

In the Land of Time

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THUS Karnith, King of Alatta, spake to his eldest son: "I bequeath to thee my city of Zoon, with its golden eaves, whereunder hum the bees. And I bequeath to thee also the land of Alatta, and all such other lands as thou art worthy to possess, for my three strong armies which I leave thee may well take Zindara and over-run Istahn, and drive back Onin from his frontier, and leaguer the walls of Yan, and beyond that spread conquest over the lesser lands of Hebith, Ebnon, and Karida. Only lead not thine armies against Zeenar, nor ever cross the Eidis."

Thereat in the city of Zoon in the land of Alatta, under his golden eaves, died King Karnith, and his soul went whither had gone the souls of his sires the elder Kings, and the souls of their slaves.

Then Karnith Zo, the new King, took the iron crown of Alatta and afterwards went down to the plains that encircle Zoon and found his three strong armies clamouring to be led against Zeenar, over the river Eidis.

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But the new King came back from his armies, and all one night in the great palace alone with his iron crown, pondered long upon war ; and a little before dawn he saw dimly through his palace window, facing east over the city of Zoon and across the fields of Alatta, to far off where a valley opened on Istahn. There, as he pondered, he saw the smoke arising tall and straight over small houses in the plain and the fields where the sheep fed. Later the sun rose shining over Alatta as it shone over Istahn, and there arose a stir about the houses both in Alatta and Istahn, and cocks crowed in the city and men went out into the fields among the bleating sheep ; and the King wondered if men did otherwise in Istahn. And men and women met as they went out to work and the sound of laughter arose from streets and fields ; the King's eyes gazed into the distance toward Istahn and still the smoke went upward tall and straight from the small houses. And the sun rose higher that shone upon Alatta and Istahn, causing the flowers to open wide in each, and the birds to sing and the voices of men and women to arise. And in the market place of Zoon caravans were astir that set out to carry merchandise to Istahn, and afterwards passed camels coming to Alatta with many tinkling bells. All this the King saw as he pondered much, who had not pondered before. Westward the Agnid mountains frowned in the distance guarding the river

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Eidis ; behind them the fierce people of Zeenar lived in a bleak land.

Later the King, going abroad through his new kingdom, came on the Temple of the gods of Old. There he found the roof shattered and the marble columns broken and tall weeds met together in the inner shrine, and the gods of Old, bereft of worship or sacrifice, neglected and forgotten. And the King asked of his councillors who it was that had overturned this temple of the gods or caused the gods Themselves to be thus forsaken. And they answered him :

“Time has done this.”

Next the King came upon a man bent and crippled, whose face was furrowed and worn, and the King having seen no such sight within the court of his father said to the man :

“Who hath done this thing to you ?”

And the old man answered :

“Time hath ruthlessly done it.”

But the King and his councillors went on, and next they came upon a body of men carrying among them a hearse. And the King asked his councillors closely concerning death, for these things had not before been expounded to the King. And the oldest of the councillors answered :

“Death, O King, is a gift sent by the gods by the hand of their servant Time, and some receive it gladly, and some are forced reluctantly to take it, and before others it is suddenly flung in the middle

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of the day. And with this gift that Time hath brought him from the gods a man must go forth into the dark to possess no other thing for so long as the gods are willing."

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But the King went back to his palace and gathered the greatest of his prophets and his councillors and asked them more particularly concerning Time. And they told the King how that Time was a great figure standing like a tall shadow in the dusk or striding, unseen, across the world, and how that he was the slave of the gods and did Their bidding, but ever chose new masters, and how all the former masters of Time were dead and Their shrines forgotten. And one said :

"I have seen him once when I went down to play again in the garden of my childhood because of certain memories. And it was towards evening and the light was pale, and I saw Time standing over the little gate, pale like the light, and he stood between me and that garden and had stolen my memories of it because he was mightier than I."

And another said :

"I, too, have seen the Enemy of my House. For I saw him when he strode over the fields that I knew well and led a stranger by the hand to place him in my home to sit where my forefathers sat. And I saw him afterwards walk thrice round the house and stoop and gather up the glamour from the lawns and brush aside the tall poppies in the

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garden and spread weeds in his pathway where he strode through the remembered nooks."

And another said :

"He went one day into the desert and brought up life out of the waste places, and made it cry bitterly and covered it with the desert again."

And another said :

"I too saw him once seated in the garden of a child tearing the flowers, and afterwards he went away through many woodlands and stooped down as he went, and picked the leaves one by one from the trees."

And another said :

"I saw him once by moonlight standing tall and black amidst the ruins of a shrine in the old kingdom of Amarna, doing a deed by night. And he wore a look on his face such as murderers wear as he busied himself to cover over something with weeds and dust. Thereafter in Amarna the people of that old Kingdom missed their god, in whose shrine I saw Time crouching in the night, and they have not since beheld him."

And all the while from the distance at the city's edge rose a hum from the three armies of the King clamouring to be led against Zeenar. Thereat the King went down to his three armies and speaking to their chiefs said :

"I will not go down clad with murder to be King over other lands. I have seen the same morning arising on Istahn that also gladdened

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Alatta, and have heard Peace lowing among the flowers. I will not desolate homes to rule over an orphaned land and a land widowed. But I will lead you against the pledged enemy of Alatta who shall crumble the towers of Zoon and hath gone far to overthrow our gods. He is the foe of Zindara and Istahn and many-citadeled Yan, Hebith and Ebnon may not overcome him nor Karida be safe against him among her bleakest mountains. He is a foe mightier than Zeenar with frontiers stronger than the Eidis ; he leers at all the peoples of the earth and mocks their gods and covets their builded cities. Therefore we will go forth and conquer Time and save the gods of Alatta from his clutch, and coming back victorious shall find that Death is gone and age and illness departed, and here we shall live for ever by the golden eaves of Zoon, while the bees hum among unruined gables and never crumbling towers. There shall be neither fading nor forgetting, nor ever dying nor sorrow, when we shall have freed the people and pleasant fields of the earth from inexorable Time.”

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And the armies swore that they would follow the King to save the world and the gods.

So the next day the King set forth with his three armies and crossed many rivers and marched through many lands, and wherever they went they asked for news of Time.

And the first day they met a woman with her

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face furrowed and lined, who told them that she had been beautiful and that Time had smitten her in the face with his five claws.

Many an old man they met as they marched in search of Time. All had seen him but none could tell them more, except that some said he went that way and pointed to a ruined tower or to an old and broken tree.

And day after day and month by month the King pushed on with his armies, hoping to come at last on Time. Sometimes they encamped at night near palaces of beautiful design or beside gardens of flowers, hoping to find their enemy when he came to desecrate in the dark. Sometimes they came on cobwebs, sometimes on rusted chains and houses with broken roofs or crumbling walls. Then the armies would push on apace thinking that they were closer upon the track of Time.

As the weeks passed by and weeks grew to months, and always they heard reports and rumours of Time, but never found him, the armies grew weary of the great march, but the King pushed on and would let none turn back, saying always that the enemy was near at hand.

Month in, month out, the King led on his now unwilling armies, till at last they had marched for close upon a year and came to the village of Astarma very far to the north. There many of the King's weary soldiers deserted from his armies

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and settled down in Astarma and married Astar-mian girls. By these soldiers we have the march of the armies clearly chronicled to the time when they came to Astarma, having been nigh a year upon the march. And the army left that village and the children cheered them as they went up the street, and five miles distant they passed over a ridge of hills and out of sight. Beyond this less is known, but the rest of this chronicle is gathered from the tales that the veterans of the King's armies used to tell in the evenings about the fires in Zoon and remembered afterwards by the men of Zeenar.

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It is mostly credited in these days that such of the King's armies as went on past Astarma came at last (it is not known after how long a time) over a crest of a slope where the whole earth slanted green to the north. Below it lay green fields and beyond them moaned the sea with never shore nor island so far as the eye could reach. Among the green fields lay a village, and on this village the eyes of the King and his armies were turned as they came down the slope. It lay beneath them, grave with seared antiquity, with old-world gables stained and bent by the lapse of frequent years, with all its chimneys awry. Its roofs were tiled with antique stones covered over deep with moss, each little window looked with a myriad strange cut panes on the gardens shaped with quaint devices and overrun with weeds. On rusted hinges the doors swung to and fro and were fashioned

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of planks of immemorial oak with black knots gaping from their sockets. Against it all there beat the thistle-down, about it clambered the ivy or swayed the weeds ; tall and straight out of the twisted chimneys arose blue columns of smoke, and blades of grass peeped upward between the huge cobbles of the unmolested street. Between the gardens and the cobbled street stood hedges higher than a horseman might look, of stalwart thorn, and upward through it clambered the convolvulus to peer into the garden from the top. Before each house there was cut a gap in the hedge, and in it swung a wicket gate of timber soft with the rain and years, and green like the moss. Over all of it there brooded age and the full hush of things bygone and forgotten. Upon this derelict that the years had cast up out of antiquity the King and his armies gazed long. Then on the hill slope the King made his armies halt, and went down alone with one of his chiefs into the village.

Presently there was a stir in one of the houses, and a bat flew out of the door into the daylight, and three mice came running out of the doorway down the step, an old stone cracked in two and held together by moss ; and there followed an old man bending on a stick with a white beard coming to the ground, wearing clothes that were glossed with use, and presently there came others out of the other houses, all of them as old, and all hobbling on sticks. These were the oldest people

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that the King had ever beheld, and he asked them the name of the village and who they were ; and one of them answered : “ This is the City of the Aged in the Territory of Time.”

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And the King said, “ Is Time then here ? ”

And one of the old men pointed to a great castle standing on a steep hill and said : “ Therein dwells Time, and we are his people ; ” and they all looked curiously at King Karnith Zo, and the eldest of the villagers spoke again and said : “ Whence do you come, you that are so young ? ” and Karnith Zo told him how he had come to conquer Time to save the world and the gods, and asked them whence they came.

And the villagers said :

“ We are older than always, and know not whence we came, but we are the people of Time, and here from the Edge of Everything he sends out his hours to assail the world, and you may never conquer Time.” But the King went back to his armies, and pointed toward the castle on the hill and told them that at last they had found the Enemy of the Earth ; and they that were older than always went back slowly into their houses with the creaking of olden doors. And they went across the fields and passed the village. From one of his towers Time eyed them all the while, and in battle order they closed in on the steep hill as Time sat still in his great tower and watched.

But as the feet of the foremost touched the edge

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of the hill Time hurled five years against them, and the years passed over their heads and the army still came on, an army of older men. But the slope seemed steeper to the King and to every man in his army, and they breathed more heavily. And Time summoned up more years, and one by one he hurled them at Karnith Zo and at all his men. And the knees of the army stiffened, and their beards grew and turned grey, and the hours and days and the months went singing over their heads, and their hair turned whiter and whiter, and the conquering hours bore down, and the years rushed on and swept the youth of that army clear away till they came face to face under the walls of the castle of Time with a mass of howling years, and found the top of the slope too steep for aged men. Slowly and painfully, harassed with agues and chills, the King rallied his aged army that tottered down the slope.

Slowly the King led back his warriors over whose heads had shrieked the triumphant years. Year in, year out, they straggled southwards, always towards Zoon; they came, with rust upon their spears and long beards flowing, again into Astarma, and none knew them there. They passed again by towns and villages where once they had inquired curiously concerning Time, and none knew them there either. They came again to the palaces and gardens where they had waited for Time in the night, and found that Time had been there. And all the while they set a hope before them that they

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should come on Zoon again and see its golden eaves. And no one knew that unperceived behind them there lurked and followed the gaunt figure of Time cutting off stragglers one by one and overwhelming them with his hours, only men were missed from the army every day, and fewer and fewer grew the veterans of Karnith Zo.

But at last after many a month, one night as they marched in the dusk before the morning, dawn suddenly ascending shone on the eaves of Zoon, and a great cry ran through the army :

“ Alatta, Alatta ! ”

But drawing nearer they found that the gates were rusted and weeds grew tall along the outer walls, many a roof had fallen, gables were blackened and bent, and the golden eaves shone not as heretofore. And the soldiers entering the city expecting to find their sisters and sweethearts of a few years ago saw only old women wrinkled with great age and knew not who they were.

Suddenly someone said :

“ He has been here too.”

And then they knew that while they searched for Time, Time had gone forth against their city and leaguered it with the years, and had taken it while they were far away and enslaved their women and children with the yoke of age. So all that remained of the three armies of Karnith Zo settled in the conquered city. And presently the men of Zeenar crossed over the river Eidis and easily

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conquering an army of aged men took all Alatta for themselves, and their kings reigned thereafter in the city of Zoon. And sometimes the men of Zeenar listened to the strange tales that the old Alattans told of the years when they made battle against Time. Such of these tales as the men of Zeenar remembered they afterwards set forth, and this is all that may be told of those adventurous armies that went to war with Time to save the world and the gods, and were overwhelmed by the hours and the years.