

Darian's Head

-R.D.D. NICKEL-



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Darian was an orphan. His parents had emigrated from Earth, that ancient and hallowed mother world of Mankind, when he was yet barely conceived. They had embarked aboard a wandering star merchant's ship toward Epaphus, the windy third moon of the gas giant Thoriam in the Epsilon Eridani System. But fifteen years into its long journey across the vast, black abyss that separates the stars, a malfunction occurred in the ship's hibernation units. And when the cranky, old vessel arrived at Epaphus, the receivers there found Darian's parents, as well as the rest of the passengers and crew, dead. They did, however, find one passenger who, although the errant hibernation unit had failed to preserve her, did manage to preserve the unborn child in her womb. The scrupulous Epaphians, deeply religious since the most ancient of times, could not abide to let a life go to waste. They extracted the unripe creature from the ill-fortuned mother's belly and nurtured it in an artificial womb. And so, Darian was born.

Through most of his childhood, Darian lived in a state orphanage in Namsatin, the chief city on Epaphus, old as the moon itself and full of corruption. Here, crooked, wrinkled men in purple robes scolded and harangued young Darian every long Epaphian day and every long Epaphian night. Never was he allowed to play, always was he whipped into submission and impelled to learn the ancient dogma. For orphans were set aside for religious duties and were raised to be faithful squires to the "doctors". A term retained from a long forgotten time when the leaders of Epaphus were required to receive their Doctorate of Science. But the science had long ago been reduced to a theocratic worship of nature and the doctors themselves to not much more than priests.

And thus this went on, long-day after long-day, year after year. The windy moon circled mighty Thoriam, and Thoriam circled the sun until one day, when Darian was twenty Epaphian years old (about twelve in Earth years), an eccentric old man had come to the orphanage from the north-east. His name, Darian was told, was Doctor Waeko, shepherd and father of a small commune in the northern foothills of the Racsagan Mountains. He had come to Namsatin in search of a new squire and had heard the orphanage there had an Earth boy which, for reasons left unexplained, he was in need of. And so it was the time came for Darian to leave that wretched orphanage to be entrusted as squire to serve for life his ordained doctor. And after traveling half-way across the moon on a train and a long, bumpy truck ride from a local rancher, Darian arrived at his new home.

The commune of Doctor Waeko was made up of a few hundred men and

women and their families living in a small village at the base of a foothill overlooking the vast, barren northern plains of sub-arctic Epaphus, all of whom were ardent followers of Waeko and his twisted and unorthodox cult: the “Peitho Kephale”. As he grew up serving as squire to the eccentric doctor, Darian was trained in the ways of the cult. He learned all the chants and rituals, he attended the sacrificial ceremonies, and as he grew older he even began to be trained to be a doctor himself. And he learned about Alaliaq.

Alaliaq was the figure around whom the Peitho Kephale cult was centered, and they hailed him as the Lord returned. He was more than forty thousand years old and remained alive by having his head hooked up inside a cerebral preservation tank, a cylindrical jar not much bigger than the head itself. He was the son of Enmenleus, the Almighty King of Earth, who had also been an immortal but was murdered thousands of years earlier by Alaliar (also an immortal), his ambitious son and Alaliaq’s half-brother. When he deposed his father, Alaliar had his twin brother Alalium and his half-brother Alaliaq sent in exile to Epaphus. Alalium frozen in cryostasis, never to be woken again, and Alaliaq separated from the robotic body he previously enjoyed and stranded on a world whose religious order would not permit such a monstrosity. Ever Alaliaq dreamed of the day when he would get his revenge on his traitorous half-brother.

Now, Darian’s guardian, Doctor Waeko, had a child one year and named him Borbus. The child was conceived in a twisted sex ceremony Waeko performed with a poor woman in his congregation, but he loved him dearly and his priestly duties were often affected because of him. But as he grew up, Borbus became very obese, so much so that his limbs were buried in rolls almost up to his knees and elbows. One day, while he was eating (as he seemed to do most of the time), he choked on a piece of ham and died. Waeko was overcome with grief and in the early light of dawn he called a meeting in the Naham Temple of the Peitho Kephale. He addressed his congregation and explained that the almighty Alaliaq loved them very much and wished for them to join him in eternal paradise. So he had his henchmen bar the doors, cover the whole place in oil, and then lit it with torches. And so, all the members of the Peitho Kephale died that day as the temple burned down.

Darian was thirty-one years old when this happened (about eighteen on Earth) and he knew that day what Doctor Waeko had planned to do. When the meeting was called, he ran off into the hills. There he sat and watched as the temple, along with everyone he knew trapped inside, perished.

When all the fires had died out and the smoke cleared, Darian walked down to the village and walked amid the smouldering rubble of the former Naham Temple. He walked through the ashes amidst the charred bodies of the people and fell to his knees.

‘Why?!’ he cried, ‘Must I be damned to depravity for all my days? Will there ever be any glory for the orphan boy from Earth?’ And there he wept, for there was no future for him. But, then, he heard a noise and turned around. And a voice spoke, sounding like a computer or android of some sort.

‘You do not have to be damned to depravity forever,’ it said, ‘I can show you glory greater than you have ever imagined.’ Darian looked around, and out of the ashes he dug out a large, cylindrical jar with a pale, white head in it attached to artificial tubing at the spine. Though he never seen it before, he knew it at once to be Alaliaq. It spoke again.

‘Do you not want this glory, of which I speak?’

‘Y-yes,’ stuttered Darian, not quite knowing how to respond to this head-in-a-jar, ‘but what am I to do to gain such glory?’

‘Take me with you,’ said the pale head, ‘and go wherever I command you.’

Darian picked up the pickled head and stood up as he surveyed the land, the gales of the windy moon blowing the smoke and ash in thick black columns. He asked, ‘Where am I to go?’ to which the head answered.

‘Follow the mountains south, past the Anician Sea and the lands of Mesomara to the Great Salt Desert of Sitnalta. There you will find the ruins of Arufara. Take me there, my boy.’

And so, with the head of the mighty Alaliaq rested firmly in his arm, Darian set off down the valley. Now, on Epaphus, one day from sunrise to sunrise is about the same length as eight on Earth. It was early morning when Darian had set off from Naham and by the time he had reached the Ogalapich River twelve hours later, the sun was still low in the morning sky but he was ready to expire. So, after taking a good long drink from the river and eating some roots of cattails he found growing in the shallows, he curled up in the sparse grass.

When he awoke, Darian judged from the sun, now higher in the sky, and the great bulk of the planet Thoriam now shrinking from half a disc into a crescent, that he had slept for eight hours. After eating a small breakfast of cattail roots and stuffing his pockets with more for later, he picked up the jar that was the almighty Alaliaq, and headed in a direction south-east, away from the mountains where he knew there was ranchlands and - he hoped - food. For another fifteen hours he

walked across the sparse shrubland, resting only a few times to eat, before stopping once more to sleep, once again on the cold, rocky ground. The sun was now high in the sky and Thoriam was nowhere to be seen, the planet showing only its dark side to its windy moon at this time of the long-day. When he woke again, Darian walked yet another fifteen hours and slept again on the ground.

On the third circad since the morning he had set off (the Epaphians divided their long-day into eight 24 hour periods called “circads”) Darian came across a small ranch, the sun now sinking in the west and Thoriam growing once more into a thin crescent, and thanked the heavens, for he was all out of cattail roots and, as far as he knew, the ranchers on this part of Epaphus were generous to strangers. There were fields with horses and cattle grazing on the grasslands, sparse still but much thicker than the shrublands he had just come from. There was a row of a few round cement granaries, a large, square barn and, right close at hand, a small plaster house with an old truck parked in front. Hungry as he was, Darian could hardly contain himself. He ran up to the door and gave a loud knock, remembering only too soon to hide Alaliaq in the bushes.

‘Who's there!?’ yelled the rancher from inside the house.

‘It is just I,’ Darian yelled back, up through the window, ‘a lowly wanderer.’ Steps rattled down the stairs and the door was opened up by a haggard, old man.

‘Say who now?’ he spat out. Darian replied, almost panting with hunger.

‘My name is Darian,’ he said, ‘since the last sunrise I have been making my way across this harsh land on foot with very little to eat and less to drink. Please sir, if you could-’

‘LAST SUNRISE?!’ the rancher shouted, ‘And you ain’t got nothin’ to eat?’

‘Well, uh, I had some cattail roots awhile back and there was this lizard-’

‘Well, what’re ya standin’ there for?’ spat the man, ‘C’mon in, le’me get some food in that belly o’ yer’s.’

Darian stepped inside. The kindly old rancher served him a hot meal of beef stew and rice and brewed up hot drinks for the both of them and sat down.

‘So, wha’s yer story, son?’ he asked, and Darian told him all about the fire, the mass suicide, everything. Everything, that is, except the jarred head and the mysterious quest it was leading him on. When he was finished, the rancher mused for a while.

‘Doctor Waeko, eh?’ he said, ‘If I’m a’thinkin’ about the same Waeko as ya’re, then me n’ him go way back. Grew up together, we did. He was a queer one,

that one. Ran off ta git his doct'rate - ah, shoot, must've been a hundird years ago. Never saw him again.

Last I heard, he found some ancient artifact somewhere in 'round the Sitnalta Desert. That's when he broke off from the Holy Doctrine Order and started his own weirdo cult. The one ya jist ran away from, the *Paytho Kefolly* or whatever-the-hell it's called. Shame it had to end like that. Damn shame.' They sat for a while sipping at their hot drinks before he got up from the table.

'Well,' he said, 'I'm 'bout ready to hit the sack. Ya feel free to sleep in the guest room if ya like. Come wakin' time I can give ya a ride to town or whatever ya like.' And with that he exited for his room and Darian got up to go to his guest room, all too happy to finally sleep in a soft bed.

But no sooner had he laid down then a high-pitched whirring sound grabbed his attention.

'Darian.' came the robotic voice from outside his window, 'Darian, get up.' Darian rose from the bed and went to the window to speak to the head-in-a-jar that was still hidden in the bushes outside where he had left it.

'Yes, master, what is it?' he asked.

'Darian, is the old man retired?' replied the pickled head.

'He must be. Why?' asked Darian.

'Then it is time to leave, we must take his truck.'

'What? No.' said Darian, 'He is a kind man, I can't steal a truck from such a generous host.'

'Darian,' said Alaliaq in his cold monotone voice, 'the old man offered you a meal, I offer you glory. Tell me, boy, do you want to eat for a day or do you want to live forever?' Darian shrunk his head.

'I'll take the glory.' he said.

'Good,' said Alaliaq, 'than you will take the truck.'

Darian snuck out of the house, gathered Alaliaq from the bushes, and crept up to the truck. The key, luckily, was still in the ignition, so he placed Alaliaq's jar on the passenger seat, started up the truck, and began to pull out. However, the rancher must not have fallen asleep yet because not a moment after the truck fired up, a loud shout could be heard and steps pounding down the stairs. The haggard, old man bolted out of the house with a plasma rifle in his hands.

'Why you treacherous, little, good-fer-nothin', punk!' he shouted, 'I fed ya, I housed ya, and this is how ya pay me back!?'

Darian didn't wait to reply but hit the accelerator and skidded out.

The rancher yelled, 'Take this, ya son-of-a-bitch!' and bright, white plasma bolts whizzed by the truck.

'Oh! Snap!' yelled Darian and he sped out of the driveway and down the road. 'Mwa ha, excellent.' murmured Alaliaq.

For four circads they drove down that dusty highway. The sun set in the west and the great disc of Thoriam grew into a full, bright circle shining a ghostly, orange light on the Epaphian landscape. On into the long-night they drove, stopping only for Darian to sleep and to eat some of the dry wafers he stole from the rancher's cupboards. When they had finally pulled up to an inn in the small town on the western shore of the Anician Sea named Arahaz, Thoriam was shrinking again and Darian was about ready to expire. Searching through the truck's compartments, he couldn't believe his good fortune to find both a small satchel full of money and a fully charged plasma pistol. The satchel he tied onto his belt and the pistol he stowed in the inside pocket of his jacket. He found a rucksack behind the seat and promptly stuffed Alaliaq inside and tied it up.

'I need to stop and rest,' he said, 'but, I'm afraid I need to hide you in here. I'm not sure how these people will think about a talking head-in-a-jar.' He put the rucksack on his back and stepped inside the inn.

'Yeess,' croaked the man at the counter, 'How can I help you, young sir?' he said with an air of impatience.

'Oh, hi,' said Darian, 'I was wondering if maybe you might have a place to stay for the night.'

'Ha!' sneered the man, 'there ain't no room here, if that's what you want. In fact,' he added, 'I don't believe there's a goddamned room in this whole sleazy town.'

Darian sighed. 'Well, can one at least find a place to drink around here?'

'Aye,' said the clerk, 'there be a pub 'round back. Though, I'd watch myself if I were you. This can be a rough town.'

'I'll be careful.' said Darian.

'YOU'LL BE DEAD!' shot the man, wide-eyed and glaring. Darian looked at him for a second and turned around to leave, not knowing what else to say. As he walked back out the door, the robotic voice of that infernal head issued from the rucksack.

'You have failed to find us quarters for our rest, Earth boy,' it said, 'We will only find trouble in this place, it is best we be on our way.'

‘Shut up.’ said Darian, ‘I’ve walked the whole long-day across the shrubland, stole a man’s truck and drove for half the long-night with nothing to eat but dry wafers. I’m getting a drink.’

The pub, it turned out was nearly empty, but the men at the one occupied table were all rough looking characters just as the clerk had suggested. Darian, however, was too exhausted to care and strolled by unnoticed to the bar and ordered a drink. The bartender looked him over. He stooped up close and said, ‘You ain’t from around here, are you son?’

‘Uh, no,’ said Darian, ‘I’m just passing through.’

‘Well,’ said the bartender, ‘They don’t take too kindly to strangers ’round here. If I were you, I’d be passing through quick. I’d hate to see a boy like you get hurt or killed for no good reason.’

‘Thanks, I think I’ll do alright,’ said Darian.

‘Well, I’ll keep my eye out for you, son.’ replied the bartender and he went back to doing the dishes.

But despite the warnings he received from both the bartender and the clerk, Darian stayed for three drinks and, so far, hadn’t received any trouble. But no sooner had the bartender left, presumably to use the restroom, a grizzled looking, hunched-over man got up from the table, hobbled over to Darian’s barstool and snatched the rucksack from the adjacent stool where Darian had placed it.

‘Oy, what you got here?’ he snarled in an Anician accent.

‘Oh, th-that?’ stuttered Darian, taken aback, ‘that’s nothing.’ He reached out his hand to take the rucksack back, but the grizzled man pulled the bag further away.

‘Oy, if it’s nothing,’ he snarled, ‘I s’pose you wouldn’t mind if I had a look-see.’ and proceeded to undo the string tie on the rucksack as he glared at Darian with a toothless grin. Darian felt beads of sweat trickle down his forehead worrying about what would happen to him if these ruffians discovered what he was carrying. He put his hand in his jacket, fingering the plasma pistol, but the movement didn’t go unnoticed by the hunched over man.

‘Oy, are you lookin’ to start somethin’, boy?’ he snarled.

‘I’m not looking for any trouble, sir,’ said Darian, still fingering the pistol, ‘I just want to drink in peace.’

‘Oy, tha’s too bad, trouble’s all we got in this town. Ain’t that right boys?’ said the grizzled man beckoning his friends at the table. The other three ruffians stood up, grunted their agreement, and the whole gang of them erupted into cruel

laughter. By now, Darian was in sheer panic. He pulled out his pistol and shouted, 'HAND OVER THE BAG, NOW! YOU GREASY SON-OF-A-BITCH!'

Everyone stopped laughing and the grizzled man put down the rucksack and sneered, 'Oy, you've jest made your last bad move, sonny boy.'

Quickly, the grizzled man reached to draw his own pistol as did the other three ruffians. But instinct gripped Darian like a flash, and in a hail of white plasma bolts he managed to shoot all four of them. The bartender, hearing the commotion, ran out from the restroom with a rifle in his arms. Darian didn't stop to ask where he got the gun but shot that man too, right between the eyes.

When it was all over, with five men lying dead or dying all over the bar, Darian stood panting in a state of shock. Growing up in the village he had gone on plenty of hunting expeditions and he knew he wasn't a bad shot, but this time, by all rights, he should have been dead. It was only by sheer luck that he shot all five men without receiving so much as a scratch himself.

Just then, the clerk he talked to earlier burst through the door and Darian was jolted out of his reverie.

'HOLY HELL!!' shouted the clerk when he saw the bodies strewn across the bar, 'What the flyin' hell is goin' on here!?' Darian, still in a state of shock and panic, turned and pointed the pistol at the man's head.

'GET THE FUCK DOWN!' he shouted. When the frightened clerk didn't immediately reply, Darian fired a shot at the roof. 'NOW!' The man did as he was told and a familiar voice issued from the rucksack in its usual robotic monotone.

'We must leave now, Darian. We must leave quick.' Darian nodded and picked up the rucksack with one hand, his other hand still pointing the pistol at the clerk, now lying on the floor with his hands on his head. He continued pointing the pistol as he scuttled out through the door and into his truck. After peeling out of that town, Darian and his pickled head drove for another six hours. When he pulled down a side road to finally get some rest, Thoriam had shrunk to half a disc and the sun was rising in the east.

'You have gravely erred, Darian.' said Alaliaq in his robotic monotone, 'You had best hope the authorities do not find us.'

'I know,' said Darian, 'I will not disobey you again.'

'You had best not. If they find us, boy, I will not achieve my goal and you will be in a far more sorry state than when you started.' Darian knew this to be true and he wept until he fell asleep. It seem as though nothing would ever go right for him.

When he awoke, Darian judged by the sun and by the disc of Thoriam that it was halfway into the first circad of the long-day. He pulled back onto the highway and drove for another twelve hours, through the pinewood forests of Anicia, across the Lyonas River and into the fertile farmlands of Mesomara, following the directions given to him by Alaliaq. Early on, he stopped at a small town to buy food and water for the road, but when he stopped to sleep at the end of the circad, he once again pulled down a side road and slept in the truck. Fugitive as he was, he would not risk any more inns. He awoke once more and drove for another twelve hours, across nearly all of Mesomara. When he pulled aside again to sleep, the sun was high in the sky and Thoriam was once again showing its dark side to its windy moon as it did every long-day at mid-day on this part of Epaphus.

After waking on the third circad, the great, orange planet was growing back into a thin crescent, and Darian and his jarred head crossed the Palfrat River, out of the lands of Mesomara and into the equatorial desert. And after driving for ten hours, their truck broke down just outside the town of Carralac, notable only as a small way-station along the railway that joined the east and west coasts of Epaphus' one continent.

Try as he might, Darian could not get the old hunk of rust started again and fell down to his knees and despaired.

'Alaliaq. Master.' he moaned, 'What are we to do? I have failed you. Our truck is dead, we are nearly out of water and we will never make it to Arufara.'

'Boy, you fret too much,' intoned the impatient head-in-a-jar, 'Water you will find in Carralac and the ruins of Arufara are only thirty miles distant. Look, you can see them from here.' And sure enough, on the horizon, shimmering in the haze of the desert heat, Darian could see the towers of that ancient city. He sighed and stood up.

'Yes, master, I will take there.' he said, and picked up the jar and pressed on foot.

As he walked across the desert, Darian was reminded of the morning he first set out from Naham with his jar and its macabre talking head. Only a long-day ago, but it seemed more like a year. The northern shrublands were cool and temperate though, but here the desert sun beat down cruelly. Then again, he made that first walk without any supplies and now, with the satchel of money he found in the old rancher's truck, he was able to buy all the food and water he needed for his trek.

For five hours he trudged on until, finally, he found himself walking past the foundations of ancient buildings. But the towers were still far away. Indeed,

Arufara was a massive city, larger than any on Epaphus in Darian's day, and before completing the last leg of his journey, Darian decided to rest under the shade of an ancient wall.

When he woke up, the sun was beginning to sink low and Thoriam had grown once more into an orange crescent. For eleven hours he walked through the ruins of that ancient city, sand blowing through the ancient streets, eroding the remains of structures that must once have been magnificent, and Darian wondered how such a mighty city could fall into such ruin. But Alaliaq guided him on, speaking as always in that computery monotone, until finally they arrived at a cliff on the edge of the ruins overlooking a great expanse of pure whiteness - the Great Salt Desert of Sitnalta.

'It was once a sea, you know.' intoned Alaliaq, 'And Arufara was a resplendent city. As stately and rich as any in the universe. But time changes all things. The sea dried up and the great city fell into ruin. For forty thousand years I have been imprisoned on this wretched world. But even when I first arrived here, forty thousand years ago, the sea was already dry and the ruins of Arufara were already ancient beyond memory. Below the cliff, boy, there we will find what we are searching for.'

Darian took the jarred head and shimmied down a steep slope to the former shore of what was once the Sitnalta Sea and walked along the dried shore until he came upon the entrance of a cave on the side of the cliff. The cave appeared to be the ruins of an ancient drainage pipe as it was circular in shape.

'There.' intoned Alaliaq, and Darian entered.

The cave was large enough for Darian to walk upright and he was guided along by the beam of a flashlight he had bought in Carralac. He followed the cave for a few hundred yards before he came upon a heap of rocks where it had collapsed many centuries earlier. At the top of the heap there was an opening dug out of the rocks barely large enough for a man to crawl through. Indeed, it was difficult for Darian to crawl through the hole with his head-in-a-jar, but he managed, and on the other side the cave opened up into a cavernous chamber littered, he was disturbed to see, with human bones. Aside from these ominous bones, the floor of the chamber had metal tracks running across the ground and it appeared to be the remains of a tunnel built for an underground train. At either end, the roof had collapsed in heaps of rocks and the only way forward that he could see was a hallway that opened up in the wall on the other side. He crossed the tracks, taking care not to step on any of the human remains, and as he entered the hall he

came across what could only have been their killer.

The robot looked to have been destroyed years ago, its head, arms and torso sprawled across the floor, its legs crushed and buried in a heap of rocks where a portion of the wall had collapsed. But judging by the size of it, it would have stood over twelve feet high in its active life. As Darian crept by it, he was startled half to death and almost dropped Alaliaq for the intense fear that jolted through him as its eyes lit up and the inhumanly large robotic hand started to move and drag itself towards him.

‘Waeko...’ it said in a robotic monotone much more screeching and abrasive than Alaliaq’s, ‘Waeko...’ it repeated, ‘...you must not enter...’ Darian screamed and pulled out his plasma pistol and shot the mechanical giant in the face, repeatedly, until the pistol’s charge ran out and the trigger went “click”. He threw the gun aside and let out a breath. He swore he almost had a heart attack, but as he calmed down he had to ask Alaliaq, ‘Why did he say “Waeko”?’

‘Boy, you shouldn’t be so curious,’ replied the pickled head, ‘but where is it you think the foolish, old doctor found me?’ Darian stood silent. He never knew. ‘But we must continue on, boy.’ continued Alaliaq, ‘We must finish what the foolish doctor began.’ And so, they pressed forward.

The hall continued for about another two hundred yards and at the end of it, they came upon what looked to be a sarcophagus of some sorts, apparently excavated from another heap of fallen rocks. Beside the sarcophagus sat a small chest. The chest had already been opened and was empty, but the sarcophagus remained closed.

‘There.’ intoned Alaliaq, ‘We have found what we have come for.’

‘What is it?’ whispered Darian, almost too nervous to speak out loud. ‘This is my brother.’ answered the jarred head, ‘It is he who will put me back in power and bring *you* glory beyond your wildest imaginings. Set me in that terminal, boy.’

In the side of the sarcophagus was a rectangular slot just large enough to fit Alaliaq’s jar and Darian dutifully did as he was told and set him in there. The pale head inside the jar closed its eyes and, almost immediately, a humming noise issued from the sarcophagus as tiny little lights lit up across it. Then, the top of the sarcophagus slowly opened with a high-pitched mechanical whirring revealing inside it a pale body lying on its back covered from head to toe with frost. The body was that of a man, tall and young-looking with long black-hair. What looked like defibrillators were attached to his heart and side and a mask covered his mouth and nose. A deep red glow filled the sarcophagus and, slowly, the body warmed

until all the frost had melted into drops of water and color returned to the pale flesh. Then, pulses surges through the defibrillators and air was pumped through the mask into the man's lungs.

This process continued for what seemed to Darian to be an eternity until finally, the man's eyes opened and he started coughing under his mask. As Darian watched, the man removed the mask and slowly sat up, turned his head and stared straight at him.

'Where am I?' he demanded, 'What year is it?'

'Uh...it's...' mumbled Darian, too shocked to speak. Alaliaq opened his eyes.

'We are on the moon Epaphus, my brother Alalium,' he said in his icy monotone, 'You have been frozen for over twenty-six thousand Earth years.' The tall, black-haired man climbed out of the sarcophagus, stood up and flexed his lean muscles. He turned around and pulled Alaliaq's jarred head out of the terminal.

'Alaliaq,' he said, 'Look at you, without that robotic body of yours you're nothing but a pathetic head. Tell me, does our brother Alaliar still sit the throne of the Almighty King?'

'I am afraid it is so,' intoned Alaliaq, 'our traitor brother still reigns on Earth. But together, me and you can have our revenge.'

'Yes...' said Alalium with a grimace, 'but not together.' and he threw the jar on the ground, glass and slimy, green fluid flying in all directions. Darian was so shocked he dropped his flashlight. Alalium looked at him, stepped forward and pressed a finger into his chest so hard Darian thought it would burst through his ribs.

'You. I need your clothes.' he said. Indeed, the tall, black-haired man was naked and Darian, fearing for his life now, did as he was told. After the man had dressed, he stood up and, without looking, cracked Darian across the side of the head with the back of his fist. Everything went black.

When Darian came to, all around him was pitch black. He had no way of telling if his flashlight had burnt out or whether it was stolen by Alalium. He was naked now, naked and cold. The man who was to bring him glory and put Alaliaq back in power had betrayed them both and Darian felt more helpless and hopeless than he ever had in his life. And he cried out loud, wailing like a toddler. Just then, interrupting his sobbing session, a voice spoke in that familiar robotic monotone.

'You petty little boy,' it said, 'all you ever do is cry and complain.' Darian sat up and stopped crying.

'Alaliaq!' he said, 'You're alive!'

‘Of course I’m alive,’ intoned the pale head.

‘B-but he smashed your jar...’ stuttered Darian.

‘That cryonic fluid prevents my flesh from rotting, but I can survive for a time without it.’ he paused, ‘I should have known Alalium would betray me, he is the traitor’s twin after all.’ Darian sat puzzled.

‘But if your brother is also immortal like Doctor Waeko taught me, than why is it that you’re a head-in-a-jar and he is not?’

‘Ha!’ said Alaliaq, ‘That is because my father and brothers are *natural* immortals and I was a mere mortal who had to have his brain preserved in cryonic fluid in order to live forever. But this is of no concern to you. Come, let us leave here. If we make haste, we might yet stop him.’

‘But we don’t even know where he’s going,’ complained Darian.

‘Ah, but we do.’ said Alaliaq, ‘He is going back to Earth. And there is only one spaceport on Epaphus - Namsatin.’

‘But even if I do find him,’ cried Darian, ‘how could we hope to stop him? He’ll just overpower us again.’

‘Complaining yet again, petty boy.’ intoned the head-in-a-jar, ‘If you want glory you will do as I say, otherwise you will never be anything more than a pathetic orphan boy from Earth.’

Darian quietly nodded and reached out and picked up Alaliaq, no longer a glass jar in his arms but now a slimy naked head. He made his way slowly out of the cavern, groping his way along the walls and feeling the ground carefully with his feet. When he had finally made his way back out onto the beach of the dry sea, night had fallen completely on his part of Epaphus. The stars were out and twinkling, and the great red bulk of Thoriam shined majestically in the sky casting an orange glow hauntingly across the great flat expanse of the dried up sea. Arcas and Hephaestus, two of Epaphus’ sister moons, sat lazily beside Thoriam, dwarfed by the great, orange disc of the gas giant, and Darian, for the first time in years, marveled at the sight. He also thanked god that it was, in fact, night-time. Naked as he was and with no water, he doubted he could survive the desert crossing in the blazing heat of day. And so, he carried on, through the ruined city and across the desert. For sixteen hours he trudged on throughout the long Epaphian night. When he came to Carralac he stopped only to take a good long drink of water from the public fountain at the train station and continued till he got back to his broken down truck. He put Alaliaq’s slimy head into the rucksack and collapsed in the front seat, passing out nearly immediately.

When he woke up, the sun was rising in the east and Thoriam had shrunk to

half a disc. A strange bearded man in a wide brimmed hat was prodding him.

‘Son, son,’ he said as Darian opened his eyes, ‘are you alright? What happened?’

‘My truck broke down,’ mumbled Darian, ‘I got robbed.’

‘Do you have any money?’ asked the man.

‘No,’ said Darian, ‘they took my satchel. I was heading to Namsatin. I - I got a job there.’ he lied.

‘Don’t you worry son,’ said the kind man, ‘I can’t do much, but I can clothe you, feed you, and send you on your way to Namsatin if you like.’

‘I would like that very much,’ said Darian, ‘Thank you, good sir. How could I ever repay you?’

The man smiled. He said, ‘Standing well in the Lord’s eyes is all the payment I need.’ He took off his outer cloak and handed it to Darian. ‘Come, next train to Namsatin leaves in two hours. Best get you to the station.’ Darian put the cloak on, grabbed the rucksack, and followed the kind man to the train station.

When they got to there, the kind man bought Darian some meat-on-bread from the station restaurant and a ticket to Namsatin. When the train came, he told him farewell and god bless. Darian thanked him again and boarded the train and sat down.

The train ride lasted for the better part of the long day, stopping at small towns along the way. They crossed the desert and passed through the land of Lomasia along the shores of its Dying Seas. They went up along the Corriander River and through the Corriander Pass crossing the Anzal Mountains and then down along the Niadna River and on into the city of Namsatin itself.

The train ride was peaceful for Darian and he spent most of it staring out at the passing landscape reflecting on his adventure and on his life. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized that he didn’t care if they caught the tall, black-haired immortal or not. All his life, he realized, he was a prisoner of sorts - first at the orphanage in Namsatin, than with the Peitho Kephale in Naham, and now, now that he was free of all of that he found himself doing the bidding of someone who didn’t even have arms to restrain him, someone who needed *him* to carry it around like a dead rock. And by the time the train rolled into the city he had made up his mind. He *would* get a job in Namsatin. Maybe he could meet a girl, get married, have a family. No one needed to know who he was or that he was an orphan. When the train stops, Darian decided, he would leave the rucksack on the seat. Let that jarred head find somebody else to do its bidding, he was free now.

When the train pulled into the station at Namsatin it was dusk, and the sun cast a deep red light across Namsatin Bay, reflecting off the bottoms of low hanging clouds. Darian gave a heavy sigh and leaned over to whisper into his

rucksack.

‘I’m sorry Alaliaq, but I’m afraid I must leave you here. I realized I don’t need glory. I’m happy enough to be free.’ and as he got up to get off the train the robotic monotone voice of Alaliaq issued from the rucksack.

‘You will regret this, Earth boy.’ it said. But, Darian ignored it and walked on. Other passengers around him heard it too, and whispered amongst themselves. But Darian ignored this as well. As he stepped off the train he breathed a long, happy sigh. He walked over to the end of the platform where there commanded a breathtaking view of the sun setting over the bay, a thousand little suns glistening off the waves. He took in the view and smiled the widest smile he ever smiled in his life.

Just then a rough hand pushed him against the railing and threw his hands into cuffs behind his back.

‘You’re under arrest for the murders of five men in Arahaz.’ hoarsely shouted the man behind his back. ‘Your grotesque, little friend told us everything.’

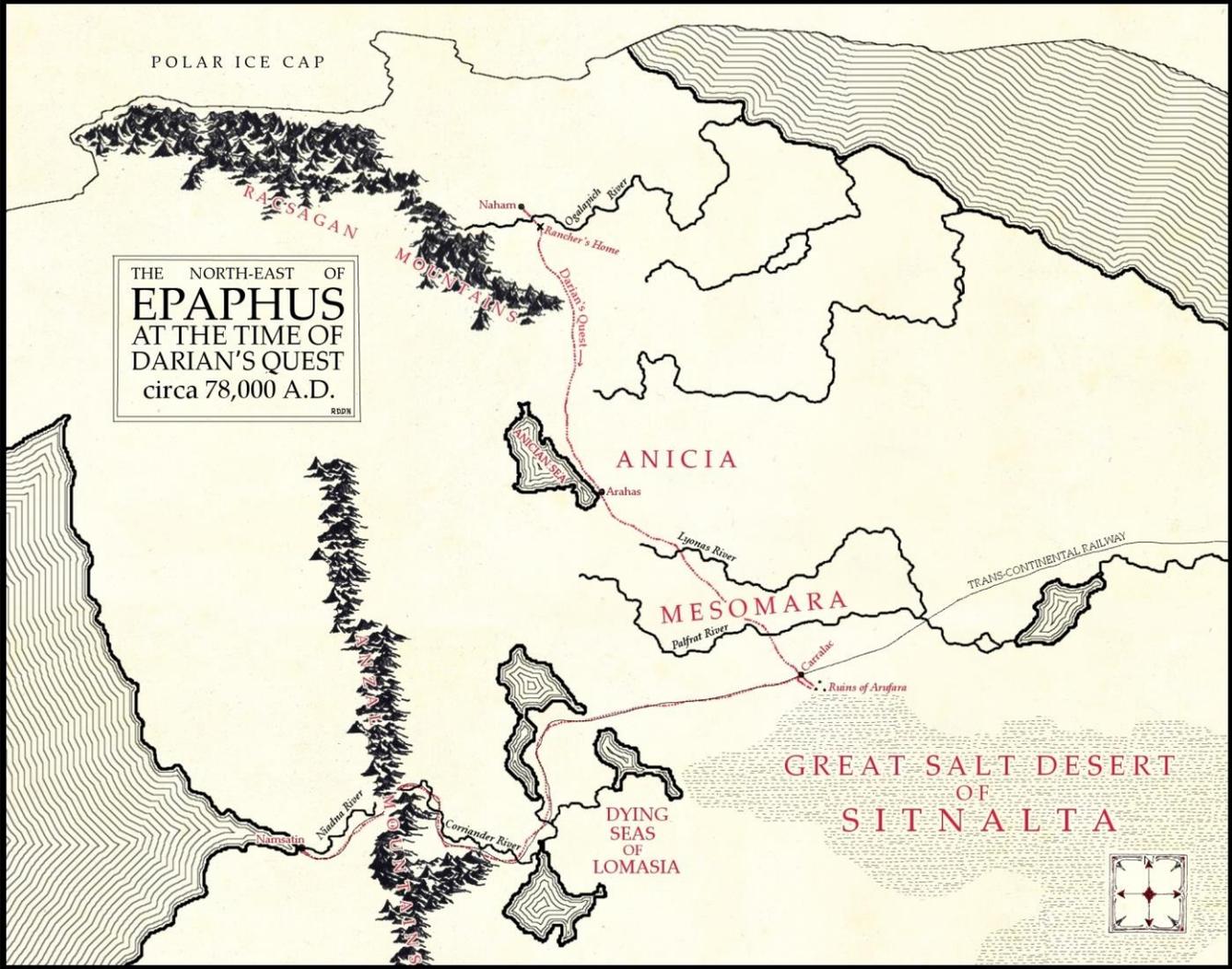
‘No, no - I didn’t mean to, I couldn’t help it, they were-’ cried Darian, struggling against the handcuffs.

‘You have the right to remain silent.’ yelled the man. He escorted Darian off the platform and into the back of a police van.

‘You’re spending the rest of your life behind bars, creep.’ he said as he slammed the doors shut.

And indeed, Darian spent the rest of his life in jail, and he never found out what happened to Alalium or Alaliaq. And every day he wondered, and every night he cried.

THE END



“Darian’s Head”

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