

## The Under-Sea Citadel of Nektos

In the middle of the Sapphyre Sea, nearly one thousand nautical miles to the northwest of Sunfell Island, where the twice-widowed King Vincenzo Paolo Dannatore II currently rules the ancient lands of Abalon and the Great Kingdom of Men, hangs a ghastly cloud of unnatural, swirling fog that stretches as far as the human eye can see. Though most men have learned to avoid these latitudes, many a vessel has attempted to venture into the nebulous void, if only to see what lay beyond. Though, of course, no sailor has ever returned from the voyage; save one.

His name was Ignatius Adelaide, a sailor hailing from a humble fishing village about half a day's journey to the south of Delphinsport, and legend has it that he was so blessed (perhaps, even loved) by the archaic Sea Goddess, Deasura, that he was gifted with supernatural command over the oceans. Two centuries prior to this writing, he took a small caravel and four of his best men into the abhorrent fog. Adelaide's men were never seen again, nor would he speak of what fate befell them. But Adelaide himself returned, unscathed, after ten years at sea.

From his personal account, we know that for most of that time, he lived among the mythical Merfolk of the Sapphyre Sea – or rather, he believes he did, since no evidence of the existence of such people has ever been found. Adelaide claims that after learning of his

devotion to the Sea Goddess, Deasura, the Merfolk spared his life, and he was allowed to live among them, which he did for many years, until he grew homesick for land. At that point, Adelaide claims, he escaped the Under-Sea Citadel and returned home.

What follows is a brief excerpt from his personal account of the legendary voyage into the Mist and the ancient civilization he found there:

“... I thank Deasura, Queen of All Seas, for the precious gifts she has bestowed upon me. Indeed, were it not for her blessing, I would most assuredly be drowned, one simple man lost among countless others, doomed to the crushing depths for all eternity. Submerged were we, yet I found my lungs to be operating with as much strength and purpose as they would were I standing on land. I was alive and living, and never more thankful of that was I than at that moment.

“The natives did not know what to make of me, nor I of them. I believe they would have simply ended my life right then, armed as they were with spears and daggers, which appeared to be made from rock, shell, and even bone. But my survival appeared to impressed them, and so down to the depths did they take me to see their king, that he might decide what was to become of me.

“My captors, it seemed, were the ever-fabled Merfolk of the Sapphyre Sea. Indeed, three of them there were: two males and one female. When first I beheld them, I thought I had been overcome by a dream, for never had I seen creatures of such beauty, grace, and magnificence. From head to waist, the Merfolk are paragons of human anatomy, with the exceptions of slightly pointed ears and large, bright eyes. Yet below the waist, rather than a pair of legs and feet, there

exists a single, muscular tail, similar to that of a fish. The female was the only one of their party to be clothed, and she wore an armor fashioned from some metal I could not recognize. Her hair and tail were both crimson, and her bright eyes shone like rubies. The two mermen were so alike in appearance that I could only assume them to identical twins. Both were bare-chested, though one wore a belt woven from what appeared to be seaweed around his waist for his dagger. So blue were their short hair and scaled tails that they seemed to melt into the water around them. More than once I found myself gazing intently upon the midriff of one of them, if only to examine how seamlessly the skin turned to scales, bright and shimmering with every color under the sun. I would have been embarrassed at my own lack of manners, had they not been examining me with the same zeal.

“They relieved me of my cutlass and pistol, though I doubt the latter would have been much help under water. The mermaid approached with a makeshift rope, made of what seemed to be kelp and some other fiber I could not identify, and she bound my hands quite well. One of the mermen jabbed a finger at me, and then pointed down, to the black void below. I confess I felt a great deal of trepidation at this moment, for never does it do a man good to be unarmed and bound, and to swim into an abyss no less. Yet, I had no choice, and in any case, my curiosity prevailed.

“Down did they take me, deeper than any human had a right to be (again, I thank Deasura for her generous blessing). Indeed, so deep were we that the light of the sun became nothing but a miniscule pinpoint high above me. Before long, it was gone altogether, and darkness crushed in on me from all sides. Were it not for the powerful fluttering of my captors’ tails pulsing on either side of me, and the pulling of my hands by the rope, I most assuredly would have been lost in that abyss, for there was no way to know which direction would take me toward the surface.

“Yet as soon as the last sunbeam was lost, a new point of light appeared in the distance; tiny at first, it grew rapidly, with each kick and flutter. When first I saw the source of the light, it was beyond my comprehension. My initial instinct told me that I had taken leave of my senses, and what lay before me was an apparition not of this world. Yet I had not, and what I saw was as clear then as this parchment is to me now.

“The blackness receded, and, indeed, disappeared altogether. I recall looking up and seeing the light of the sun, as if we were no more than twenty meters below the water’s surface. As awed as I was at this feat of magic – for certain, there was no other worldly explanation for this occurrence – it was nothing compared to the sight that lay before me.

“It was a city, indeed, a city as vast as Sunfell, but infinitely more breathtaking. I could not say from where exactly the light emanated – it reflected from the sun’s rays, perhaps? – but the very stones and buildings seemed to glow with a soft, white light that engulfed everything as far as I could see. The landscape was foreign to me, like nothing I had ever seen before. Were I to compare it to a place above the water, I would say it was reminiscent of the desert hills of the distant shores of Ellusia, rolling and winding every which way. Occasionally, much like a summer’s breeze, a brief current would sweep through, billowing up sand and small pebbles. Coral and kelp and all manner of aquatic vegetation, many of which were unfamiliar to me, sprouted up from the seabed. Nestled among the dunes were dwellings; some, those which laid on the outskirts, were as humble as huts made of coral or rocks, and others, these toward the center, were much more extravagant, with columns and flourishes carved into the walls and decorative coral gardens surrounding their plots. But none were so extraordinary as the structure that stood on the hill at the very center of it all.

“The city appeared to be positioned in a circle, circumventing the gigantic palace on the hill in the center. For certain, that building was a palace or castle of some kind; its sheer enormity convinced me of that at once. None but a king, among men or Merfolk, could be fit to live in such a place. It soon became clear to me that this was our destination.

“As we approached the city, I began to notice some of its inhabitants. More Merfolk appeared in all directions. Young merchildren swam to and fro, darting from one place to another with such speed that my eyes could barely follow them. The closer to the dwellings we swam, the more about them I noticed. Many of the details afforded me enormous insight on how the Merfolk lived. Indeed, it surprised me greatly to find that they, in many ways, are not unlike us humans.

“Those who lived on the outskirts were clearly the poorer folk. I saw one merman tending to a herd of sea-cows, which were grazing on a kelp-covered dune. Another was tilling a field sprouting with small, pink anemones. And yet another...”

(Adelaide then proceeds to describe various minutiae of Merfolk life that he encounters while being taken to the Citadel, starting with the lowest class and ending with the highest class. Fascinating as the subject may be, Adelaide digresses and becomes slightly long-winded in his descriptions. For the sake of efficiency, the aforementioned passages have been cut, taking us to the moment Adelaide enters the palace at the mercy of his captors.)

“... By now our foursome had attracted a following of a great many Merfolk, a large school indiscriminate of class or age, all swimming about behind us and whispering and pushing themselves out of the way in order to catch a glimpse of the two-legged prisoner. For certain, they were as intrigued by me as was I by them.

“The palace loomed before us. Up close, it was clear to my eye that the walls were made of enormous white bricks, each composed of a mixture of countless stones and shells which reflected the light of the sun in thousands of glittering sparkles. We approached the gate, which resembled an immense portcullis of the castles of old, fashioned out of some metal I could not identify, though it seemed to be the same metal that my captor wore in her armor. Two large mermen stood sentry, each with spears and armor forged with the same unfamiliar metal as the gate. The mermaid who held the rope that bound me -- I had come to decide that she was the leader of the party that found me -- had said not a single word to this point, but now she spoke to the sentries. This was not the Tongue of Man, yet I found that I could understand her words as clearly as if it were -- for certain, another gift from the venerable Deasura; I am forever grateful.

“‘Open the gates.’ She said this with the authority of a commander giving orders to her subordinates. The two sentries exchanged an uncomfortable glance. To my eyes, it was clear that they did not want to open the gates. Yet neither did they want to disobey my captor.

“One of them spoke up, ‘But my lady, the King--’

“‘I said, open the gates.’ The mermaid’s tone brooked no argument. ‘We are taking this human to the King. Go ahead and tell him of our arrival if you must.’

“The sentry eyed me with a great curiosity before signaling his compatriot to open the gate. Then he fluttered through ahead of us . And so, we proceeded through, leaving the

whispering crowd behind, the armored mermaid leading me along by the rope as a child would a young pup on a leash.

“The interior of the palace was nothing like what I had seen on the outside. After we had passed through the entrance courtyard, which was built of the same stone and shell bricks as the exterior and centered around a gargantuan statue of a mighty-looking merman, presumably their king, we entered a series of dark corridors. These corridors looked to have been carved out of the very walls that supported them. Unlike the exterior of the palace, these halls were made of Nightglass<sup>1</sup>, and they were lit by the occasional sconce that hung from the wall. At first glance, these sconces appeared to be holding torches, yet closer inspection revealed them to be holding tiny crystals that gave off a flickering blue light. As we swam through these glass halls, I beheld my distorted reflection gleaming back at me from the roughly carved walls.

“We passed many hallways that branched out from our path, and I tried desperately to glance down them in an attempt to see as much as I could. Indeed, so fascinated was I at this marvel of architecture and beauty that rather than recording the turns we were taking in my mind, in the event that I might have a chance to escape my captivity, I became quite lost. All that I could have said at that moment in reference to our whereabouts was that we were descending deeper into the sea. Several Merfolk passed us by, all of whom looked to be of a status befitting a resident of such a dwelling, and all of whom gazed upon me with the same intrigue as their less-privileged brethren outside the gate. I was just beginning to appreciate the enormity of this place – for certain, by this time I had swum quite a distance, much farther and longer than I ever had before, and my stamina was fast depleting – when our corridor opened up into an enormous cavern.

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<sup>1</sup> The “Nightglass” to which Adelaide refers has since come to be known as obsidian.

“The cavern was so vast in size that for certain over half – if, indeed, not all – of the fleet of Mitra could fit within its walls. Merfolk were darting in and out of several holes which lined the cavern from top to bottom, each a different hallway branching back into the labyrinth whence we had just emerged. More glowing sconces lined the carved walls, and huge columns of Nightglass supported the ceiling, which rose so high I had to crane my neck to examine it properly. The majority of the ceiling was open, allowing for a goodly amount of sunlight to enter and engulf the cavern, yet it was barred; a giant cage crisscrossed above us, causing the light to play intriguingly along the glassy walls. Though it was far above me, I felt secure in my assumption that the caged ceiling could easily allow a merman, or human, for that matter, through its bars, and I found myself curious as to what purpose these bars might serve.

“My mind did not linger too heavily on this thought; for certain, there was still so much for my mind to digest. Despite its immensity, this cavern was merely the atrium. In the center of the cavern rested a gigantic mass of Nightglass which resembled a palace in its own right, and in it were carved windows and railings and all sorts of adornments. I found myself reminded of a human heart, resting inside a man’s ribcage. Indeed, if this palace were a body, then those Nightglass corridors were the veins, and what lay before me was most assuredly the heart. Bright white light spilled out through the windows. One look was enough for me to infer that this was our destination, and that the King of the Merfolk lived inside.

“As we left the cavern behind and entered the inner palace, fatigue was setting heavily upon me. I had ceased to kick for some time now, so the mermaid dragged me, effortlessly, by the rope; my wrists chafed raw and burned in the salty water of the sea. We passed through a short series of corridors before we came to a set of double doors, guarded by two sentries, and which I estimated to be comparable to the height of three men. The doors were adorned with

carvings, and several of the blue light crystals were embedded into the stone. Try as I might to understand the nature of these carvings, only one was I able to understand. It was the centerpiece of the artist's work, and it was unmistakably the image of none other than my great Matron, the Goddess Deasura, Queen of All Seas.

“Upon seeing this favorable visage, I was revitalized enough to support myself, and I offered up a prayer of thanks that I had lived so long and well, and that I was ever blessed for all I had seen this day. The mermaid noticed my renewed vigor, exchanged a few glances with the twin mermen, and examined me with newfound curiosity. She said nothing, however, and proceeded to command the guards to open the door.

“We had, at last, come to the throne room. Of all the marvels that I had had the privilege of beholding to this point, none were so magnificent as this. The Nightglass ceiling was high and vaulted, much like the cathedrals found in Praetories across Abalon, and from it, huge chandeliers composed of hundreds of light crystals hung down. The floor, as well as the rows of Nightglass columns that lined either side of the great room, was decorated with more carvings, and, like the doors, incorporated several light crystals and shells in its patterns.

“In the wings of the hall stood more guards, including the sentry who had met us at the gate, and what I could only assume were the members of the Mer-King's court. Indeed, they were each lavishly dressed in what was presumably the height of Merfolk fashion. The mermaids had all tied their hair up, wrapping it in lengths of shell-lined seaweed and other fabrics that were foreign to me. Their bodies were adorned with all manner of jewelry and gemstones. They covered their torsos with a lightweight cloth that flowed as easily as if it were nothing more than water. The mermen were mostly bare-chested, with hair trimmed short and neat. A few wore sashes of the flowing fabric that lay over one shoulder and crossed to their waist. They, like their

fellow Merfolk, put their heads together and whispered, though they appeared to regard me not with curiosity, but with disgust, and I found my spirits lowered greatly in sight of them.

“Despite my discomfort, it came to my attention that the court members were inclining their heads to my mermaid captor -- some more begrudgingly than others. Whoever she was, it was clear to me that she was important. She pulled me along, parading me in front of all of the court as though she wanted there to be no doubt that I was her prize. She led our party directly up to the two thrones elevated at the far end of the room, where sat the King and Queen of the Merfolk.

“The Queen’s throne, which stood on the left, was noticeably lower and smaller than the King’s, yet, for certain, it was no less extravagant in its adornment. Both thrones were carved out of the glowing white stone that comprised the exterior walls to this palace, and they shone like moonlight in the dark, watery hall of Nightglass.

“The Queen was the most stunning creature I had ever seen. Unlike the members of the court who wore their hair up, her dark, purple hair was weighed down by little stones and gems that were wrapped up in it. Her eyes sparkled with all the warmth and tranquility of Sunfell’s lavender fields in the summer, and she wore few embellishments on her person – a simple, yet elegant swath of fabric on her torso – and she radiated an aura of poise and grace. Her tail was every shade of violet and more, and it glittered like amethyst in the light of the room. The King was cut from a different cloth, it seemed. He appeared to be much older than his queen, and he was most assuredly a brute to behold. His dark, mossy green hair and beard were long and wild, and he had followed his wife’s example and weighed them down with small stones. He wore a dark, dagger-laden sash that stretched tight over his muscular chest, and his pale green eyes held

none of the warmth that the Queen's possessed in abundance. Indeed, those eyes never left my face as my mermaid captor dragged me forward and set me before him.

"I returned his gaze but found myself distracted by a merman who moved up from the crowd of Merfolk. He positioned himself to the right of the King and carried such an air of self-importance that I could only assume he was a herald of some kind. He looked down his long, pointed nose at me and said to my captors, 'What is this that you have brought before the Great King Archedinos and the Lovely Queen Narissa?'

"The mermaid ignored the herald and spoke directly to King Archedinos, 'Father –' she began, but she was interrupted.

"'Silence, Cordelia,' said the King in a deep, gravelly voice, 'We will discuss your treachery later.'

"The apparent Princess Cordelia, my captor, looked as though she was about to retort, but after a warning glance from the Queen, she decided against it. Despite the circumstances, I confess I felt sympathy for her in that moment. Deasura knows, I am no stranger to the disdain of cold-hearted fathers.

"The King turned to me and regarded me with such enmity that I felt a chill in my bones. 'So,' said he, 'a human has at long last breached the mighty halls of the Under-Sea Citadel of Nektos. What, then, shall be done about it?'"