

KHULUTATH : A BRIEF HISTORY

He stopped at the crest of a small hill overlooking the village. Several small cook fires dotted the open area below. Just beyond the edge of the most distant blaze, the ruins of ancient buildings that once were part of the city of Jhaafa could barely be seen in the flickering glow. The acrid odor of burning lizard dung mixed with the smell of sizzling sand viper wafted across the cool evening air.

Pausing for a few moments, he adjusted the hood of his robe, adjusted the grip on his staff and carefully made his way down the hill toward the nearest fire. As he descended he could hear a mix of laughter and quiet, but pleasant conversation. "Ahhh, happiness" he thought to himself, "An all too precious thing in these times, tonight may turn out to be pleasant after all." He made no effort to disguise his approach knowing all to well that an unwelcomed surprise could cost him dearly.

As he reached the base of the hill a scattering of gravel shifted off to his left and a deep, gravelly voice called out, "That is far enough, who is it that travels unannounced in the night?"

He turned and addressed the burly Neksuta warrior whose obsidian tipped spear was poised dangerously close to his heart. "Surely the mighty Juu-Kat is not afraid of a frail, old wanderer?"

"Ancient One?" the warrior replied cautiously.

"Yes my friend, it is I. May I share your fire this night?"

"Of course, we would be most honored. Where have you been, we've not seen you for nearly 20 darks of the moon?"

"I have travelled far and seen many things Juu-Kat. Things of wonder and others terrible beyond imagination, and I have searched."

"Searched? Searched for what Ancient One?" Juu-kat responded.

"Answers my young friend, answers to my many questions, but for every answer, I found that many more questions. Now, let us sit at the fire, my bones are chilled and I would rest and relax for a time."

"This way Ancient One," said Juu-Kat offering his arm to his long-time friend and mentor.

Upon hearing of the arrival the Ancient One, the entire village gathered around one of the more central cook fires. As during most of his visits the Ancient One provided the latest news and many fantastic stories of days long past. More dung had been heaped on the fire and the flames now rose several feet into the growing chill of the night. The Ancient One sat close to the fire, his hands held out to the flames seeming to almost absorb them. Juu-Kat sat to his right gnawing on the remnants of his meal. To his left sat a small group of Neksuta younglings, as it was the Ancient One's habit to surround himself with the young during his story telling.

The Ancient one sat back, folding his hands into the sleeves of his dusty robes. "Now then, what tale would you hear this night?"

Many voices broke out, both young and old calling for their various favorites. After a time Juu-Kat held up his hands for quiet, "I usually don't ask for any stories or tales myself, but for once I think I will take advantage of being chief and request one."

"And what would that be Juu-Kat?" the Ancient One queried, his sand colored eyes refelcting the firelight.

The Neksuta chief cleared his throat, "I would hear of how this land came to be as it is, because it is my belief that it was once much different." This brought on more discussion and again Juu-Kat had to raise his hands to quiet everyone.

"In that you would be right, my friend," the Ancient One replied, "Very well then, let me tell the tale of the breaking of the world, and the fall of the old races..."

"Ages ago the world was much different than it is now. The Great Dust Sea was once a vast area covered with water known as the Sea of Ta-Faa." Several exclamations of surprise and disbelief followed this statement and the Ancient One waited patiently until the noise subsided before continuing. "The land now claimed by the tribes was known as the Province of Jhaafa, and was a part of a large kingdom ruled by men. At this time the tribes were much more scattered than they are now, forced to inhabit the outlying reaches of the realms of man, dwarf and elf, as we were deemed unworthy to share in their successes. This was in some ways fortunate for the tribes as it prepared them for what was to come later."

"Jhaafa was a thriving land, its people prosperous and wealthy. But as is ever the case with man-kind, they became greedy. Always expanding, always wanting more, never were they happy with what they currently had. In time the leaders of Jhafaa, in order to satiate their ever-growing greed and desire for more, were forced to war with neighboring lands. These wars grew to encompass all the nearby lands and eventually even the tribes were embroiled in Jhaafa's wars. At first we fought to defend our homes, but the sorcery wielded by the humans and their allies was too much and the tribes were forced to submit and became merely another cog in the great war-machine of Jhaafa."

"For hundreds and hundreds of moons the wars raged, neither side gaining any real advantage. But each was willing to escalate its atrocities as it discovered new and more powerful ways to wage war. Wizards and sorcerers cast more and more powerful magic against their enemies, until the very land cried out for relief to those who could hear its pleas."

"The battles continued, destroying the land, devastating anything caught in their path. Ultimately one side unleashed sorcery so powerful that it tore the very land apart and caused the skies to burn. Those who could flee did so, the rest were slain. Fortunately for the tribes at that time they were far away from the center of the cataclysm and were able to escape the worst of the devastation. Lakes and rivers dried up and disappeared, mountains and hills crumbled, forests disappeared in great raging infernos that burned for weeks, the Sea of Ta-Faa eventually drained away into a great rent in the sea bed we now call the Black Rift."

"For those of the tribes that survived times were very bad, there was little water other than that found in various caves, and nearly all but the strongest were lost. Some tribes disappeared altogether; others fled with the remaining humans to far away lands never to be seen again. For moons beyond counting the sky continued to burn, the land continued to wither and die and yet the tribes somehow survived."

The Ancient One paused, took a small sip of his meager drink and continued. "In time, the sky stopped burning and the sun shone brightly once again. But oh how the land had changed. The once rich lands of Jhaafa were as they appear now; dry, desolate, and seemingly devoid of life. But life has an amazing capacity for adapting. As the tribes adapted to their changing surroundings so to did the plants and animals that remained. Gone were the great herds of creatures known as horses, cows, and sheep. Now we have sun lizards, sand vipers and the great scorpions. Gone were the great trees once known as oak, maple and ash, replaced by needle leaves, dust vines, and rock cactus. Ruins existed where once stood the great cities of men and the other old races. Only the tribes remained of those deemed as 'civilized races', not only did we survive, but we began flourish to some extent."

"It has been a long, long time since the breaking of the world, and there are few who have knowledge of how the world once was. But the tribes have survived, adapted and our life, though difficult at times can be both rewarding and fulfilling. In time we may even discover some of the wonders that were lost."

One of the younglings sitting at the feet of the Ancient One tugged lightly on the hem of his robe. "Yes little one?" the Ancient one responded, taking in the wide-eyed expression on the young face with much enjoyment.

"But Ancient One, how is it that you know all these things to be true?"

The Ancient One paused, and looked about the gathering before answering. He returned his gaze to the youngling and replied, "How do I know these things? I know because I was there."

With that statement the Ancient One looked up at the clear night sky and those who were close enough stood in awe as they could see tears running down his cheeks and heard him whisper to the night. "Gods above, I saw it all..."