

The Grand Inquisitor and the Sea

The fire burned dimly in the metal canoe. The Grand Inquisitor rested, hands clasped, elbows on his knees, and watched the clothes he'd lit at the bow of the canoe burn into chaff. The thin, blackened remnants blew away in the meek breeze. The stench of burning clothes pained his nose.

Waves gently beat his starboard side, spilling frigid water inside.

Pushing himself up and popping his aching back, he grabbed his metal bucket to bail out the water. He worked slowly. His arms were sore. By the time he was finished, his rubber boots were slick and shiny, and his bare fingers were pruned. He set the bucket down.

Resting his back on the bow, he let himself stare into the starry sky. It would have reflected better in the clear water around him if he hadn't lit the fire.

"Pity."

His knees were warm at least. And he preferred to look at the real thing instead of its reflection anyways.

The moon had already shrunk into nothingness, waiting to ebb back into light, reborn.

He smoothed out his black and red priest tunic, feeling the even seams of his chest emblem. A bird, flying upwards with outstretched wings, shrouded in red light. Its body was a black silhouette against the flames. His hand lingered there.

Tilting his neck down, he stared at the dying blaze. Only tattered, crisp rags remained.

He wrinkled his nose at the smoke, tainted by the stench of sweat.

He heaved himself to his feet and, balancing the canoe unconsciously, walked to the crumbling pile of cloth. After slipping on thick, coarse leather gloves, he scooped up the ashes and flung them towards the sky. The burnt fabric glanced his balding head.

He stroked his gaunt jaw, noting the glove's heat.

"Gone like all creation will be. Burnt to ash in the sun's dying gasp."

He repeated tossing the ashes, over and over, tossing and tossing the scooped and rescooped ashes until just soot marks and a dull red glow remained.

"Scattered across the cosmos. Detritus in the eternal sea."

Grabbing the bucket, he scooped up water, careful not to soak his sleeves, and doused the embers, washing away the stain.

"Washed away in the night sky, the true sea from which all life springs. Inevitable."

He gripped the metal pendant hanging underneath his tunic. He'd received it on his original commencement day. It was rusty now. He didn't care, but he kept it hidden, nevertheless.

"Such is the natural cycle of existence. Wait once more to be reborn from flames."

It was an old legend he clung to. He patted the pendant against his chest.

He returned to his seat in the stern. It was time to go. He groped for his wooden navigation board. Finding it lodged beneath his seat, he pulled it out and placed it on the supply chest between his knees.

He squinted at his chart, unsure where he was. He'd been handrailing the coast on his return trip, but his reverie coupled with the ever-beating lifeblood of the universe had thrown him off course. He looked north. Open sea. South, the coast. His bow, northwest. His destination was still a short enough way west.

None of that told him where he was though. The coast was spotted with bays, each one blending into the next until landmarks were nigh impossible to differentiate. The moonless sky made everything worse, as the distant islands were now completely out of sight. Thankfully, a few islands were nearby. They would suffice for navigation. One looked like a boot kicking a ball. Another looked like a jagged finger, pointing due southeast. It was a start.

He placed his rectangular compass on the chart-board. He needed to shoot a bearing to confirm his location and trajectory. Shooting a bearing was simple. He needed to line up the edge of his compass with two distinct points on his chart. He chose the opening of the bay behind him and what he suspected was the boot island. Next, he made the necessary calculations with the compass, adjusting it to see whether it pointed towards the boot island.

It was usually a precise method, though there was plenty of room for error if your chart was improperly aligned, a step was forgotten, or one was too lax examining the nearby land.

He finished and held the compass nearer to the lantern to see the results.

150 degrees.

Pointing exactly to what he suspected was the boot. He repeated the process with the gnarled finger and, once again, the chart matched reality.

Though not foolproof, he was now relatively certain of his position. He could reach the fort within the hour if he worked hard and didn't get distracted. He sat up straighter, lighter now that he'd confirmed his location so quickly. It had come slowly to him in his youth.

Seizing his paddle, ignoring the blisters on his calloused hands, he paddled on his right to tilt west, still following the coast.

He strained with each thrust. Paddling a canoe by himself was a new experience, and the few remaining supplies weighed him down.

It didn't matter.

The journey was almost over.

He felt the glassy orb in his pocket. It didn't feel worth it. Not yet.

He paddled on his left to correct right. The gentle waves were torturous on his weak joints and overextended core. Every paddle was longer and wider than it needed to be.

He kept going. He could taste the salt and water blown against his pursed lips.

For light, he had only his lantern and its focusing cone to illuminate the coastline. The stars were still too dim for anything but a bearing.

He drank slowly from his steel canteen. The water was lukewarm.

This continued into the early morning. He paddled around the craggy, bony, interwoven trees that thrust their leaves and trunks out of the water. He swiveled around the rocky crags of the peninsula, ever mindful of the winds that pressed against him no matter which way he turned.

He paddled and paddled, never ceasing save for drinks or compass navigation.

Then he came to an island that was wrong. It wasn't on his chart. He withdrew it to check again, finding only a blank spot of water a few meters deep where this island was instead. It was just large enough for alarm.

Paddling closer, he grabbed a long root that extended past the shore and coiled into the sea. He wrapped the bow's rope around it, tying a quick but tight knot. He rested in the shade of the mangrove's thick green foliage.

He set his lantern beside the navigation board.

The island didn't add up. It wasn't supposed to be there. Were there alternative locations? Not really. A bay too far east had two comparable islands that he may have mistook. That would make this island the boot he'd assumed he'd seen earlier.

He tested this theory. No luck. The finger island was nowhere to be seen, and the bearings pointed only to the open sea.

He hit the canoe's rim guttle, rocking the vessel back and forth.

Mosquitos swarmed around him now that he'd stopped. He swatted them away fiercely. They clustered near his neck and wrists, so he furiously beat them back. The repellent had been lost with the rest of the unessential supplies.

He tried navigating again. There was a bay between the two spots he'd checked. He may have overestimated the size of the islands. But the thought that he'd been misreading the chart so poorly only stooped his back further and tightened his grip on his paddle. Navigation should never have fallen to him.

A fish leapt in his canoe, thrashing wetly. It knocked over the navigation board which clattered loudly, echoing shortly.

Jumping back, he screamed a despondent howl and then lunged. His knees hit the floor unevenly, nearly capsizing the canoe. He tried clutching the fish with his gloves while maintaining distance, but it squeezed away from him, flopping near the supplies. He stood and stomped the fish. He kept stomping, stomping so the canoe rocked and beat metallicly against the root it was tethered to, stomping so the fish stopped moving and deformed rapidly under his heel, stomping until his heat cooled and he shakily returned to his seat.

He took the crumpled, stinking fish and flung it at the water. A root caught its flattened body, stabbing it, slowing its sink into the water.

He grabbed the nearby sponge and began cleaning the blood. With the bucket, he got more water and rinsed the fish blood and bile away, sponging up the remains and squeezing them out into the sea.

He grabbed the guttles and leaned back, his eyes closed. He took deep breaths through his nose. When his hands stopped shaking, he sat up again and reset the navigation board.

The mosquitos returned. He rubbed his eyes.

Just going west would suffice. He'd hit his destination eventually. Since he was already late and there was much to do, it didn't make sense to waste time on unnecessary navigation. He untied the canoe and shoved off.

He paddled west for many miles.

Far ahead in the darkness, a dolphin fin crested the water.

He slowed, paddling backwards. He waited.

It crested again.

He set his jaw firmly. Paddling on his right, he veered south widely, making slim adjustments north with a few strokes away from him.

The dolphin leapt from the sea, splashing and chattering in the second before it submerged again. It was disgustingly picturesque, the kind of wonder that sounds fake and hollow when described.

The Grand Inquisitor watched long after the ripples stopped hitting his canoe. Maybe good life could come out of this darkness after all. It had been beautiful. Unfortunately, none would believe him. They would all smile and nod, but none would take him seriously or dare to correct him.

He continued on.

Fog was rolling in, obscuring the horizon, blurring the distinction between sky and sea. Did not both hold a common destiny? The thought made his arms lighter, firmer, and the way ahead illuminated enough to see. He paddled fiercely until his back needed cracking. Still, he refused to stop. There was work to be done. Yet even this strength left him as the paddling went on.

The sun would begin to rise soon. He dimmed his lantern to accommodate the anticipated, yet unseen, light.

There in the west horizon, framed by the brightening sky and hemmed by the reflecting sea, was the castle. The old fort that awaited him was finally cresting into view over the thick forests of short, brambly trees that broke up the otherwise glassy sea.

The old castle fort was ancient but not yet dilapidated. It radiated antiquity without senility. Wisdom with sharp strength. It was a thick, brown castle with several smooth outer walls that gently curved around it. It had been built upon the edge of a peninsula that dropped off to jagged rocks below. Its windows were ornate stained glass, and its spires were still bright red from their painting over a

decade ago. The bricks were locked together so well that no sword could force itself between them. Its craftsmanship and renown were unparalleled.

He paddled for the base of the peninsula, distant from the large port north where the mountain land sloped into the shore. Instead, he slid between the jagged rocks that reached for the castle like a bouquet of robbers' knives eager to slash the church's throat and hoards its riches. An all-too-common threat these days. He paddled deftly between the shallow shoals, the sandbars textured like cliffsides, and the occasional marker leading the way for anyone who knew to get close enough to see them.

A thin stone dock extended far into the rocky bay. He swung his canoe alongside it and hurriedly lashed the stern to one of the moorings. He followed suit with the bow, tightening the knots to bring the canoe flush with the dock.

He stepped onto the dock and sighed with relief. His chest hurt. Every breath was a battle, his dry eyes kept fluttering shut, and the coarseness of his throat still hadn't gone away. The Grand Inquisitor eyed the near-empty canoe for a moment. His heavy arms fell limply at his waist. They were all he could think about. He rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat.

In the end, all he could manage was a silent toast. Words were too heavy, too full. He feared that if he shared them, even alone, he may feel their weight and sink. Even here on the dock, there was no relief.

There would be time later. More moments, more days to remember, to speak.

Today, there was work. The sun was rising. The journey had not been for nothing.

A small stone spire thrust its point above the waves.

He froze when it caught his eye.

It was jagged, a grey mountain in miniature. Far, far above it was the exterior, eastern-facing window that curved along the Inquisitors' throne room. He'd never before considered what would inevitably happen to someone if they crashed through that window and plummeted.

It was an odd time to think such thoughts. Still, looking at it caused him to feel uneasy, deeply cold at the ends of his limbs and wet around the chest. He smoothed out his shirt, and the touch of his pendant dispelled the vision.

Turning, he fished through the canoe, grabbing his few supplies. He tied his navigation board and chart to the supply chest, made sure his bucket and sponge were beneath his seat, and then carried the chest and his lantern down the dock to the heavy wooden doorway. He forced it open with a shoulder, still thinking only of the task at hand.

The room was plain, smelling of old books. Stone floors, stone walls, and wooden furniture. There were shelves for food, charts, and books, as well as a table and chairs for impromptu gatherings or covert meetings in the secluded, secret bay. The room was dusty. There were banners of the fire bird hanging from every available rafter. He tapped his emblem proudly, slowly.

Closing the creaking door, he silenced the beating of the waves upon the dock and the cries of the morning birds.

He set the chest on the table, ignored the myriad of food items and clothes that lay on the furniture and proceeded upstairs through the dark spiral hallway. He held his lantern close to see the steps. There was no handrail, only the pitch-black, unforgiving, and cold path to warmth and light above. The priests liked it this way. Few ever saw the hidden port, as it was small and more relic than tool, but those who did found the pilgrimage to and from thoroughly meaningful. From cramped darkness to light. Perhaps back again in this lifetime, depending on one's role.

He continued on.

He could hear the distant echoes of fighting. Screams, cutting steel, crashings. It sounded like a distant festival, just with more tables breaking than usual.

He really had been late. He knew he'd overestimated himself at the boot and finger. With one "Hmph," he set this behind him and clomped up the stairs, his lantern swinging widely and illuminating the branching stairwell haphazardly as he held it away from him. He knew every turn by heart.

They would care he was late. Few would care once he arrived. It was their role to live and die. They should be proud. That was what it meant to be a Heatonist.

The Grand Inquisitor reached the top of the stairs and shoved open a thick stone door. It appeared as an ordinary wall on the other side. He emerged into his room, a small yet regal abode.

His room had green carpet and beautiful red walls with ornate gold trim. Two walls were bookshelves containing tomes on religion, politics, history, and chemistry. The other was a long glass window behind his desk, overlooking the sea. A globe sat on a table next to a chess set between two green, velvet-covered chairs of mahogany wood. The ceiling tapered into a dome skylight, revealing a pinkish sky and wisps of clouds.

He glanced at the door. It was bolted. The paintings of himself and his fellow Inquisitors still hung on the walls.

Even the lamps were still lit.

He slouched.

He snuffed out the lamps before setting his handheld lamp on his desk, ending the flame within it as well. He did so respectfully, grateful for its goodness and its service that had been channeled through him. *He* would not abandon light, leaving it to shine for nothing.

The rising sun sufficed for light.

He moved to the seat beside the chess set and fell into it. He spread his legs, getting mud and water all over his green carpet. It mattered not. He could have it cleaned or replaced. He unbuckled his belt, grunting as his stomach burst free. He breathed there, thoroughly exhausted. Holding his forehead in one hand and the glassy, orange orb in the other, he squinted out the window, watching the sun rise and warm his skin.

It was stunning.

His mosquito bites itched.

He needed to change. He'd waited a few minutes, but the world would wait no longer, not to mention how rancidly his priest garb smelled of salt and sweat. With two struggling pulls, he tore his boots off, setting them beside his chair. Moving to the wardrobe against the wall, feeling the soft carpet on his feet, he shucked off his jacket and hung it on a nearby golden coatrack bolted to the wall. Hurriedly, he slipped his robes and undergarments off. He folded them neatly and methodically, setting them on his beloved chair. He saved the glass orb for last, setting it as softly on the clothes as he would return an egg to its nest.

His pendant was cold against his bare chest. His arms were spotted with mosquito bites. Worse still were the thin cuts and blotchy bruises that ran down his legs and back. Stretching, clasping his hands behind him, he popped his back and breathed.

He already knew what he wanted to wear, so he did not waste time. Thick black pants, warm but not coarse. His silk red button-up shirt, with his cuffed sleeves already pinned with golden, sun-styled cufflinks. His long black coat with the sharp collar that tickled his ears and tailcoats that flowed past his knees. Metal boots, silver and shiny. He finished with a white cravat, tight around his neck.

He slowly posed in front of his full-length mirror. The coat fit well, disguising his age and puffing up his chest rather than his gut to return the illusion of strength. The length of his outer layers concealed his wounds from his journey, and the comfort helped set his mind at ease. The cravat and long-sleeves covered the worst of his bites.

His hair remained a wet, salty mess that had stiffened erratically. He turned to his washbasin which was concealed in a nearby cabinet. Sliding it out, he turned on the water, letting it circle the bronze bowl that caught the window light. He rolled up his sleeves, wet his hands, and splashed his face.

The water was hot, gloriously hot. The priests kept it heated, even now.

He soaked his hair, careful to reach every spot without unnecessarily wetting his new outfit. When he was done, he retrieved a comb from the drawer beside the cabinet. It was a simple, iron thing that he'd received years ago and treasured. He slicked his sparse hair back, smoothing it down, trying to cover the balding spots. He failed, but he did look less disheveled and more distinguished. His thin hair dried quickly on its own.

He walked slowly to his desk. A slew of medals and stripes were arraigned before him. One by one, he took them, remembering each one's awarding date and triumph that bought it, gently clipping it to his coat so that everyone would be reminded of his achievements when he returned. There was the green lion within the golden sun, awarded for valiance in combat. The blue raven, the eminent scholar's charm. The rising phoenix, same as his pendant, demonstrating his rank within the Heatonists. Grand Inquisitor. The one of the former many. He finished with the medals and stripes of rank, priesthood, accomplishments, deeds, and character.

Returning to the mirror one last time, he squared up. He looked old. His stomach was more pronounced, his comb over no longer combed over, and his slouch had settled into a stoop. Despite this, his shoulders were still broad, his forehead wrinkles appeared determined rather than defeated, and his medals were still clearly visible even if they were lower than they had been in his youth. He looked like an old general and liked it that way.

He surveyed the room. It had not changed.

He grabbed the orb off his laundry and rolled it around in one hand.

Without another thought, he slipped it into his pocket, turned suddenly so his coat fluttered, and left his sanctuary.

The trip upwards was monotonous. The splendid paintings, the unrivaled stone artistry of the pillars and gilded walls, the red and black carpet leading up the spiraling staircase and even the chandeliers with their glorious light were all things he'd seen before. His mind was elsewhere.

The fighting was louder now. He suspected that the insurgents were about to breach the throne room. He did not hasten his pace. They could be disappointed. They could wait.

Someone clattered down the steps towards him, huffing and hitting the wall periodically for support.

The Grand Inquisitor glared upwards.

A knight bounced into view. He was fat, his red hair curled under his raised visor, and he was trembling so much that he could barely walk. He sighed in relief. "Grand Inquisitor!" He rushed beside him, but the Grand Inquisitor continued at his speed, unhindered, without acknowledging him.

"Sir, the rebels have breached the castle! It's the women from the bread lines and the rabble-rousers from the pubs and libraries! The heretics insisting that heat death is avoidable, that we can live forever!"

"Yet they slaughter countless opponents for their convictions," said the Grand Inquisitor in a deep, husky drawl.

"Yes sir! We need your support. Where are the others?"

The Grand Inquisitor reached the door at the top of the stairs. He flexed his fingers.

The knight struggled to breathe beside him.

The Grand Inquisitor closed his eyes, mumbled slowly, and withdrew the glassy orb which shone orange in the dim, cramped space. Throwing back his head, he tossed it into his mouth and crunched it between his teeth. Shards fell down his shirt, yet his mouth refused to bleed. Instead of violence, there was a wonderful warmth. The orb's contents and shattered shell glazed into his skin without harm. Its contents were hot but tasted sweet.

It felt like being young again. His joints and muscles burned, not the sharp or droning pain of the expended, but the invigorated rush of one with the finish line in view. His thin, spotted skin glowed. A gale swarmed around him, buffeting his coat, filling it out in splendor.

The knight stumbled backwards from him, whimpering.

The Grand Inquisitor thrust open the doors as the glow around his body burst into flames. The carpet caught flame, and the stone walls became waxy, dripping and falling away. This time, he could not smell smoke.

The knight retreated, shielding his face but unable to look away.

The Grand Inquisitor stepped through the doors and faced the crowd of rebels just as they crashed into the throne room. He spared a single glance behind him, only for the knight's sake. The flames shrouded him in a glorious red light. His body was a black silhouette against the flames.

"Watch and see what I will do!"