

The Hill at Arben Ma

Philip Harker

1859 Words

Dialon, Tiffany, and Dyer had been standing in the rain for what felt like forever. Arben Ma, the desolate knoll covered in grass and wildflowers, stood some one hundred feet away from the treeline. As such, the three of them were getting pelted with raindrops as hard as pebbles, with no canopy cover to speak of.

Dyer spoke finally, breaking his five minute silence as he stood hunched over the stone tablet. "It says... 'This Place is a Message.'"

"Thanks. We knew that part," said Tiffany.

Dyer was a self-proclaimed "language expert". Given his lack of social skills, annoyingly high-pitched voice, and apparent inability to walk without limping, this expertise was the only qualification that had earned Dialon's trust to bring him along to Arben Ma. For Tiffany, though, this wasn't enough for her patience.

Dialon on the other hand was far too fixated on his surroundings to pay much attention to their ex-lover's quarrel. Arben Ma was a hill some fifteen kilometres from their home village of Kindle. At the very top of the hill was a small stone building, perfectly cubic in shape, and dotting the hillscape were a series of large circular stone statues too precise to have been cut naturally.

"Guys, shut up," said Dialon, raising his hand. "Listen."

From the stone circles came a noise— a sudden sharp whistling, unappealing as anything, bouncing off of the edges of the hill and splitting into his ears. He winced, but inside Dialon was delighted.

"So it's true," said Dialon. "The stones of Arben Ma. They sing."

"Hardly a laudable performance," said Tiffany, rolling her eyes. "Listen, Dialon, I'm glad you're excited to be here and everything, but it doesn't look like Dyer knows what he's doing."

"Wait just a second—" Dyer tried to interrupt, but Dialon talked over him.

"There's more text in the hut," said Dialon. "Maybe he'll understand some of the languages up there."

It was a short climb up to the hut at the top of the hill, and it was a welcome break from the rain. Dialon had been in here once before, on his brief trip to Arben Ma with Tiffany. Dialon had pretty much no reading skills at the time, his only knowledge of his native script of T'Kon coming from the writings on shipments of fabric that his father received from villages neighbouring Kindle. The phrase "This Place is a

Message” was inscribed both on the standing stones that Dyer had read from, as well as in a few places inside of the building.

Dyer walked to one of the inscribed walls, and with a groan, he sat down, resting his bad leg. In addition to the many walls of inscriptions, there were large diagrams of the hill at Arben Ma, detailing some complex structures that were either fictitious or long since swept away.

“This is interesting,” said Dyer. “A lot of this isn’t in T’Kon.”

“You’re kidding,” said an exasperated Dialon. “So you can’t read it?”

“Relax.” Dyer ran his finger over the bottom inscriptions. “This part here is in T’Kon. But it’s a translation of this,” he said, moving his hand up the wall. “This is Cenelin.”

Dialon had an anecdotal knowledge of what Cenelin was. To his knowledge, it was an ancient language still spoken in the faraway ocean cities, a language descended from an even older language called Arabic.

“How do you know any of this?” said Tiffany.

Dyer shrugged. “I’ve spent most of my life off of my feet. I’ve had more than enough time to read every book in Kindle, even the old Cenelin ones.”

Tiffany seemed satisfied by that answer. Dialon, on the other hand, wanted to know more.

“Well... are you gonna tell us what it says?”

“Hang on. This isn’t inscribed very well, it’s hard to read.”

Dialon stared at Dyer intensely in the silence as he struggled to read. Finally, Dyer spoke.

“This place is a message. It is part of a... a series of messages. It is very important for you to pay attention to and preserve this place.”

Tiffany frowned. “Why would they put so much work into this?”

“Maybe it’s got some spiritual value or something,” said Dialon. “Dyer, what else does it say?”

“That’s it,” said Dyer. “It looks like the Arabic part is longer. But I can’t read that. Wait... there’s something else in the Cenelin part.”

“Yes?”

“We were a powerful civilization. Sending you this message was extremely important to us. This message is a warning— a warning of great power.”

“Power?”

“I think it means power. Cenelin has some weird rules with nouns, they can mean different things in different contexts.”

Talk of grammar tended to go over Dialon's head, but his curiosity was greater than ever. "We've gotta keep looking," he said. "We have to find out what the message was."

Tiffany glanced out the open door of the hut, into the sheet of rainfall outside. "I don't know. I think we found what we came for. We figured out what Arben Ma is, didn't we? It's a holy site, a monument or something."

"But a monument for what, Tiffany?" Dialon paced back and forth across the floor of the hut. "Great power. Wouldn't the village appreciate it if we learned more?"

"If a so-called 'powerful civilization' felt a need to warn us about this 'power', I really don't think it's a good idea to go poking around."

"You're missing my point," said Dialon. "If we find out about the power, we'll be better prepared for it back home."

"He's right, you know," said Dyer, slowly standing up.

"Dyer, don't encourage him," said Tiffany.

"Oh, come on. There's got to be some more Cenelin or T'Kon around here somewhere."

Tiffany, who was increasingly losing her patience with Dialon (her patience with Dyer having been lost years ago), sighed in defeat. "Fine. But we *cannot* walk home in the dark. Make it quick, and if we don't find something soon, we turn back."

Dialon and Dyer quickly agreed, and, splitting up, the three of them set back out into the rain to search for more clues.

Stumbling across the slopes of the steep hill, Dialon found it hard to concentrate on anything owing to the piercing noise of the circular stones and the ever-intensifying rainfall. After about ten minutes of aimless wandering, he called back in the approximate direction he last saw Dyer. "See anything yet?"

He didn't get a response. In Dyer's defence, he probably couldn't hear a thing. Undeterred, Dialon continued.

And then he saw it. A tunnel poking out of Arben Ma, a few metres in diameter. This was it, thought Dialon. This was his clue.

He wasted no time in stumbling down to the entrance. The interior was dark, but Dialon found himself able to see somewhat. The tunnel fed deep into the tunnel, and he set out into the darkness.

It was warm in the tunnel, almost artificially so. Dialon kept his eyes open as he went further into the tunnel, searching for anything of interest as he wrenched the wetness out of his clothes. Slowly, the earth around the tunnel morphed into stone, and the warmth became more and more intense.

“Dialon!” called a voice from the entrance of the tunnel. The boy jumped, but after whipping his head around was relieved to see that it was Dyer limping towards him.

“Dyer,” said Dialon. “Where’s Tiffany?”

“I thought she was with you,” said Dyer. “She must have gone back to the hut.”

“Are you sure?”

“She wouldn’t leave without us.”

Dialon nodded. “This place is amazing,” he said. “I can’t tell how much further it goes.”

“This doesn’t look natural,” said Dyer. “Someone must have dug this.”

“Do you think it was recent?”

“Whoever dug this tunnel was chiselling into the stone. It can’t have been too long ago.”

“Grave robbery,” said Dialon, musing.

“Or just people curious about Arben Ma,” said Dyer.

The two of them continued to walk through the tunnel, and eventually it gave way to a far more man-made looking series of hallways. The halls were perfectly carved into the stone in an identical array.

“Check it out,” said Dyer. “More inscriptions!” sure enough, on the farthest hallway were more carvings. “It’s the same stuff... ‘This place is a message, part of a series of messages, that kind of thing... oh, hang on.’”

“What?”

“More Cenelin.” Dyer squinted. “We created a great power. This place is considered power and is repulsive to us. The power is present in your time as it is in ours.”

“This place is... ‘considered’ power?” said Dialon, puzzled.

“It’s hard for me to understand,” said a frustrated Dyer. “I don’t know the full context here. It’s a translation. And fuck, is it hot in here or is it just me?” Dyer was sweating, his face going red.

“Maybe it’s the ‘power’,” said Dialon with a chuckle.

“Okay, this place is starting to freak me out,” said Dyer. “Let’s just go.”

“Oh, come on! There has to be more stuff here. We can’t turn back now.”

Reluctantly, Dyer caved, following Dialon further into the tunnel. As they walked, they encountered more inscriptions, some of them Dyer could read, others he couldn’t.

“The power is present in this place only if it is disturbed,” said Dyer as he read one. “This place is not a place of honor. Nothing of value is buried here.”

“There has to be something,” said Dialon, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Just a bit further, then we turn back.”

It was darker and hotter with every step that Dialon took. But he was determined to find something. Anything.

The tunnel finally led into a large chamber, lined with stone bricks and containing hundreds of steel cylinders. Cautiously, Dialon advanced.

“Dialon...” said Dyer behind him. “We...”

“Hold on,” said Dialon. “We have to find the power. It’s here somewhere. We’re so close.”

He entered the chamber, his breathing getting harder and harder, eyeing the many cylinders. He had to figure out what the power was. He couldn’t bear to go back to Kindle empty handed, not knowing the truth about the Hill at Arben Ma. The curiosity had dominated his mind for too long.

“TIFFANY!” screamed Dyer. Suddenly, Dialon turned around and saw Tiffany lying still on the stone ground, in a pool of her own vomit, her skin pale and yellowed. He sprinted over to her side and knelt down next to her. As he tried to shake her into consciousness, he looked up at the wall she lay next to. On it was an inscription in T’Kon, which Dialon could read.

This message is a warning. A warning of great danger. The danger was present in our time, as it is in yours.

Dialon gasped. “Dyer, you idiot... it doesn’t say power, it says danger. We... we need to get out of here!”

Dialon turned around, only to see Dyer on his hands and knees, his face red and his eyes leaking with blood. Dialon opened his mouth to speak, but his muscles betrayed him as his vision suddenly faded to black.