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Exploring Mythology Through Writing

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The Cost of Fate

I know the real truth behind Rockhaven because I was stationed here for years as the captain of operations in this secluded town. The local's ignorance is one of the reasons I sort of like Rockhaven; the Silence is no more than a myth to them, put in place to create a relative calm in a town of criminals. The Silence will continue its parasitic existence as an information leech as long as the general population of this deadbeat town continues to discredit the myth. The common criminal is usually so preoccupied with several petty matters that leave them little time to investigate the truth behind myths. It may surprise them to know, many of the stories they call myths are quite true.

The location of Rockhaven makes it an enticing staging area for the Silence since it resides in a cave high up in the mountains and there is a vast array of remote villages nearby should leadership in the Silence need to gather more information before embarking on one of the Emperor's many quests. I instantly felt at home upon seeing the quiet lights of Rockhaven glistening in the distance. It took me thirty years to gather the courage to return to what had effectively been my home before I deserted the Silence. Fear of retribution ransacked my brain for years and still exists subtly today. Truthfully, if I hadn't been driven by the gods to come here, I would have never made my return. I need to atone for my transgressions and ensure that my mistakes will not be repeated. A new captain is arriving soon and I have to prevent him from completing his mission.

Age became my greatest asset in the years following my departure from the Silence. Not a single person took interest in my appearance on my way to a tavern barely through the rusted gate that guards the city limits. My ease of movement comes from the idea that old men are

washed up which makes us easy to underestimate. Should someone be so bold to act upon their idea, they would come to regret their mistake. The muddy street wind haphazardly between scattered buildings. Even though the tavern is close to the edge of town, it is quite a venture to find it.

I had been told through a dream that Emperor Gery had recently deployed a strike team to Rockhaven so they could gather themselves before assassinating the newly risen leader of the Offspring, a band of creatures sharing divine blood. From experience I knew that their mission is ill-fated at best because of how similar their assignment is to my final mission with the Silence. Their leader, Roland, will be picked apart in the jungle but their youth will propel them to total destruction. The gods won't allow their Offspring to be defeated.

I scan the dingy crowd of people for any sign of the young captain. Since Roland is relatively green, he may not fully conceal his appearance out of willful arrogance. It is a point of pride in the Silence to appear superior to those they monitor in every aspect which could grant me insight into which cloaked figure is Roland. I hope his pride shines through his disguise.

The chair I chose at the bar groans from its years of neglect as I wave for the barkeep to bring me a drink. I need to blend in with the patrons if I want to catch Roland by surprise. He will feel safe in his skills and knowledge which will force Roland to commit the same fatal mistake I did should he undertake his mission; an overestimation of self. He will feel like he is in control of our little meeting which is exactly how I intended to keep his attention on my words.

Hours tick by in a blur only interrupted by the barkeep refreshing my drink. Thankfully he wasn't the talkative type, else he may have questioned the time spent reserving space in his bar. As long as I keep spending money, his disposition was unlikely to change.

Half the dinner crowd was forced out after a few of the regular ruffians stirred up a little too much trouble for the barkeep's liking. The barkeep left them to fight a little while until he saw a chair thrown which compelled him to protect his livelihood. The figure rushing into the bar shortly after a fight had to be Roland because the allure of learning about a fresh feud was too captivating to resist for someone so young. The Silence is addicted to knowing everything which made Roland a little extra careless on his first assignment.

Out of respect for Roland's eager curiosity, I wait patiently for him to investigate the crowd himself before beckoning him to follow me into a backroom. He followed without hesitation which could have been a lethal mistake should I harbor any ill will towards him. I only hope that our meeting protects him from costly mistakes like this in the future.

The room I paid for isn't more than a collection of rotting boards that serve as walls and a few bits of furniture hiding under layers of dust. You get less than you pay for in places like this but the din of the small crowd in the main room should keep our conversation fairly private. The last thing I needed was the wrong ear to hear my tale. I had not prepared for such an eventuality.

"What information do you have, scum?" Roland greeted me.

"Ah, I do have information," I start, allowing my hands to move with my words. "but it may not be exactly what you hope it is."

"What game are you playing at?" he asks, emphasizing every word.

I let his question hang in the air much longer than I'm sure Roland would have liked. The agitation in his face would only increase the longer he listened to my story. This night would be much longer than even he could imagine.

"No game," I start, "I only want to help you."

“Who says I need your help?”

“I do. You have no idea what you’re up against.”

“Look, you decrypted goat, there is nothing a petty criminal like yourself can help an officer of the Emperor’s royal guard with. Besides, what could you possibly know that my informants don’t?”

He ends his speech with a smile which lets me know that Roland feels as though he is winning our little discussion. My face falls into a win grin that matches Rolands and reminds me of my time in his shoes. I am starting to gain a hold on him.

“For starters, I know your mission is unlikely to succeed and even if it does, the cost of victory will be greater than you can imagine. The forces you’re dealing with—they’re much more powerful than you can imagine. We’re talking creatures with literal Gods backing the seeds they threw onto this Earth. If you fail to learn from my anecdote and treat your foe like myths, I promise that the next myth I tell will be of your team’s destruction.”

I could see the questions bouncing around his skull, begging to be released. Roland took his time plucking the most pressing question from the torrent that occupies his mind. I fear if he takes too long, his conscious mind will be lost in the chaos.

“Who are you to make such bold promises?” he asked.

I exhale audibly before responding.

“To be perfectly clear, I am the dishonorably discharged captain that was sentenced to the same death sentence you currently are.”

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And so, having fully engaged Roland to my words, I began.

“I knew that failure was not an option as soon as I agreed to this mission. Assassinating a prominent leader of the Offspring would be the defining moment of my career with the Silence and I wanted nothing more than to impress my superiors. The oppressive heat of the jungle joined our company as soon as Rockhaven disappeared from the horizon. Our contact from the village was less helpful than we anticipated before he expired which meant we would have to locate the Offspring’s stronghold ourselves. I was confident in the resolve of my men which I handpicked from their respective fields. Our inability to discern any large cluster of leaves from the next did not concern a single member of my strike team. Every one of them was an expert in their field and valued leaders of the Silence. Such a crew could not possibly fail.

“Fowler, my lead tracker, attempted to explain the subtle patterns that governed the endless rows of trees to limited success. Even though I could never map the twisting paths mentally, I trusted Fowler would keep us from walking blindly into an ambush. It is important to surround yourself with people you can trust.

“There is no such thing as too cautious when you’re in an unremarkable jungle surrounded by opponents that know the place like the back of their hand. Every time Fowler reported back from his forward position, I adjusted the company’s progress based on landmarks only he could see. I counted myself lucky that I had a team willing to follow my orders completely without so much as a word of complaint.

“Days went by in a blur with little progress finding even a trace of the Offspring’s forces. It had been days of walking miles through incessant bugs, rain, and waves of heat only to reorient ourselves and start in a new direction the next morning. Fowler’s information was good, but if he wasn’t able to show us a concrete example of progress, our predicament could begin to

threaten the morale of our band. Attempting to keep my troops positive, I called my team back together to rehash our travel plans in a jungle that shifted around us. We all agreed that the jungle was the first enemy and we would treat it as such when we started the next morning. We didn't know at the time, but the Offspring were able to exploit the jungle to mask their positions.

“After I dismissed my officers for the night, Fowler pulled me aside because he wanted permission to explore a semi-local waterfall he spotted on our way to the night's campsite. Fowler was young and clearly wanted to leave his mark on this expedition by presumably naming a newly discovered waterfall after himself. I could understand his passion for such an activity but was a little wary of letting Fowler venture off by himself at night. Once he convinced me that he would take measures to return back to camp later that night, I granted him permission. Fowler eagerly scurried off to gather a few supplies before his expedition while muttering about the great opportunity he had to anyone that would listen. Only now, can I empathize with his excitement. Very few people ever leave the sprawling buildings we now call cities and he was one of the lucky few that could. We're all looking for something to put our name on.

“The night blew by quietly with no sign from Fowler. There was no way an expert tracker would be lost on his way home but no one had seen him return to camp and his tent remained vacant. I made sure all the sentries doubled up and told them to inform me as soon as Fowler returned. When I woke up the next morning, I knew he wouldn't return.

“I ordered the routine teardown and stared distantly in the direction I saw Fowler disappear in, and hoped his telltale mask would pierce the treeline. Every member of the silence wore masks at all times except captains who earned the privilege of exposing their face to the elements. Fowler's mask was a simple slate with two eyes, a slit that served as a mouth and

feathers around the edges. He had earned his name not only from the mask but also from his ability to explore sheer amounts of land in a short time. Fowler was a bird among men.

“Within minutes, you’d never know we had camped in that particular site. I still held onto hope as I gathered my officers to discuss our next move. No one could agree on a course of action without explicit information from Fowler but many stepped forth to present their own idea. Skipjack suggested picking a direction and sticking to it, while making enough noise to attract the enemies to our positions so we could track them from there. This kind of idea would be plausible with Fowler on watch but without him, we would be unable to fully prepare for that kind of fight and risked losing to the ambush we invited not to mention that our enemy are experts at covering their tracks.

“Our constant bickering did not subside which caused our entire morning to pass by in vain. Out of a desire to make forward progress, I dispelled the meeting and ordered our company in a random direction that I felt held our foe. Fortunately for me, I was right and we found a lone enemy soldier standing alone in a slight clearing. We stalked around the clearing to ensure that our masked opponent was completely alone which we confirmed. We were a little timid to engage him in fear of an ambush, so we resolved to take him down with a silenced weapon. Outlaw volunteered for the task and drew his pistol smoothly from his holster. Outlaw took his time, lining up the shot and with a single exhale, it hit its mark.

“A brief spark of joy shot through my team before we moved to reveal the identity of our fallen opponent. We laid the body out carefully and found no bullets for his weapon and an outdated gun of some form. These events seemed strange until we removed the mask of gold which revealed the strained face of Fowler below. I made the few soldiers that saw this truth

swear to secrecy which was unpopular but accepted. If such a mistake were to be spread around my team, dissent might take us over. Our mission was given the Emperor's blessing to succeed and this setback may convince my fellow soldiers otherwise."

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"Just because one of your men was careless, does not mean my squad will meet the same fate," Roland interrupts. I let him sit quietly for a moment so he could fulfill his need to be superior. What a proud captain he must be.

"The fact that you even mention fate means that there are no such things as accidents," I say, allowing my words to hang loosely in the air. "Besides, that wasn't the only incident we had."

I willed my words to penetrate the depths of his skull but fear that one anecdote would not be enough to persuade him. A good captain of the Emperor's secret service would discredit the very idea of fate since they are blind to its power. If I learned one thing from my adventures, it's that we operate under a power much greater than our own. I'm not sure Roland can come to accept that.

"I can promise you that the shortcomings of your so-called team won't get in the way of mine. If your argument is rooted in fate, you're just as useless as I thought."

He's right of course, the zealous and inquisitive nature of my team may not be replicated as openly in his strike team. It does not matter if the next words I say are true, but I need an excuse to keep him sitting passively and listening to my story.

“I can promise you that my failure will hurt you,” I say without anything to back it up at that moment. The test succeeded because I knew I had his attention since he no longer looked to be in a hurry to leave.

“They will hurt you because our enemy has learned from my failures even if you do not so arm yourself as they have!”

Those last words find their way past his wall of ignorance. This is the first shred of my argument that he latched onto; even though I do not know how true this statement is. For all the Offspring’s skill, I’m not even sure we taught them anything they didn’t already know. They routinely surprised us because their knowledge was ancient and we were foolish.

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“Our team was locked in place for a matter of days after we took down Fowler. I had implemented strict guidelines that forbid anyone from wandering off alone for any reason. Several tactical debates raged among my core group which meant our meetings were a stalemate since no one could get the majority’s favor. I had the authority to take over full command but my comrades may still be a little wary with Fowler’s death fresh on their minds. A mistake that cost me control of these meetings.

“In one particularly tense meeting, Outlaw stormed out causing Patriot to follow in pursuit. Outlaw’s deployment was part of the Emperor’s new plan to allow convicts to atone for their crimes and he was still getting used to a democratic setting. Even though his methods were usually violent, I allowed him to become an important voice in my corps which meant he was prone to fits of rage like this one when conversations were extremely unproductive. I’m just glad

Patriot had become close enough with him to calm his fury before he did something we would all regret. I thanked the stars for Patriot's welcoming instincts.

“Hours of meetings bled into a full day without a sign of either Outlaw or Patriot. Thinking of it, the pair of them had not been to any required gathering since Outlaw stormed out of our tent. Their absence didn't make any sense to me because Patriot had an impeccable record in her long career with the Silence and Outlaw would not throw his only chance at redemption away so carelessly. Neither of them would stand for that. My team discussed this for a bit prior to searching every inch of our campsite. No tent or cluster of trees betrayed their location so we were left empty handed. We could not have anticipated their actions nor their condition the next time we encountered them.

“A trusted man of mine, Bomber, told me what he knew later that night. He took his time retelling everything that he knew but appeared timid with every word. I tried to look through the eyes hidden beneath a pure black mask and they were true enough. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling he was hiding something from me as he recounted the events as he knew them.

“Bomber started with an argument between Patriot and Outlaw shortly after they left our tactical meeting.

“Look man, there's no way I can return to civilized life now. It doesn't matter what I do now, Kingpin and the rest of em can rid the world of me for his mistake,” Outlaw said.

“No one thinks that,” Patriot responded vehemently. “You were the instrument but it wasn't your decision.”

“Thanks, but they won't see it that way.”

“Their debate lasted Bomber’s entire shift as a sentry. Outlaw would bring up another method I could dispose of him without batting an eye and Patriot would stand in my defense. I have to admit, it was tempting to cut a convict loose by changing a few of the details in my end of mission report but I found myself quite fond of the guy. Regardless, Patriot eventually lost the debate and moved to comfort her distressed companion. That was when Outlaw shared his idea.

“To start, Outlaw convinces Patriot to desert with him in order to help him evade returning to prison. Patriot reminds Outlaw that desertion is not his only option but packs her things despite her uncertainty. I have speculated that the pair’s relationship may have been deeper than a close friendship but I will never know how Outlaw got Patriot to forsake her oath of service to the Silence. I only wish both of them felt my sorrow at their passing and find forgiveness in the afterlife for their actions. They deserved better than this.

“They planned to meet up at a cluster of rocks a short distance from our current campsite. Both of them snuck off to scout this location together which meant no one paid any mind since neither went off alone at any point. Patriot and Outlaw made sure they were the only ones that knew of this location by abusing their rank to keep the sentries quiet. It was well known that they would often sneak off to have their private conversations but I never imagined the habit may become lethal in the future. Hindsight is always perfect though.

“Patriot arrived first, having left our camp shortly after nightfall. She brushed off the sentry by stating she needed a bit of alone time off in the woods and flexed her rank to keep him from asking too many questions. The darkness worked to her disadvantage as fate guided her to the pile of rocks she intended to visit but it kept our enemy hidden well. Patriot sprung the

ambush that was meant for both of them, and barely managed to slip into the underbrush when the Offspring's hit squad were blinded by a flare she shot at them.

“A few moments pass before Outlaw shows up to meet with his partner only to find a pack of golden masks sorting through Patriot's discarded possessions. Enraged again, Outlaw threw his weight around, killing as many of the foe as he could before he was fatally wounded near Patriot's hiding spot. The pair locked eyes for the last time in a moment that further complicated Outlaw's feelings. Part of him knew that there was nothing she could have done for him but he couldn't get past a deeper feeling of betrayal. Patriot's decision to hide is likely the only reason we know what happened to them as she managed to escape while they were distracted with Outlaw's remains.

“Though it was not as quiet as she intended, Patriot did return to the outer sentry of our camp. She told her story briefly before passing out from a wound she received during her final dash to safety. Patriot then died a few days later as our best doctor could not restore her back to a living order. I still wish I could have asked her the reasons for her desertion but she never regained consciousness. Patriot was one of the most loyal soldiers a captain could ever ask for.”

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“You're arguing in defense of deserters,” Roland was quick to reply. “Even if such a soldier was well respected in the past, you cannot look past the pure betrayal of loyalty that became their final act.”

While he was right, Roland was missing the point that even good soldiers can be lost to the chaos of the jungle and besides, he was talking to a deserter. There was a time I could have been a man that Roland grew to respect before I deserted for my own reasons. There was

something about those densely packed trees that could lead even the Emperor's finest to madness. The idea had pried into Patriot's head through Outlaw's weaker mindframe where it lodged itself completely. It only takes one person to start the ripple that could end in the total collapse of the entire unit. I was lucky that this instance we isolated and didn't spread to anyone else.

"Even if these two were random deserters," I reply after our brief pause, "it only takes one soldier breaking to make the rest start to waver. The very nature of this level of disillusionment with the Silence, would be out of your control. I got lucky that Outlaw decided to leave instead of poisoning the minds of others. I only wish good fortune onto you should dissent kick in."

My words may have bounced right past his ears but Roland at least appeared to think before responding with the basic rules of the Silence. Desertion would be punished to the highest degree, no good soldier would ever consider this, the people I have told him about are better at serving their own ends than listening to orders and why do I continue to waste his time with such meaningless anecdotes. The word meaningless was really telling. I needed to bring Roland back into my line of thinking.

"Bad things not only happened to people you brand as traitors, but also to those that got lost completely in our creed," I started.

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"Despite the losses we suffered, we managed to discover the Offspring's base without any more ambushes. My team, already tense from the desertion of Patriot as well as the loss of Fowler, met again to discuss our next move as a unit. Debate surged since everyone had their

own idea on how to proceed and no one wanted mine. Some wanted to risk a single operative in the effort to disrupt a well supplied opponent while others cried for an immediate assault quoting our losses as an inevitability. Since no one could come up with an agreement that morning, we all broke quickly for lunch.

“Skipjack, a longtime veteran of the Silence, pulled me aside during my modest lunch. He had devised a plan in which he could cause the disorganization among the Offspring’s forces while only committing himself. I told him that such an action would be reckless without more information but I proposed a scouting operation he could embark on so we could have a complete report on the stronghold’s defenses. Skipjack enthusiastically agreed to my compromise but made sure he would be called upon for such an operation. I knew Skipjack harbored a long hatred of the Offspring so I was willing to entertain sending him off if it would raise my units desperately low morale a little. If his feelings were as I read them, he would return with no issues because his report would be critical to our success in the coming assault on the stronghold. Skipjack would logically know that a mistake would cost him his life and the unit their best chance at hurting the Offspring’s forces. I could only pray I convinced him to maintain a scouting posture after discussing this logic directly with him.

“Unknown to me, Skipjack had no intention of pursuing the mission as ordered. He was infatuated with our opponent and wanted to gain as much insight as possible on them. Skipjack intended to kidnap one of them in order to experiment on their divine blood for his own nefarious motives. Skipjack thought he could give us an edge in the endless war with the Gods by gleaming something from a prisoner and he knew this could be his only opportunity to hold

one for any amount of time. His more than eager nature made a few soldiers uneasy but Skipjack easily deflected any pressing concerns. He was going to proceed with the mission.

“There was a wrench in his plan however and she went by the name Dewdrop. Dewdrop did not approve of letting her long-time comrade complete any sort of mission without her to watch his back. The pair got in quite the heated debate which I settled by instilling confidence in Dewdrop that Skipjack would return alive and well. She remained unconvinced by the end of it but Skipjack promised he would return before fading into the jungle.

“Since there was no one traveling with Skipjack, I can only assume the rest. First, Skipjack easily made it to the compound where he was able to fulfill a complete scout of the base without raising the alarm. After taking the careful precautions to detail his notes, he moved much closer than ordered in the hopes of ambushing a perimeter guard. This action was ultimately unsuccessful as Skipjack never returned to our campsite alive.

“We gave up waiting for Skipjack when the sun set and sat blissfully unaware of his demise late into the night. Most presumed he was taking his time so he could pick all the juiciest targets for himself. We laughed at the thought and went to bed with joyous hearts. Tomorrow Skipjack would return but none of us could have guessed how he would.

“His body crashed into Dewdrop’s tent from the cover of the canopy. Those rabble always know the best way to disrupt our forces since it left Dewdrop an emotional wreck which locked out position again. I couldn’t tell for sure, but I think Skipjack died with a smile on his face. It said to me that his plan may have gone wrong but he never regretted the action for a moment. I wonder if his expression would change if he saw the effect it had on his partner.”

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Roland's footsteps echoed through my mind as he faded into the jungle with his newly acquired strike team. He had barely listened to my last tale before storming off at the end of it. I clearly wasted too much of his time.

Roland may never know that my team lost at my final order as captain; an ill-fated assault on the stronghold with almost no information. There is no safe way to fight the seed of a god. I hope the next captain will be a little more understanding. I may not leave this town alive if too many continue in ignorance.