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Content warning : Death, descriptions of gory scenes.

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Erzats Haderas

By Jak Alam

"So do you have a favorite among your collection?"

Now that is a question that certainly has been put to every great collector in history. To whittle down their vast collection of splendid objects to just one exhibit when asked to do so, now that I think is a travesty to the significance of every piece in the collection.

But nonetheless, I do have a favorite amongst my humble reliquary of trinkets.

He rests there in the middle of my collection, right between the 400 year old inscribed totems carved out of coconut trees, atop the shelf stacked with figures of lesser gods.

He is Erzats Haderas. He is a humanoid figure that has a surrealist interpretation of a bird's head, the size of a Labrador, and carved out of Lapis Lazuli.

I picked him up from a vintage shop on the Malabar coast. I admit, it's an odd place to stumble upon such an empyrean languishing besides a dirty coffee pot and a tattered rug. But nonetheless, at the moment, I laid my eyes on him, I knew it was fated to be.

The proprietor of that shanty establishment was a gaunt woman who looked to be no younger than a student in the later years of her postdoctoral education.

She gave me a sufficient rundown on the origins of the effigy. It originated from the Erzum culture. The ancestral forebearer civilization that once reigned across the inner hinterlands of the Malabar Coast.

Erzats Haderas was a pagan god venerated by the people of Erzum. Erzumites considered him the god above all gods. In the once great temple of Garagoa, it is said that his statue was put in such a way as to float above the figurines of their conquered enemies' pantheons. The priests sang hymns to him everyday, they chanted "Erzats Haderas is the greatest among all and he has no equal!"

That had been the way of things for many years until a new idol was brought to the once great temple of Garagoa and it was placed in the same manner as Erzats Haderas above all the other idols. The priests chanted as usual, "Erzats Haderas is the greatest among all and he has no equal!"

But in the same breath, the priests started to chant "But there is also Tubana and she is greater than the rest!"

A new dynasty had subsequently swept into power and had brought in a new god into the Erzumite Pantheon, and she was placed as a counterpart to Erzats Haderas.

This is said to have sparked a rivalry between the two gods and brought an end to the prosperity of the Erzumites via natural calamities brought on by the warring deities.

This particular idol is said to be the same as the one that floated like a cloud above the graveyard of lesser beings in the once great temple of Garagoa.

It would seem that while adherents of Tubana or whoever else came thereafter, had taken to absconding with Tubana and coterie of other once worshiped idols. Erzats Haderas was forgotten and left to wither away like the civilization that once worshiped him.

As for how she acquired such a valuable piece of history and culture, she merely implied that she knew the grandson of the man who helped in the excavation of the once great temple of Garagoa. Which I was skeptical of, as the great temple of Garagoa has never been located, that is if you don't count the ramblings of some unsavory academics.

It mattered to me not whether she was lying or telling the truth, I had become encapsulated by his majesty. I would have him no matter what.

She was quite shrewd. She took one look at me and knew I had fallen for her bait. I thought I had been an expert at haggling with the locals. But she was another beast altogether.

She might not have wanted me to have him; however, I was committed.

She caviled at my offer, instead she made counter-offers of amounts that even a native couldn't imagine to earn in a year.

I am generally a very patient man. I am renowned for it even, ask any acquaintance of mine.

But her unrelenting demeanor forced my patience and the thought of leaving the coast without his majesty enraged me to no avail.

I gave up on bargaining but not with my pursuit of Erzats Haderas.

I could see that the situation called for a deviation of normal norms and somewhere I felt the pull of my caprice.

I returned to that ramshackle late at night, sneaking in from a broken window, and I appropriated the idol in a manner as to not damage it, but unfortunately I had not properly given heed to the whereabouts of that squabbling wretch.

She hurled insults at me, and called me a number of things that I presume went along the lines of “Thief” and “Dirty Foreigner”, my understanding of the language was still in the primordial

ocean of life and until that point, my vocabulary had been sufficient enough to persuade the locals.

But this was not one of those haggling bazaar encounters. Thus my subsequent efforts to diffuse the situation through my enunciation of gibberish and hand gestures were unreciprocated by the other party.

Even my offer of money, an enormous amount of money, mind you for someone living in that part of the world, was not enough to sway the woman from acting manic and constantly speaking over me.

Her voice was irritating. It was hoarse like the grinding of stone or the sound of a creaking door hinge. All I could think about was making her stop making that noise. That awful noise. Out of her cacophony I could make out that she was going to be calling the neighborhood volunteer militia on me.

A voice in my head said that I needed to stop her once and for all, and my body followed the command of that voice.

Her voice pierced my ear canals with its loudness. I pity the spouse that had to keep up with her.

She was more hardy than her meager frame would suggest but I would say she was nothing compared to the sino-communist progeny I had to face during my service in Sarawak.

They fought with the ferocity of badgers, I'd go further to say that the communists were demons in human form.

You know, in that green hellscape, fighting was hard and claustrophobic. You came face to face with death more often than not. And you had to be ready to shoot, stab, bash his skull and gut his insides out if you wanted to live to see the sunrise the next day.

Sometimes death came in the form of women with disdain for the authority of the white man.

Erzumites fought in the same kind of battlefields ensconced by banana trees. Like the communists who spoke of Marx as if reciting divine script, the warriors as well chanted the deeds of Erzats Haderas as they charged to ambush their enemies. Of course later on, they adopted Tubana into their pre-battle rituals.

Erzumites in fact are never recorded going head to head in pitched battles with their adversaries, they always employed guerrilla tactics and deception. Which was contrary to the tactics of their contemporaries.

And to think they successfully carved out an empire through such tactics, one can draw a conclusion to explain as to why the communist menace has been able to fester and expand in the orient.

Enemies of the Erzumites discounted their stratagem to cowardice, and their success to dark magic and their empire, even the last soothsayer allowed to conduct divine rites in Garagoa had foretold “would not last for it was brimming with evil.”

Afterwards, the only soothsayers allowed into the temple were those of the defeated ilk who were to be sacrificed, their blood to be used in the making of warrior amulets blessed by priests of Erzats Haderas.

Evil was everywhere in Sarawak. Evil squirmed around the paths we patrolled and the plantations we scoured, you could see the scars of communism on the lands, on the bodies of the dead.

It wasn't always easy to see the taint. Sometimes they acted like normal god-fearing people and other times you could see them venerating the triumvirate idols of Marx, Lenin and Mao, assembled from the viscera of dead soldiers, villagers and government officials.

I became quite adept at beating down death. Staring into his pupils as I plunged my knife into his stomach. Many men didn't have the leisure of thinking back on their experience in that infernal place.

I owe my survival to my instructor. I wasn't always what you would call a proper gentleman. If you ask my childhood friend, Ewan, he'd tell you that I was a “moutchit”. In 9th grade, my

school principal had entirely given up hopes on molding me into becoming a functional member of society.

When I got to the boot camp, the instructor told me he'd make a disciplined and lethal instrument out of me that could withstand any pressure and overcome any odds. He certainly succeeded in that and more—

Oh yes, pardon me for running off on that tangent. Back to the topic at hand.

What happened to that woman you ask?

Simply put, I dealt with her. For a man like myself, it was nothing more than breaking a twig in half. Though cleaning up was a laborious task. It was a dreadful mess. For good measure, I set the place ablaze while leaving.

The idol required a very good polishing afterwards. Blood and sinew are really hard to clean especially getting them out from the crevices. She seemed to be unwilling to part with the figure even in death.

It would take me another three weeks to smuggle him out of the country. It took a quarter of my savings to arrange that.

In the meantime, I spent countless nights with him in my rented bungalow, I stared at the magnificent craftsmanship and sometimes it felt like he was trying to talk to me.

Actually it felt like that way before when we first met. Like we had been telepathically linked somehow and it had been the plan all along for us to meet like this.

The proprietor of the trinket shop being a final test of my devotion.

It was like small ripples in the water at first. I couldn't make out what i was hearing or seeing. My dreams were blurry visions of a past I did not recognize. My incomprehension made me first be dismissive of the mental noises.

But over time, the noise became more vivid like it was a story of a time gone by and I could feel the divinity spewing onto me from every tone and syllable. And there I was before it's ruin.

The great temple of Garagoa in all its splendor lay before me. White stupas with intricate carved inscriptions shot high into the skies as if piercing through the stratosphere. The temple walls were inlaid with the finest of jewels. Servants both young and beautiful were running back and forth, adorned in sarees that glistened with all the colors of the spectrum and covered in intricate tattoos that looked to be henna, with copper platters full of roasted nuts and a variety of curries.

A banquet was being held in the courtyard where singers sang in languages and tones that were inconceivable to human anatomy. Men, women and children danced and feasted under the auspices of sacrificed captives that hung from poles all contorted and twisted.

I wandered through the revelry and into the temple's inner sanctum, and there he was dangling, floating above lesser beings. But he wasn't an inanimate statue as you would expect. No, he was a god in meditation. And he looked right at me and he spoke.

He was beautiful in how he spoke and I started to believe.

Now he sits on his righteous throne like the sun, above all and equal to no one. I see him in my dreams. I feel his loving embrace. I am in awe of him. I was CHOSEN by him.

Erzats Haderas is the greatest among all and he has no equal!

And once I find his begrudged rival, I shall strike down Tubana and she will be nothing. For Erzats Haderas has no equal.