glass. Wiping the foam from his trembling lips, Montmoran continued, "The old ways are forgotten, my friend. You are a relic. This was foreseen. My last quest will have been a Fool's Errand."

Tha'akrash shrugged. His image flickered violently, and barely came back into focus. As a window, Tha'akrash was opaque; he could neither minimize nor maximize, restore nor close; the data on which he was based was evaporating as its containment collapsed. He was just glad he had not turned senile.

"I expect nothing," said Tha'akrash calmly. "We don't even know what it is. My identifier barely knows what my name is, and you! You're so old, all you can manage is to turn swill into beer!"

Montmoran frowned, but said nothing. His battles with the fiend Rhazul had consumed him. Draining his pint, the gnome grabbed the satchel and hopped down onto the floor, which immediately gave way, sending the pipsqueak crashing into the cellar.

"Most prefer to exit by the front door," suggested Tha'akrash to no one, as he tended his bar on the last day of his existence. As his rag encountered a stray peanut, the force of it was too much. His image flickered randomly, and vanished. A crusty sigh hissed from the blackened Boar as it shrunk in upon itself, and all was still.

"A little help!" croaked Montmorán, his brittle bones broken in too many places. The leather satchel had rolled out of his grasp, and into a sinkhole.

"Meddling fuckstick" cursed Montmorán with his final breath.