

Bar Conversations By Enko

Sliding the bottle of beer across the bar's aging wood, he examined the archaic carvings and symbols with idle disinterest. Quite fittingly, the ancient defacements focused mainly on alcohol, running the gamut from tiny beer-mug depictions to lengthy poems about the lovely qualities of domestic. One of the carvings even -

He crinkled his nose in disgust at the image. "Weirdos."

A noise at the back of the bar caught his attention. Turning, he sighted a wiry little man dressed all in black, attempting to creep by the windows facing onto the temple square. The little man froze.

The drinker raised his bottle of beer in response. "Yes, I see you. What were you trying to do, anyway? There's nothing in here to hide behind." He motioned widely at the empty tables and randomly sprawled chairs, sloshing beer on the floor as he did so.

"Um..." the stranger nervously approached. "Buy you another drink, friend?"

His suspicious expression curled up into a red-faced grin. "Sure thing."

Behind the bar, the tired-looking bartender sighed. "I don't trade with folks I can't see."

Growing visibly more nervous, the wiry man stumbled once on purpose.

The drinker laughed. "You sure you're not trashed already?"

The bartender accepted the gold this time, and a bottle of beer slid over.

"Thanks." Lifting the bottle, he made a grand motion, about to say something about beer bringing strangers together. It would have been amazing, surely.

The black-dressed man jumped in surprise.

"What?" the drinker asked. "Afraid I was going to blast you with a spell or something?"

"No, no of course not," his new friend responded, sipping his own beer in fear, his expression all forced smile. "So, where are you from?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you." He made another motion, about to start a grand diatribe about storytelling's societal effects he'd had saved up for quite some time. It would have changed the world, surely.

Unfortunately, his new friend seemed startled again. "Um, no, really, you can tell me. I'll believe you."

"Really? Well then..."

"...hmm, how to explain it... there was no Sun where I grew up. Yes, really. Our sky was a constant shifting panorama of blues, oranges, and browns, all afire with glory like you can't imagine. Oh, but the Sun here's pretty nice. Some evening sunsets even approach what I grew up under."

"But I never had any time to care about it when I had it. My village had maybe eighty people - we weren't rich or important by any measure. What we did have was an unfortunate location. We were about two leagues from the base of Yttril volcano - what? No, the volcano wasn't the problem. If *only*."

"See, our village grew pumice moss as a main crop. No, it tastes horrible. But you can live on it, and our environment wasn't exactly hospitable in the first place. Anyway, we were about two leagues from the base of Yttril, and about two leagues from the edge of the Zyxyzyz glacier. Zicks-icks-iz-iz. No, Zicks- whatever, it doesn't matter."

"But there were two huge cities, two cultures even, always at odds. The Thermites, who ran the volcanic lands and worshipped heat, and the Gelidites, who developed civilization on the

glaciers and were all about ice magic. So you see, both empires thought the other heathens, and they were opposed in any case by landlock. As they both expanded, our land became a crazy mess of volcanoes, magma rivers, and huge columns of smoke, all mixed up with frozen peaks, glaciers, and blizzards. There was nowhere to go after that, and they began an on and off war that just never ended."

"And us - yep - exactly. There's us, right on a border of this endless conflict. "

"Now there was never anything too horrible... there was no reason to pillage our pumice moss or kill us or anything like that - but we had orators, priests, politicians, everybody - all harassing us all the time. Villagers got bribed, bought, or blackmailed to one side or the other over the years. At some point, we became as split as the land itself."

"I had a family in that village. They're still fine. Parents, two brothers and a sister. We never really got along due to the conflicting loyalties within our home."

"But the village elders remembered. When they made a call for seekers to go out, I joined up. My family's bitter infighting was bad enough on its own, but I was just damn tired of alternately sweating profusely or shivering painfully every time I went out. I'm no pumice farmer, either."

"The elders' idea wasn't to fight, or anything like that. They were just hoping that some of us might find a new land, and that we could all go there to escape the endless Hot and Cold War."

"I'd always been fascinated by our sky, so, as a lark, that's where I decided to go."

"I found a passage through the glacier, and headed up through it. I saw wonders frozen in that fathomless ice like you wouldn't believe. Also, garbage. Like broken beer bottles and discarded gear."

"This passage came out to the highest peak in the region, a bitter-blasted frozen place I can still feel in my bones. From there, I could see the extent of our lands - a patchwork ice and fire hellhole - and, for the first time in my life, I truly understood what bitterness and rivalry can do to people. I understood what happened to my village, and to my family."

"What could one person do against all that? Nothing. It was far too big. My only hope for any sort of future was to simply escape and never return. I had a feeling that the village would never leave this place even if I did find another land. It was only the elders that remembered the time of togetherness. Personally, I wasn't sure it ever really existed."

"Sitting up there among the jagged ice formations, chilled to the core in more ways than one, I could also see the limits of our world. We had no oceans, not like here. We had only massive cliffs, titanic, tremendous, enormous, huge - ok, I see you get the idea - big cliffs that ran 'round the whole. I knew the others would fail in their search for new lands. *There were no other lands.*"

"That's when I realized that my fanciful choice to seek the sky might have been the only chance for legitimate escape."

"From my high vantage point, I could see something I'd never been able to before - among the shifting ash clouds and blizzards high above, a tiny black circle hung unmoving."

"I built a fire to stay warm, watching that unknown portal, trying to craft some plan to reach it."

"We had to have come from somewhere, right? Our legends spoke of other worlds, as all legends do, but seeing the limits of our plane truly hit home that men must have come from elsewhere... unless my world had been a paradise before the endless conflict ruined it."

"In that case, we had our just desserts, and that would be it for us."

"My fire attracted a denizen of the ash clouds - a bomb crag. While I slept, it floated over through the sky. If I'd been awake, I would have been on guard, would have seen it. We were all

well aware of the dangerous wildlife of our untamed skies. Oh, right. A bomb crag, how to explain... it's a living ball of dense smoke and crackling lightning, with a weird impish face that seems perpetually mischievous. They're skittish usually, but this one was hungry. Oh, and they explode when they die."

"I awoke to it already upon my little camp. You see my dilemma immediately. I couldn't use my meager magic to disperse it, or it would explode - and those jagged ice formations all around would shatter and fall - and then I'd be in a world of hurt."

"So when it tried to eat me, I leapt up, fell on top of it... and gripped the denser parts of its inner ash. I could feel the heat slowly working its way through my arctic furs, and its inner lightning jabbed at me the whole way -"

"No, I'm serious! I rode a panicked bomb crag up into the sky."

"Totally serious. That's how it happened. I even figured out how to control the little jets of heat it gives off that let it fly. Bomb crags are normally skittish, remember? This thing's instinct was to rush straight up, in any case."

"And I managed to tilt it towards that black hole high above. It soared up at tremendous speeds - no, I wasn't scared. I didn't even scream once. Ok, maybe once."

"The dark circle came upon us quickly - some sort of vertical tube of pitch blackness, transporting us to another world, no doubt."

"The bomb crag got wise, crashed me against the side, scraped me off against something hard, and bolted back down. I could still see my world lit in ice and fire far below, through a wind-blasted aperture beneath me. But I wasn't falling. I was... clinging to rocks."

"I know, right? Rocks?"

"With no better idea, I climbed up. Most of my arctic clothes had burned through, so I discarded them - only to find that it was eerily cool, not freezing as I'd expected."

"It seemed to take forever, placing one hand above the other, finding footholds and purchase in the dark - until, finally, I came upon a carved series of handholds, and a note left in stone - someone promising they'd 'finish this later', whatever that meant... but the note was ancient. Whoever left it was long gone."

"Climbing further up, falling exhausted on level stone, I slowly realized I'd climbed up into a strange new world. Labyrinthine, totally dark, all twisted passages filled with flowing water and eerie, diseased creatures..."

"Right. I thought the same thing. All that effort, just to end up in a nightmare world... except I hadn't. After endless wandering, I suddenly found myself emerging into light, under a ridiculously huge sky with that Sun flaring overhead. I thought I was about to die, seeing such a huge fireball - but it stayed in place, mostly."

"Furthermore, a large number of people bustled past in the glare. Buildings towered in every direction. I'd emerged from the maze-like underworld right here in Midgaard."

"You don't believe me? I said you wouldn't."

"Don't get skittish, I'm not going to blast you! Jeez. But I'm completely serious. Beneath us, there are endless sewers, and beneath the sewers, there's a whole other world, and that's where I came from. They have only the slightest mythical inkling of where they really live."

"The vow of poverty for becoming a Monk was easy. I already owned nothing, and their training helped me survive."

"But adjusting to life here was a series of incredible wonders. This world isn't confined to fire against cold. The Noachite organization promised magic based on that ridiculous orb in the sky you all take for granted. Spirit magic, light magic, all the same thing - I hated wandering

those pitch caves and sewers, thinking I was going to die, without hope... that darkness still lingers in my nightmares. So I joined with them, too."

"I think about going back home sometimes... but my new skills would be weak down there, so far from the Sun, and I'd rather leave them all to their own petty conflicts than become a part of it again."

The drinker finished his sixth bottle of beer, grinning stupidly. "So, that's where I come from."

"Very interesting," the black-dressed little man responded, smiling for some reason. "Well it was nice to meet you, I've got to get a move on..."

"Sure thing, friend."

He moved stealthily off, heading for the exit.

"See you later!" the drinker called, raising a hand to wave happily.

The little man turned just in time to see a beam of light shooting over. His scream lasted a split second before the intense sunray caused him to explode from the inside out.

"Oh, damnit!" the drinker shouted, stumbling over to the tattered scraps of black cloth and charred flesh - all that was left of his new friend. "Not again!"

The bartender sighed.

The drinker lifted a charred coin purse from the remnants. "Wait, is this my gold?"