

# Shorts & Rejected Stories Part 1

I've got two for you today, one long and one short.

## The Stolen Sun

This one was written sometime during Blue Core. I wanted to write a story with the logic of mythos – where all natural forces are in fact created by something, where gods walk the earth with men, where the limits of the world truly exist. This one didn't work; it was too unwieldy and tried to do too many things. However, you can see how some of what I was doing here ended up in Chasing Sunlight.

### Chapter One

Toq crouched in the undergrowth, gripping his spear as the longneck lumbered past. It was a huge beast, its head the height of ten men at least, and it crushed small trees with casual indifference as it passed. Such a beast was far too large for a single man to take down, but the other spear-carriers of the tribe were hidden in the tall grass and shrubs nearby, waiting for the signal.

Champion Nomak whistled and all the spear-carriers burst forth at once. Toq darted in and drove his spear into the longneck's rear left leg, feeling the flesh part before the obsidian point, the tendon parting as it squalled in pain and surprise. It heaved its body, long tail lashing and limbs stomping, the weight of it shaking the earth as it stumbled. He jumped away from the sweep of a limb that would pulp him, pulling his spear out as Champion Nomak ran in.

Nomak wielded the First Spear, a weapon with a great and terrible purpose. Every time Toq saw it, it was like he was staring into all the fangs and claws in the world, but Nomak wielded it with mastery. With the beast crippled, brought to its knees as its legs gave out, Nomak could reach its heart, and the First Spear cut a man sized hole into the longneck's chest. The massive creature shrieked, then stilled.

Toq looked around, and spotted that Hunter Griss had gotten flung backward by the longneck's last spasms while Toq was transfixed by the deadly promise of the First Spear in action. He trotted over, offering a hand to help the wheezing man up. Since he was still breathing, it couldn't be too bad.

"My thanks, Toq," said Hunter Griss, and looked mournfully at the corpse of the longneck. "It broke my spear," he said, and Toq winced.

"Bad luck," he said, glad that *he* didn't have to go through all the ceremony it took to bless a new spear.

"I would bet Nomak does not need to worry about such a thing," Griss said, still hobbling as they approached the massive corpse.

"Envy is unseemly," Toq said, quoting the teachings of the shaman. Griss snorted and punched him in the shoulder.

"No use mourning over it," he said. "Let us go help."

Slaughtering such a massive beast was an equally large endeavor, and soon enough blood turned the grass into stinking, churned mud, but their work yielded proper cuts, of which was placed onto one of the sleds they'd taken with them after finding such a lone monster. The tribe would be able to feast for a week.

Toq took his place hauling one of the sleds back to the village. It was bright and clear, and he was able to see up and up to the peak of the Pillar of the World, the mountain that supported the dome of the sky. There weren't even any clouds around the home of the gods, which was a rare event.

They didn't get back until late in the day, reaching sight of the village just as the Sky Guardian reached up to coax the weary sun out of the sky. All of them paused and watched as it plucked the sphere from the sky, leaving everything in darkness, and then released the moon to bob into the heavens. Sparkling stars spattered in its wake, painting the dome of the heavens until the moon reached the very apex of the vault.

By the time they entered the bounds of the village, nestled among the immense trees by the side of the sacred river, the great victorious bonfire had been lit in anticipation of their arrival. One single fire blazing at the village heart, with dozens of lesser ones scattered around it to mirror the moon and the stars. Cheers went up from some of the watchers as the men emerged from the darkness with tons upon tons of meat and hide and bone.

Toq grinned and lifted his spear, winking at some of the younger women who came up to grab the spoils of the hunt off the sleds. He hadn't yet found himself a wife, but it was about time for him to start looking for one. Not that he was the Champion or even the Second, but he didn't do too badly for himself. In fact, he was the one who had first spotted the longneck, separated somehow from its usual herd, and brought its location back to the other Hunters.

"Hunter Toq!" Champion Nomak called his name and Toq turned, ducking his head in respectful greeting.

"Yes, Champion?"

"Good job." Nomak clapped him on the shoulder and presented him with one of the longneck's tusks, a pointed piece of ivory as long as Toq's arm.

"Thank you, Champion," Toq said politely, but he couldn't stop the wide grin as he hefted his prize. It wasn't like he had brought down the thing on his own, but being afforded the tusk showed he had played an outsized role in the hunt.

With tusk in hand, the women definitely paid him more attention, even ones that had dismissed him before. Just another Hunter among many, but now he had the Champion's attention and a trophy to prove it. Standing by one of the fires, with tusk in hand, he happily told his story of the hunt with only minor embellishments. He hadn't dealt the killing blow, but finding and tracking it, and being trusted to help hamstring the longneck, was no small thing.

After a couple of repetitions his hunger won over his pride. He slung the massive tusk over his shoulder and swaggered off to his family's hut. His parents were a little too old to hunt, but between them they would know what to do with the tusk. His own scrimshaw was passable, but not as good as his father's. Nor did he have his mother's eye for detail.

Nobody was *in* the hut, all of them out somewhere helping with the burgeoning celebration, so he left his bounty there and left to rejoin the feast. Already, spits of meat were crackling over fires, and extra smoking sheds were being hastily built off to the side. Laughter and cheering sounded throughout the village clearing, and Toq felt a little bad for the Hunters who had to be on watch while everyone else was having fun. But only a little. They'd get their turn eventually.

Everyone from the wizened old shaman to the smallest child was cutting meat, turning it into strips and chunks and putting it over the fire or sending it off to the smokehouses. The scent of roasting longneck filled the air with a savory scent, along with the spices that some people had pulled out of storage to season the windfall.

He found his family, parents and siblings, all gathered around the same fire, the older ones using ivory knives and the youngest using flint. His little sister squealed when she saw him and abandoned her child-size cut to their brother, running over to Toq with knife in hand. He snorted and grabbed her hand, taking the flint knife from it before hefting her up and carrying her back to the fire.

"Meat!" She said happily. "So much meat!"

"Good job, son," his father said, putting aside a knife and wiping his hand on the grass to clasp forearms with Toq as soon as he let his sister down again.

"All I did was spot something," Toq demurred.

"A sharp eye is oft more useful than a sharp knife," his father said, smiling. "That's how I spotted your mother." The smile turned into a grin as the woman in question indignantly elbowed him in the ribs.

"Now come take your share!" His father gestured at the fire, and Toq took his place alongside his younger siblings, carefully placing his spear at his feet and handing the knife back to his sister before taking a bite of juicy, roasted meat.

The celebration went long and long into the night, and while Toq felt like he'd fallen onto rocks repeatedly by the next morning, he found no cause to regret it. He hauled himself out of the hut and splashed his face with cold water from the nearby stream. The glow of the eager sun was starting to seep into the sky from the Pillar of the World, where the Sky Guardian was ready to release it into the sky.

As the Sky Guardian's massive fingers were silhouetted against the globe of the sun, Toq noticed something against the rapidly lightening dome of the sky. At first he thought it was one of the great eagles venturing out from the Pillar, but the longer he looked the more he was convinced it was something else. It had wings, that was certain, but there was too much of a man about it for it to be some kind of wild beast.

It circled around the Pillar of the World, the feathers of its wings etched against the blue of the sky. Then the Sky Guardian released the sun, letting it out to shine in the sky, and the winged figure moved. Toq was running even before he even understood what was happening or where he was running to, his gut telling him that something terrible was about to happen.

"Fetch Champion Nomak!" He shouted at a startled Hunter who was not even looking upward, even as the intruding figure threw out a great dark net. Even at such a great distance above, he could feel the dire import of the clinking links that made up the net's substance.

The net wrapped around the sun, and the Sky Guardian screeched, the sound issuing forth from its beak stirring a storm and instantly darkening the sky. A great gust rushed down from the Pillar of the World, forcing the trees to bow before its might and quite nearly knocking Toq off his feet. He squinted into the wind and looked upward, vaguely aware of the other Hunters venturing out of the village behind him.

“Tell me, Toq, what have you seen?” Nomak’s voice came, along with the terrible sharpness of the First Spear at his back.

“Something has come to catch the sun in a net,” Toq replied, well knowing that was precious little help. They stood for a moment staring up at the scudding grey clouds. Lightning flashed, the sound of the Sky Guardian’s screech sounded once again, and the intruder fell below the clouds. The Sky Guardian followed, eagle’s beak flashing in the lightning and human fingers outstretched to clutch the would-be thief.

Shining feathers worked as the intruder darted this way and that, evading the Sky Guardian or fending it off with a formidable shining knife as long as the intruder’s wings were wide. The line of the net was wrapped about its left wrist, trailing off into the sky, where the sun cowered behind clouds. A flock of razorbeaks, sheltering from the storm under a nearby tree, burst from cover in a panicked clamor as a pillar of flame lanced down from the mountain, marking the arrival of Tak Who Brought Fire.

The martial god, who hatched the egg of the sun and stirred humans from their caves inside the Pillar of the World. In his left hand a flame and in his right a naked blade, Tak Who Brought Fire was an edge that faced in every direction. To face him was folly. To fight him was death.

The forest blazed with his very presence, and the intruder was forced almost to the ground. Toq and Champion Nomak exchanged glances and sprinted toward the forest’s edge, where the stranger reeled back from Tak Who Brought Fire while the Sky Guardian screeched indignantly overhead. Once, twice, and again did their blades cross, fire against foreigner, sending sparks fountaining into the sky.

Drawing closer, he could see the intruder was three times the height of a man, of a height with Tak Who Brought Fire, armed and armored with some strange substance that looked like stone and glistened like water. It was this strange substance that allowed it to cross blades with the god, for it seemed to be utterly impregnable and indestructible. Despite that, Nomak hefted the First Spear, the world bending under the weight of its terrible purpose, and drew the attention of the stranger.

He leapt back with a beat of his wings, getting distance from Tak Who Brought Fire, and swept his weapon to deflect the ominous advance of the First Spear. Toq had little power of his own to lend to that sort of exchange, but with the alien god so distracted by the pair, he could circle around behind. If he could not contest with it directly, then he could find some gap or opening in the impregnable armor. It might not be possible for even Tak Who Brought Fire or the First Spear to pierce it, despite one being a god and the other the progenitor of all weapons.

There was a mighty clash that nearly bowled Toq over, the stranger’s blade ringing from the impact with a pure note that Toq had never heard before. Yet it didn’t give, even if it was forced to yield to the dire import of the First Spear. Clearly the intruder couldn’t withstand both of them, and it fell back a few paces, stretching its wings again to take flight, and that was when Toq saw

it. A small gap where the wings met the back, the joint not quite flush where covered feathers met covered flesh.

He was not the Champion, and the spear he wielded was not the First Spear. But it was still a spear, and the intruder had quite clearly dismissed him as a threat. Its wings flexed as it stepped back another pace, preparing to take flight, and Toq leapt with all his strength. He seemed to hang in the air for long moments as the intruder grew closer, and then he brought his spear forward in a mighty thrust into the narrow gap in the armor.

It was like driving his spear into a trunk of wood. His spear stopping a shock that made him almost lose his hold, the wood of the shaft tearing at his palms as it slipped through his grip. Yet the intruder let out a sound, a high-pitched noise like the call of a bird, and swept his hand back, faster than Toq could see. It was like the land itself had hit him, an impact that was more sensed than felt, leaving him numb as the sky and ground wheeled about him.

He found himself sitting against a tree, blood oozing from a dozen cuts and scrapes, muscles useless, and with no memory of the intervening seconds or how he had managed to land so perfectly. By some miracle his spear was still clutched between his hands, the obsidian spearhead impossibly intact – save for one drop of amber blood glowing at its tip. A hundred paces away, the intruder took to the skies, fleeing the fight and escaping beyond the range of Champion Nomak. Yet, for all that they had driven it off, it still had ahold of the net.

Tak Who Brought Fire pursued him into the whipping rain, the Sky Beast's shrieks coming from above, but with each passing moment it grew darker. Champion Nomak began to follow, but stopped, for they had both passed from sight within moments, hidden behind smoke and cloud, fire and water. Only then did the rest of the tribe's Hunters arrive, seconds late to a fight that had not lasted more than a few breaths. Though in truth Toq knew that they would merely have been slaughtered had they engaged the intruder. He was lucky he had survived a casual swipe.

"Back to the village," Nomak said, still holding the First Spear, which was unmarked and unmarred from the terrific blows. "This is a matter for gods and shamans."

"What was that?" Toq recognized Hunter Lorn's voice.

"Some foreign god," Nomak said grimly. "Come to steal away what is ours."

"Whatever it was, it can bleed," Toq objected, finding his voice at last. "If it can bleed, it's not much of a god." Nomak turned to look at him, frowning at being corrected before he took in Toq's battered and bleeding form. And the amber glowing at the tip of his weapon.

"It takes more than a pinprick to defeat anything," Nomak said, crossing over and taking the sting out of his words by offering Toq his hand to help him up. "Nevertheless, well done. To bleed such a force is no easy task." Toq inclined his head, eyes catching the dancing shadows on the grass. The only light was from the trees burning where their god had walked, the morning severed and turned into night.

"We must consult with the shaman," Nomak proclaimed, and Toq leaned on his spear. He could barely move, only realizing in the moment how close he'd come to death. Not that it was any great surprise; death was everywhere in the world. He had to squint his eyes against the rain, which beat against his skin, and suppressed a shiver as he began limping along after Nomak.

Hunter Girss appeared beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder to help steady him as he tried to make his legs work again.

“Now you know how it feels,” Girss said in an undertone, and Toq snorted.

“We’re both fortunate,” he proclaimed, indeed having a better appreciation for being hurled through the air like an errant stone. It was mostly shock, though, and while he would be bruised for days to come he hadn’t sustained any lasting injury. Which, all things considered, was the greatest piece of luck he’d had in his life.

Once again fires were blazing when the hunters returned to the village, but it was no celebration. Fear prevailed; fear and uncertainty and the pressing menace of the darkness. The light of flame alone was not enough to push back the untimely night.

Toq was one of the last to return, bringing up the rear with Girss as his muscles were still weak and twitchy. But there was no time for the luxury of rest, especially not out in the dark and the rain where anything could be lurking. He worked his way through the people crowded around the central fire, worried faces focused on the wizened old shaman that stood by himself, stirring the fire with his bone staff.

He found his family and winced as his father clapped him on the shoulder. They wordlessly made room for him as everyone watched the shaman, almost silent save for the crackling of fire and the sound of breathing. The firelight flickered over pale faces, all but the youngest solemn, or pinched and drawn. The anticipation pressed until there came, from a great distance, the long keening wail of the Sky Beast, a sound of loss and mourning.

The shaman pointed at the fire, his hand held out as if to beckon the flames. For a long moment nothing happened, then there was a great flare and Tak Who Brought Fire stepped out, twice as tall as a man and clad in tongues of incendiary brilliance. The shaman bowed deeply, leaning on his bone staff, and Tak Who Brought Fire glanced around at the assembled people before speaking.

The words weren’t things that could be heard. The god’s voice was not loud, but Toq felt like he had become deaf, only able to feel the rumble and impact of the god speaking. The words themselves were too profound, too grand and glorious to be understood. Only the shaman could interpret them.

Then he was gone, back up the mountain and taking the forest fire with him, embers swirling up the Pillar of the World. Toq watched the trail as it faded, feeling obscurely snubbed, as the only one who had actually landed injury on the interloper – though it was only because both the god and the tribe’s champion were taking all its attention. Perhaps if he had been more like the Champion, he could have actually forced it to turn loose its prize.

“The sun,” the shaman said, his voice pressed as though under a great weight. “The sun has been stolen. An evil god from the forbidden East came here to take our light and our fire. Our Great Champion Nomak and Tak Who Brought Fire drove it away before it could take our lives as well, but we have still have lost the day.” He looked around at the tribe, the folds and pleats of his wrinkled face etched even deeper in the firelight.

“What shall we do?” Asked Champion Nomak, facing the shaman.

“Before the sun, we dwelled in the roots of the Pillar of the World, where the fires of the earth would warm us,” the shaman said. “That is where we must return, until something of the sun can be found once again. We cannot live in a sunless world.”

“What about taking back what was stolen,” Toq said, his voice still hoarse, disbelieving that the shaman would give up so easily. “We can’t live in a world without sun, so we should get ours back!”

“A noble sentiment,” the shaman said, his eyes alert despite his age, pinning Toq in place. “But it has gone into the forbidden East, and guarded by a god even Tak Who Brought Fire could not easily best. Who would go on such a doomed journey? Who could we spare, in such perilous times?”

Toq scowled, for the shaman had a point. Leaving the village undefended, vulnerable to an eternal night or the hostile tunnels of the Pillar of the World, could not even be considered. Champion Nomak’s first duty was to the tribe and the people therein. The same was true for most of the Hunters, who had families besides.

Yet, something had to be done.

“I will,” he said, stepping forward into the clear circle by the fire. His mother made a noise, and he cast her apologetic look back over his shoulder, but he stood firm. Perhaps it was the bloodstain on the tip of his spear that gave him the courage, or perhaps it was his simple outrage that nobody else was willing to see justice done.

“And for what reason are you are willing to defy the laws to pass into the forbidden East, to try and hunt some evil god?” The shaman’s voice could have been contemptuous, but it wasn’t. Champion Nomak stood straight, looking at him with eyes full of challenge, but did not contest Toq’s right to speak.

“That I have already wounded it,” Toq said loudly, his throat almost closing over the words regardless. He held up his spear, the very point still stained with that color that was almost amber, but not quite. “What has been done once, can be done again.”

“Easy to say, far less easy to do,” the shaman said, but beckoned him closer. Toq stumped up to the shaman, feeling the heat of the bonfire scorching his back, the reflection burning deep in the shaman’s eyes. “Is this the path you are set on, young Toq?”

“Yes,” he said, giving himself no time to second-guess his gut. There was a sort of singing certainty to the moment that he didn’t want to waste, a feeling like fates had converged. Nor did he want to waste the righteous fury that still burned his veins from encountering the enemy and feeling its contempt. It was a warmth that not even god-given fire could compare to.

“I will not stop you,” the shaman said. “But there is little aid I can give you, for you will pass beyond our sight and none can prepare you for that. But I will give you a benediction from Tak Who Brought fire, that you will always have a flame to light your way.” He raised his bone staff and shook it, chanting softly, and Toq bowed his head.

If there were any power passed from the god to him, Toq couldn’t tell. But the ways of gods were unknown and unknowable, or else they would simply be powerful mortals. If as simple a Hunter as he could grasp the form of their godhead, either he would be a deity himself or they would be charlatans.

“One other thing,” the shaman said, and pointed at Toq’s spear. “The Mother of Waters bestows upon your weapon the name of *Esatir*.” Toq could only barely make out the name, the sound rumbling in the language of the gods. “God-Piercer.”

“I thank The Mother of Waters,” Toq said, though he half-wondered why it was the Mother who blessed his weapon, and Tak Who Brought Fire who blessed his journey. The reverse was far more appropriate, and he felt there was some kind of message there if only he had the wit to decipher it.

“Return to your family,” the shaman said in an undertone, something Toq barely caught with his ears still ringing, and he bowed to the shaman before taking his newly blessed weapon and self back to where his parents and siblings waited. His little sister didn’t really understand the import of what had just happened, but his parents and younger brother certainly did.

“Why, my son?” His mother asked, her voice plaintive.

“Because we cannot simply do *nothing*,” he told her, and reached out to clasp arms with his father, who merely gave him a nod.

“Gods go with you, my son,” he said. Toq’s brother simply hugged him, and Toq patted his shoulder.

The shaman raised his voice to give instructions, ones that Toq didn’t really pay attention to. He wasn’t going with the rest of the tribe, for they were all headed west. He alone would go to the forbidden East, to the end of the world. Only a small part of him wished that some of the other Hunters would go with him, so he would not be alone. It was always better to hunt together, but he understood why no others could follow that path.

Before he could even remember to listen to what the shaman was saying, the gathering broke, all the families returning to their own tents and huts, to gather what they could. The sense of threatening, alien darkness sent people scurrying, the fires of man not enough to quite hold back the terror of a sunless sky. In the light of such an exodus, his immense trove of newly-acquired ivory was not so important nor impressive, but still enough to trade for things from people who were sorting what to take and what to leave.

Toq helped his family pack their belongings onto a sled, but kept one for himself. There were only so many, but he couldn’t possibly bring everything he required just in a leather satchel. The tusk made an unwieldy trade item, but his small celebrity among the Hunters allowed him some freedom. He accumulated some supplies and foodstuffs, a spare canoe, some woven cloth and hide. Most importantly, he accumulated a few surreptitious kisses from unmarried young women wishing him luck, something just as nourishing as the smoked meats piled up on his sled.

He checked over his own personal supplies, his knives, his spear, his tent and bedroll. Across the village, everyone was going through similar motions, packing up for the great migration west. The journey itself would be dangerous, and the Pillar of the World was hardly safe. At its crown stood the gods, and beneath its roots was the hearth of Tak Who Brought Fire.

In a matter of hours, it was time to say his farewells. Toq embraced his mother and father, bent down to clasp arms with his brother and ruffle his sister’s fiery red hair. There were only a few

words exchanged, for there was little to say in the face of such a upheaval. All that could be said were messages of love and hope.

It was still raining, hissing down from a black sky, and Toq helped adjust his little sister's oiled cloak one last time before watching his village leave. A trail of torches followed the sacred river like lost stars, and he stood there in the abandoned shells of their dwellings until he could no longer see them. Only then did he turn and followed the river, knowing it mattered not what route he took. There was only one path: East.

His muscles protested as he dragged the sled over the grass, loaded as it was with supplies for his journey. Everything was sore, only hours after a casual swat from a god. Part of him already questioned the wisdom of his actions, but he clung to the fire burning in his belly and pressed onward. Somewhere, perhaps far or perhaps near, was the sun.

Toq found he could not track the passage of time, save for the needs of his body, without anything overhead. The Sky Beast, grieved by the lost of the sun, did not loose the moon either, and the world stayed black. Only the light of his own torch revealed his surroundings, a world drained of color. Color, but not life, for even as he made his way to the eastern end of the world there were the sounds of things stirring, things that would never show themselves under the light of day. His spear would not be enough to deal with such monsters.

Despite his weariness, Toq bent his back and labored to increase his pace. The sled hissed across grass and underbrush, his path close to the sacred river to avoid bogging down in the jungle. When the river bent sideways and vanished into a hill, he knew he had reached the point where the world touched the East.

Up he hauled the sled, the world crowding in from every direction, for all the land had only one point East, perched at the crown of a tall hill. There in that lonesome and terrible place, the land of Man ended and nothing lay beyond. To step past that point was to step beyond the world, and into the East.

Toq stood panting from the climb, struck by the place where everything ended. It was a different absence than the darkness behind him, but no less profound. The forbidden East was not the world of Man, and even the most impenetrable night reflected that. He cast one more glance behind him, where there was nothing to be seen, and stepped through.

## Chapter Two

Cold and iridescent rain spattered Toq's face and a cruel and gleeful wind tugged at his cloak. He ignored both and worked on lashing his supplies to the canoe, the sled coming apart to provide paddles, bracing, and an oiled hide cover for his cargo. He finished tying things down and wrestled with the crude sail, tied to the spar of wood set in the front of the canoe. Small as it was, it would have to serve.

The Sea of Creation stretched out in front of him, glimmering in every shade, in colors he had seen before and those he could barely grasp. The longer he looked at them the more he felt he knew them, as if they were seeping into his very being. The storm that swept across its surface and illuminated it in bolts of lurid green and blue or other, less nameable colors, flung droplets against the narrow spit of land that Toq had found himself, each one growing a leaf of grass or a buzzing insect or a piece of water-worn stone.

He knew that it was perhaps foolhardy to voyage out into the storm with only a vague idea of his bearings, but there was very little choice. The lightning illuminated what it was that drove the storm, without The Great West Wind or the Sky Beast to create it. Legs the size of mountains, a titanic body large enough to dwarf even the Pillar of the World, and eyes that gleamed, somewhere unimaginably far above, with a malign intelligence. The storm was merely its mane and tail, shifting with its smallest movements, and would not subside soon.

Then there was the blood that still stained the tip of Esatir, seeming to be part of the knapped stone. It seemed to yearn for its source, the faint glow pointing in a single direction no matter which way he swung it. He had blooded his prey, and now he could track it no matter where it went.

With a vessel and a guide, Toq had no excuse to delay. He pushed the canoe into the iridescent waters and then followed himself, holding the boom of his makeshift sail in one hand and Esatir in the other. The wind took the woven cloth and set him cutting through the sea, the endless waves stretching before him.

The spray kicked up by his passage didn't smell like water, carrying instead the scents of far-off places. Of summers heavy with fruit, of winters crisp and clear, trying to call up memories he didn't have. And it was cold, cold. He clung to the boom while he rummaged underneath the tie-down, pulling out a roll of oiled fur and wrapping it around himself.

Esatir pointed him past the great storm-beast, a thing he dared not survey too closely. It was so immense and strange a thing that even looking at it directly induced a terrible foreboding, that he was looking upon something not meant for mortal eyes. He hunkered down into the fur, tucking his fingers and toes inside and pulling his hood down as he let the wind drive him forward.

Toq only had stories about the Sea of Creation. Some mentioned how the world of man had emerged, fresh and shining, in one convulsive moment of birth. Others told of how it held everything that had existed or would, touching the furthest shores. None of them described the massive beast he saw in the distance, or had warned him of the sheer scope, something so far beyond every river and lake he'd ever seen.

The canoe rocked and shivered as it skipped through the waves, just unsteady enough to put his nerves on edge and jar the bruises he still bore. Part of him was actually grateful, for he was weary and could easily have found himself sinking into a slumber, save for the jolting and jerking of his watercraft. He knew he'd have to rest eventually, but not yet. Not so long as he could stay awake.

Toq was not so deluded as to think he could win back the sun from the god if he could catch up that very moment. But he also didn't wish to let the trail go cold. Clearly, the alien god was taking the sun *somewhere*, and should he find that place he could make plans from there. Perhaps he was no Champion, but anyone so careless as to turn their back to an enemy would have any number of weaknesses to exploit.

In the very far distance the storm-beast took a step, one mountain-sized leg rising and falling with a breathtaking majesty. Even at an impossible distance, the movement of something so enormous had an sense of impending cataclysm, as over the course of minutes it rose and fell,

plunging into the Sea of Creation and raising a luminous wake as massive waves rippled outward from the impact.

He braced himself for the enormous swell to reach his boat, and waited. Then waited some more. As the minutes dragged on, he realized the distance was so enormous that even a wave taller than a mountain might have diminished to little more than a ripple by the time it reached him. If it even reached him before he found his destination.

## Golem Urban Fantasy

This one is a lot shorter.

I believe this one also dates from the Blue Core era, but it might be early Paranoid Mage era. Either way, while I liked the basic premise I had no idea of any non-generic plot. This introduction demonstrates that, as it's heavy on infodumping rather than actually doing something. Sure, it's not long but it's already gone weird.

### Chapter One

He was wiping down the bar when the antimagic pulse hit.

The lights flickered out, leaving only the electrical backups spotlighting the exits and the refrigerators humming in the back room. Despite the fact that the antimagic did nothing to him, he froze in place as if he were an inanimate statue, one arm extended with a rag and the other one lightly resting on the bar top. Whomever it was at least had the decency to wait until everything was closed and the customers gone, though considering some of the customers, it might not have gone well if the attackers or saboteurs had made their move during business hours.

Nothing happened for a long while, but he was patient and completely capable of holding his statue stillness for hours. Or years. Eventually, though, a shadow spilled through the transparent glass of the front door and stretched upward to disgorge a trio of young men in black clothes and blank white masks. Quite likely the outfits had concealment spells woven into them, but he could track them easily enough. In truth, there was little that could fool his eyes. He was particularly proud of them.

Antimagic was expensive enough that they were probably there for him, but anyone who was serious about robbing a place would spring for some. Of course, they'd probably *also* cut the electronics, but it was more difficult to notice a snipped wire from inside. Either way, it would be interesting to see what they did, though it would be annoying to have to change identities once again.

Unfortunately for them, it seemed like they were just catspaws. Nobody who really knew what he was would have been so cavalier about approaching him even with the magic dead. Besides, the antimagic wouldn't last forever, and only poorly-wrought magical items would stay nonfunctional once it faded. The wards would have to be totally redone, of course, but that was what insurance was for.

The obvious leader stepped forward, taking a black marble from his robes, and *that* was something that was actually worth worrying about. A fraction of a second later and he was holding the marble instead of the leader, tucking it into a pocket.

“What —” One of the other started to speak, and was silenced as the bartender threw a bottle through his head. Gore splattered and glass scattered over the walls. The second man dropped a moment later from a second thrown bottle, taken from under the bar, before the bartender’s hands closed around the leader’s throat.

“Who sent you?” He asked. Now that he was thinking about it, it wasn’t likely those three were the real attack. They were there to distract him from something else. Probably his home, which was actually fairly amusing. There was nothing there that would compromise him any further than he already had been, nor was there anything irreplaceable. The masked mage gaped, scrabbling at the hand choking him. Given that it was made out of steel and ceramic, it didn’t give even slightly.

“Names?” The bartender intoned, only vaguely interested in if he got a reply. It wasn’t likely the intruders knew anything of value.

“Sir Lantern!” The masked mage managed to choke out, and the bartender sighed. The local smuggling leader was not likely anyone who would be after him, but it might be worth a visit before he left. Unfortunately for his intruders, he preferred it to remain ambiguous how much antimagic affected him, so he crushed the mage’s throat and dropped him on the floor.

The bar’s owner wouldn’t be particularly happy when he found the mess, but he’d get over it. Losing a golem employee would probably be more irritating. Most golems didn’t have the finesse or intelligence to tend bar, but even those that did could do the job at low wages and with no worry about losing their tempers.

He wasn’t most golems. He wasn’t, strictly speaking, a golem at all. He was *the* Golem, animated by Truth and not magic. There were no scrolls that gave him instructions, no mana channels to give him false intelligence. There was an inscription on his forehead, but the  $\aleph$  was etched in symbols smaller than the eye could see. Technically speaking he didn’t have a name or a designation the way most golems did, but when he had to use one he usually went through the Greek alphabet.

The Omicron identity was gone, now, and if someone had found him knowing he was The Golem, he should break his habits anyway. He decided to be Aleph instead, which was a popular name for people to name theirs when they thought they were being witty. Idiomatic, but generic enough to move forward.

Aleph unlocked the door and stepped out into the streets of Lusina. The antimagic had disabled the streetlights nearby, but less than a hundred yards away the magical lamps shone steadily, illuminating a wet street. Far above, the monorail slid along the glowing line of the lux conduit that ran into the city center and the silhouettes of those in flight eclipsed the stars that were visible past the city’s light.

He turned away from all that and stumped down the sidewalk. He was capable of far more graceful motion, but for the moment looking like a regular golem was for the best, especially since regular golems didn’t have the senses he did. For him, the city light drowned out *no* stars.

Unfortunately, he couldn't see or sense anyone suspicious nearby. A few passers-by, drunks, loitering ladies of questionable virtue, the usual.

At least until a purple sphere dropped out of the sky.

Aleph dove for cover, reacting with all the speed his steel body gave him, because he recognized a siege-grade spell when he saw one. He sprinted behind a building, flattening himself against the street and digging his hands into the asphalt in the scant seconds before the spell landed. A roar of silence exploded outward, disintegration beams pulsing from the impact point and cutting neat lines through all the nearby buildings. One clipped his leg, annihilating a swath of alloy and composite but fortunately leaving the joints intact. Though getting portions of his body destroyed was never pleasant, it wasn't like it actually hurt.

While Aleph didn't have emotions that stirred as quickly as those with blood in their veins, using a siege spell, a *disintegration* siege spell, in a populated area was alarming. Most people that knew who and what he was were more interested in capture, and Aleph had no interest in staying to find out who hated him that badly. Shaking answers out of a gang leader was one thing, but dealing with someone who could weave citykillers was not something he wanted to do.

Aleph bolted for the harbor. At full tilt, he was faster than a horse or runecar, and while he had to be careful about the weakened leg, it was still mostly intact steel and didn't bend much under the effort. Mana surged far away and a bolt of lightning sizzled down from above, which was far less worrisome than disintegration. He was well-insulated where it counted and grounded otherwise.

The lightning carried more mana than he'd been expecting, which was probably a good guess for anyone who thought he was a mix of magical and electrical circuitry and wanted to shut him down, but technically speaking he didn't really use either. The mana flooded through the magical channels and dissipated, and he kept running.