

The background of the cover art depicts a religious scene in a dark, forested setting. A central figure, a bearded man with long hair wearing a white and gold robe, sits on a throne. He is surrounded by several other figures, some kneeling and some standing, all with glowing halos. The scene is lit with a greenish, ethereal glow. The title 'DIABLO' is written in a large, white, gothic font at the top, with a large green 'IV' behind it. Below it, 'VESSEL OF HATRED' is written in a smaller, white, serif font.

DIABLO®

VESSEL OF HATRED™

When Akarat Came to Nahantu

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When Akarat Came to Nahantu

Here begins the tale of Akarat and the Wolf.

The truth of it is known by those who cross between the realms of flesh and spirit. It is our history. It was given to us by our elders, who received it from their elders, who received it from their elders, who received it from the Dedicants of Akarat, who witnessed its events. It is told among the Spiritborn of Nahantu, be they Umbaru of the jungle or Teganze of the plains, but the wisdom contained herein belongs to all. Many are those who have already forgotten it, allowing the wicked to exploit it for their pride and their will to rule.

Hearken, children of Nahantu. Hearken, all heirs of Sanctuary. Hearken to the true tale of Akarat. Hearken, ye who have set yourselves above the people as seekers of the Light and defilers of Akarat's wish. Hearken, ye who would pave the path of Light and then collect a toll in Akarat's name. Hearken to the truth, unwanted servants, lest Hatred consume you.

When Akarat came to Nahantu, he did not arrive in splendor. No litter bore him through the streets of Kurast, and no praise or adoration welcomed him. He was not looked for. No prophecy foretold of him. If even there had been a prophecy, it would not have been believed, for the people of Nahantu had little hope in those days. A sickness infected the land. The lush rainforests and fruitful fields had been overrun. The beasts had turned wild and ravenous. A corruption had taken root

that spread like a festering canker. Where the seeds of the scourge erupted, the land rotted and became poisonous. The blight bent even the peaceful animals toward blood. It twisted the mangroves, and it scorched the plains. It seemed that a curse had claimed Nahantu, leaving its people ruined, starving in despair.

Many Umbaru fled the doom that had befallen them to seek refuge in strange and distant lands. Akarat's mother sailed among these emigrants, and that is how he was later born on Xiansai to a father of that place. And so it was that his arrival in Nahantu marked a return of a kind.

At his side was Ysevete, full of hope and charity, known now as Akarat's First Dedicant. He and she were friends of old, beloved of each other since childhood in the manner of brother and sister. So deep was their bond that when Akarat left Xiansai, Ysevete departed with him, and she had remained his steadfast companion during his travels in Kehjistan. Three others also came with Akarat and Ysevete to Nahantu: Adavin the mapmaker, the artful Istabela, and Guilla the strong-willed.

Together, these five crossed the mighty Argentek River, where the deserts of Kehjistan give way to the twisting vines of Nahantu. As they neared the far shore, the waters began to flow sluggish and putrid under their slender boat, darkened as with shadow and blood. Akarat held in his hands a small carving of jade, one of the few possessions he carried with him from Xiansai. Its luster seemed to dim beneath the deepening jungle and failing sun, and he brought the figurine close to his breast.

"Master?" said Adavin.

Akarat spoke with patience. "As I have said many times before, Adavin, I am not your master. We are both of us seekers of the Light."

Adavin shook his head. "Of course. Forgive me, Master."

Akarat sighed and looked to his Dedicant. "Ask your question."

"What is that you carry?"

The others in the boat held still their oars and fell silent. Istabela had also wondered about the carving, as had Guilla, but neither had thought it their place to ask. Ysevete knew the answer to Adavin's question, but she waited to see how

Akarat would reply.

"It belonged to my mother," Akarat finally said. "I have carried it with me since leaving Xiandai, hoping to one day bring this piece of her back to the land of her forebears." He gazed ahead into the marsh. "Now that I am here, I realize that I would not want her to see what has happened."

"There's a sickness on this jungle," said Istabela. "They speak of it in the markets of Caldeum. They say the people here brought this curse on themselves. I always thought the stories were nothing but the superstitions of fools."

"Perhaps they are," Ysevete said. "My father would say that superstition blames the victim for their illness, instead of blaming the disease."

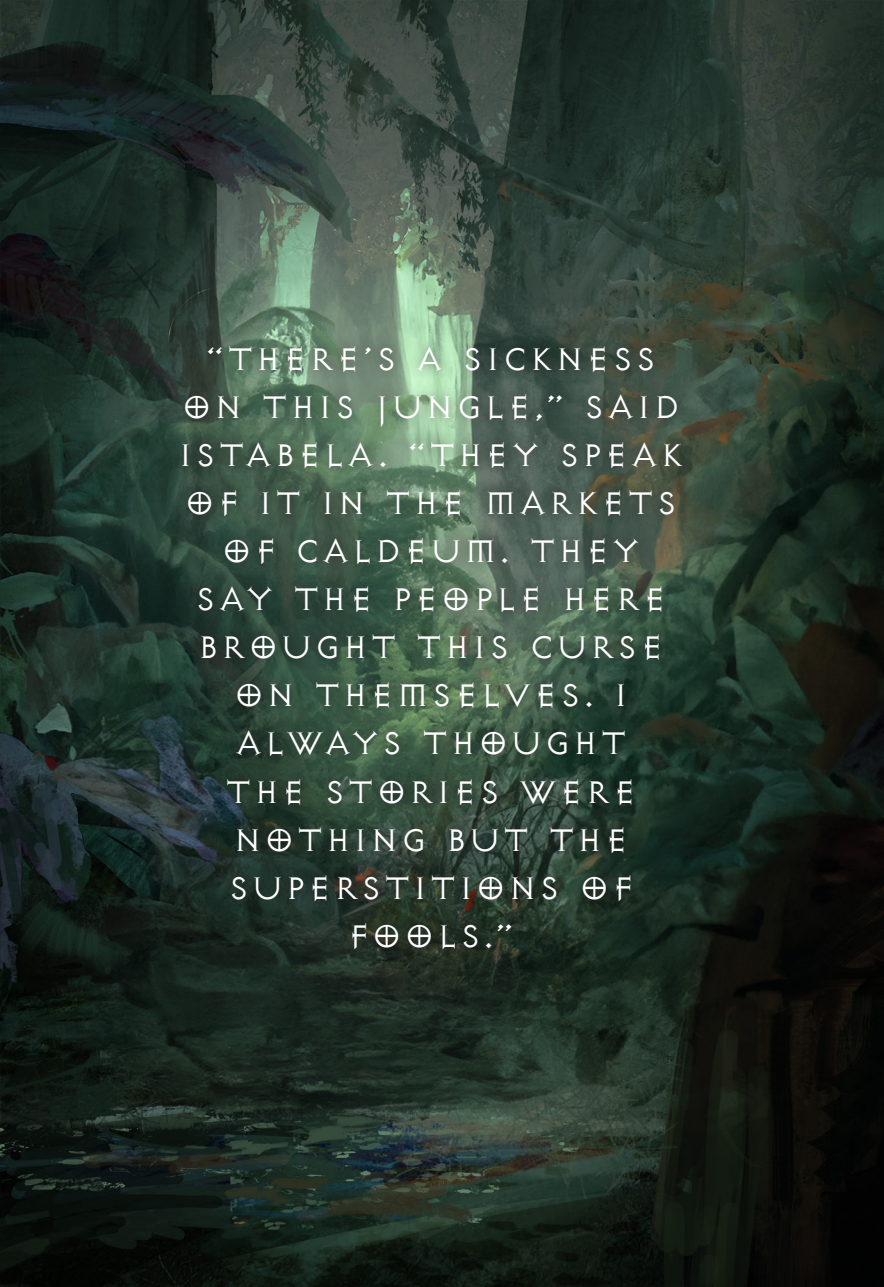
"Wise words," Akarat said as he tucked the jade figurine away.

Their boat struck the shore, and they disembarked. They had not journeyed far into the fen when the Dedicants began to quail. A choking miasma clouded their sight and reached into their chests with every breath to squeeze their hearts. Their strength failed beneath an oppressive weight that pressed down on their minds, as if the very jungle hated their presence. Their feet and courage faltered in the mire. Only Akarat strode ahead undaunted. The Dedicants tried to follow him but could not match his pace.

Akarat saw their struggle. He saw how they trembled. He bade them to halt. He sat upon a rotting log, and then he confused the Dedicants when he began to remove his shoes. "Can the village healer avoid bloodying her hands?" he asked them.

The Dedicants looked at one another, then answered together, "No."

"Indeed," Akarat said with a smile. "Not a good healer, to be sure. I would not trust a healer whose hands are clean." Then he shocked the Dedicants when he stood and let his bare feet sink into the foul mud. "To close torn flesh, to clean an infected wound, to soothe the fevered and plague-ridden, a healer must touch corruption. I do not yet know what evil dwells in this land, but I think on the wisdom of Ysevete's father, and I remember that the land is not evil." He stepped back and forth in place, squelching his feet in the muck with a child's glee. "Wherever I dig



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my soles into Sanctuary's dirt, I can feel the Light within it. I am connected to it, even here in this forsaken place. You are also connected to it. You must try to feel it."

"May I keep my shoes on?" Adavin asked, which drew forth an affectionate laugh from the others.

"You may." Akarat smiled. "Your shoes are no barrier to the Light, which dwells in us all."

Then the Dedicants quieted their minds and hearts. They reached for the Light within themselves, and by its radiance they saw the Light within Nahantu. They saw that it wanted to flow as abundantly as its rivers and streams, but its normal courses had been trammelled, strangled, and dammed by the corruption.

"Do you see?" Akarat asked the Dedicants. "Do you understand why we are here, and what we must do?"

"We understand," said Istabela, Adavin, and Guilla.

But Ysevete said, "I feel something else. There is something more. The Light is different here. It feels as if we move across the face of a deep ocean."

Akarat nodded. "Perhaps that is because your father came from Nahantu, like my mother, for I feel what you feel. I do not yet grasp the meaning of it. There are many questions I would have answered, but that will not happen here. Come."

And he led them deeper into the jungle. They tried to find and follow what paths they could, but no trackway survived long against the greedy vines and the shifting ground. Any road they discovered soon fell into the swamp or was swallowed by impenetrable undergrowth, requiring them to retread their steps and seek another route.

Adavin grumbled his frustration and said, "I will make a map of this place to aid future travelers."

"Your skill is great," said Akarat. "But I fear any map of these changing lands would be outdated before you completed it."

Creatures slunk and hissed and writhed through the waters around them, hidden but for the spreading of their wide wakes or the sudden splashing of something large beneath the surface scum. Biting flies drew blood from necks and

faces. The webs of great spiders stretched among the branches overhead. Away in the distance, beasts howled and roared over the screams of dying prey. The land resisted them, and the going was hard. The Dedicants still felt the unrelenting presence of evil, but the Light strengthened them. Nahantu strengthened them.

The day died young beneath the jungle canopy, and the night came swiftly over its corpse with darkness so complete the Dedicants had never seen its like. All was shadow. They had hoped to find a settlement or town by then, knowing well the danger of spending a night in the open. Istabela's torch allowed them to press on, but they had not gotten far when a swarm of hellish rodents fell upon them.

The creatures burst from the trees, large as dogs, slaving and screeching from blunt snouts.

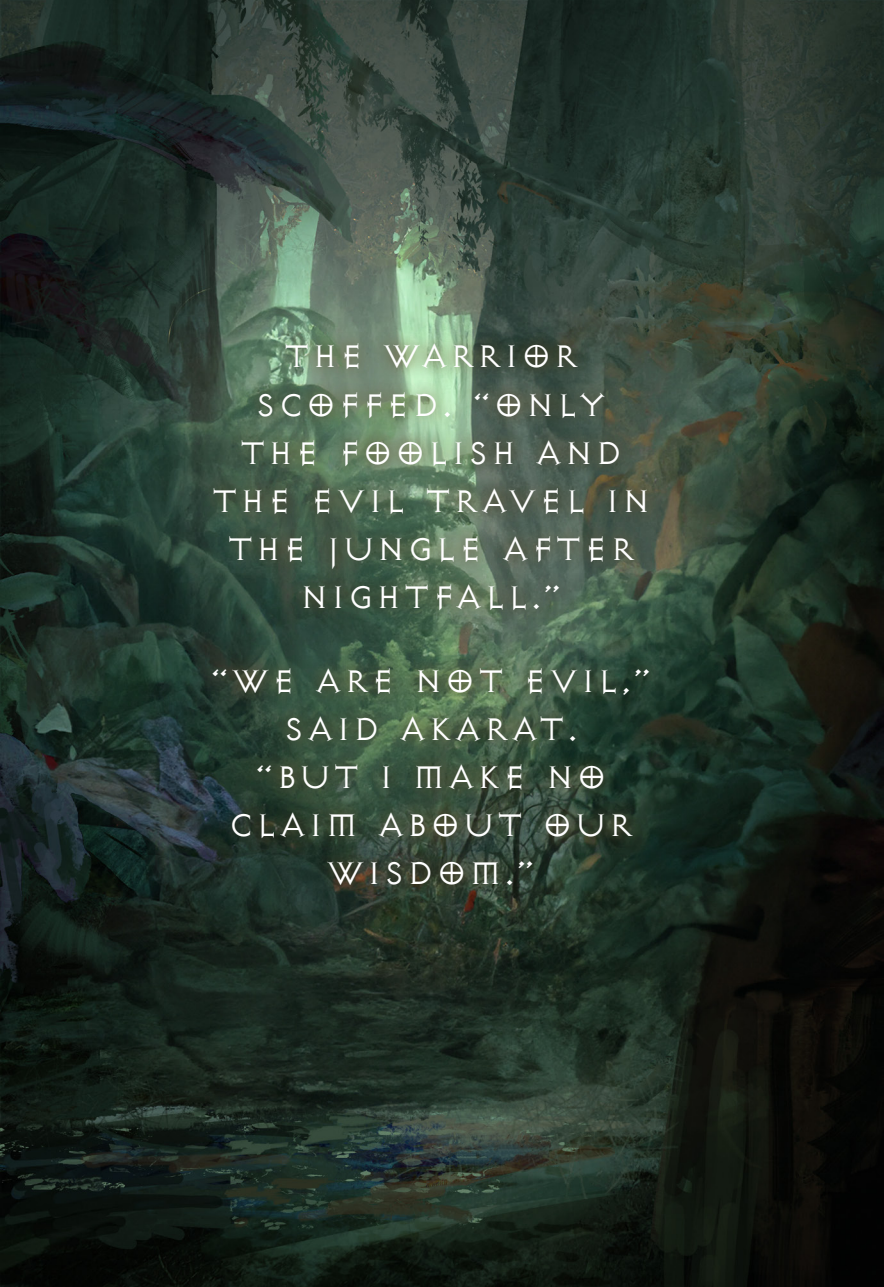
Before their claws and teeth could find the Dedicants, Akarat raised his voice and commanded, "Stay back!"

So strong was his spirit and so full of Light was he that the beasts halted in their charge, confused, but not yet afeared, and not yet dissuaded from their attack. This reprieve gave the Dedicants time to arm themselves.

Adavin carried a bow in those days. Istabela still favored the knives she hid about her as she had during her years as a thief, before she met Akarat. Guilla fought with a staff handed down through generations of mages in her family. Ysevete swung a golden mace, its head shaped like the sun. Akarat wielded the Light and his Flamberge sword. When the animals regained their courage and made their attack, they found their quarry ready to defend themselves. Adavin aimed his arrows true. Istabela stabbed and sliced with her knives. Guilla and Ysevete bludgeoned and battered their foes. Akarat blazed. The Dedicants fought well, but it seemed they would soon be overwhelmed, for the horde were too many.

That is when a mighty Umbaru warrior joined the battle. Many of the beasts died quickly upon his spear, which seemed to weaken the bloodlust of the swarm and broke their attack. The rodents that could still flee retreated to the darkness.

Before the Dedicants could thank the Umbaru warrior for his aid, the stranger turned his spear on Akarat. "What are you?" he asked.



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The Dedicants leapt to defend their teacher, but Akarat stayed them with a calming glance. Then he sheathed his sword and held up his empty hands. "My name is Akarat," he said. "We are but travelers here."

The warrior scoffed. "Only the foolish and the evil travel in the jungle after nightfall."

"We are not evil," said Akarat. "But I make no claim about our wisdom."

"Your bare feet in the tainted water speak well enough to that," the warrior said.

Akarat laughed. "And what of you? Are you not also here in the jungle with us? You are certainly not evil, and I think you are no fool."

The warrior remained wary, but he seemed satisfied that Akarat and the Dedicants intended him no harm. He pulled back his spear. "I was looking for my brother. I expected his return today from a neighboring village, but there has been neither sign nor word of him."

"We could help you search for your brother," said Ysevete.

The warrior regarded her with both surprise and suspicion. "Why would you offer to help a stranger find another stranger?"

Ysevete replied, "We are strangers to you, and yet you aided us in battle. Help is needed, so help is offered."

"True enough," the man said. "If you are sincere, then I would be grateful for your assistance. But there is little to be done until morning. There are deadlier creatures to fear, and the smell of death will draw them out."

Akarat said, "Then we will help you search tomorrow by the Light of a new day. What is your name?"

"I am Tusega," the man said, and then he looked around them at the carnage they had wrought. "It grieves me to kill these poor creatures. In the old stories, they ate only leaves and grass. They were shy, with a peaceful spirit. It is not their fault the demon seed drives them mad."

"What demon seed?" asked Guilla.

"The hateful sickness that festers here is not of Nahantu," said Tusega.

"You are right," said Akarat, suddenly beset by troubled thoughts, for his great

and final enemy had begun to make itself known to him. “This corruption is full of Hatred.”

Ysevete, who knew Akarat best and could read his moods, asked him, “What disturbs you?”

“Nothing that is yours to carry,” said Akarat.

Then Tusega guided Akarat and the Dedicants to his village, where they learned he was a man of high regard among his people, both a healer and a leader. He invited Akarat and the Dedicants into his home, which was filled with all manner of herb, root, and blossom for the crafting of curatives and potions.

“It appears you are a man of great knowledge and skill,” said Ysevete.

“The elixirs I brew are but a small part of healing,” Tusega replied.

“What is the larger part?” asked Ysevete.

“Spirit,” answered Tusega. “If the spirit is broken, my remedies can do little.”

His words pleased Akarat, who believed the Light had guided him to meet Tusega, though it would take time for Tusega to learn that the Light had guided him to Akarat.

The next morning, they set off into the jungle to search for Tusega’s brother, and the Dedicants saw Nahantu anew through Tusega’s eyes. He taught them how to find and walk the driest paths. He taught them how to avoid the sucking mud in which a careless traveler would sink and never be found. He taught them which plants were edible and which would kill them within the span of a breath. He taught them how to listen for the beasts that would attack so as to avoid them and prevent unnecessary violence. He taught them how to see the Nahantu that was.

“Why do you stay when so many have forsaken this place?” Guilla asked him.

Tusega thought for some time before answering. “I stay because I can still feel the spirit of this land, and it is stronger than the demon seed.”

“I feel it also,” said Akarat. “I felt at home the moment we entered the tangles of Nahantu. It was as if I had found something I never knew I was looking for.”

“Master, what is spirit?” asked Adavin.

“I do not know,” said Akarat. “But I know that I can feel it.”

“Is spirit the same as Light?” asked Guilla.

“I do not think so,” said Akarat. “But the Light has opened my eyes to spirit.”

They continued their search for Tusega’s brother until they came to a lonely homestead. Tusega wanted to ask if those living there had seen his brother. He soon realized that none could answer him, for they had all been freshly slain. Their mutilated corpses lay in heaps beneath clouds of flies. Their blood soaked the ground. Istabela knelt over shreds of flesh that had been a child, and she wept. For many long moments, no one spoke, too overthrown were they by grief and horror. Then Tusega found his brother among the dead. His eyes had been cut out, and his nose and ears had been torn from his face, but Tusega knew him by the necklace of beads still tied about his neck. Akarat and the Dedicants helped Tusega gather up the dead, that their remains might be given to the flames of the pyre and thereby laid to rest.

“I am sorry for your loss and your pain, Tusega,” said Akarat.

Then Istabela said, “It’s our fault. If you had been here instead of aiding us, you might have saved him.”

Tusega shook his head. “If my brother had been the one to find you, his choice would have been the same as mine. He died fighting for his people, without regret.”

Guilla’s anger burned for the sake of the dead, and she said, “If the people here had fought with the power of the Light, they might have lived.”

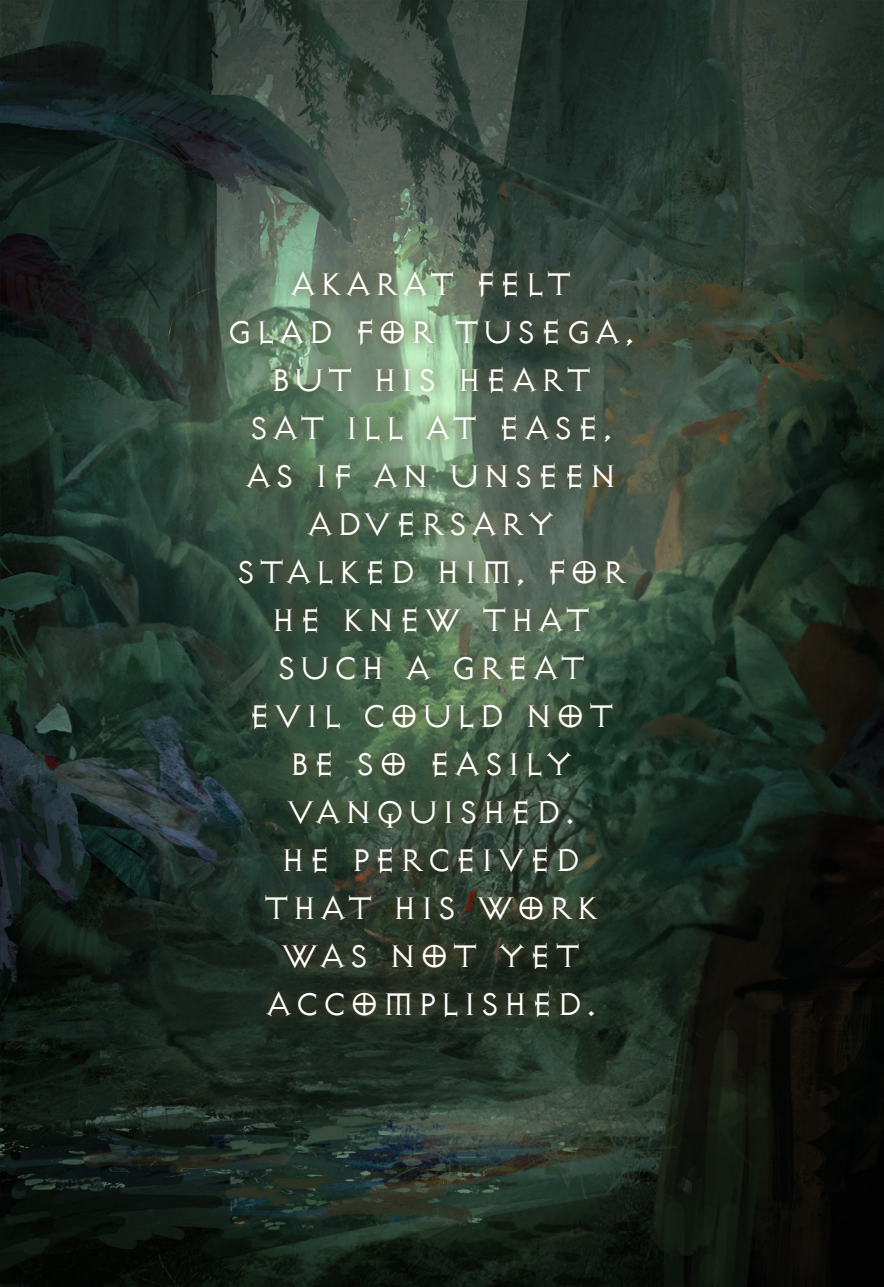
But Akarat calmed her, saying, “The Light cannot stop all suffering and death. That is not its power, and that is not why we seek it.” Then he said to Tusega, “If you had been here, you would have died with your brother. You are a mighty warrior, but you could not have stopped this bloodshed. It would seem another purpose has found you before Death could.”

“What purpose?” Tusega asked.

“We have come to cleanse Nahantu of the corruption that lies upon it,” said Akarat. “I believe you can help us accomplish this.”

“How?” asked Tusega. “Who are you to stand against this evil?”

“I am no one,” said Akarat.



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So it was that Akarat taught Tusega about the Light, and he bade Tusega show him one of the demon seeds from which the corruption of Nahantu spread. Then Akarat and his Dedicants shined the Light upon the writhing roots of the Seed of Hatred, and not even the great evil within it could withstand their strength. The roots withered, and the seed was no more. Having witnessed this, Tusega became Akarat's Fifth Dedicant, and afterward he guided Akarat and the others through the jungle in search of the Seeds of Hatred. They faced many dangers together, and they survived terrible ordeals, and they endured countless hardships, but those are tales for another telling.

In time, some small part of Nahantu began to heal, by the Light and by the labor of Akarat and his Dedicants. Word of this miracle found its way to Caldeum, where merchants turned their eyes southward for the first time in many long years, toward the richness and bounty of the jungle. So it was that a noble and educated youth from a wealthy and powerful family journeyed there in search of trade. They came to Nahantu not by choice but by obedience, resolved to the duties of a life already planned. Nevertheless, this youth still possessed a loving heart, a curious mind, and a hopeful spirit, and upon hearing of Akarat, sought him out, already guided in their steps by the Light.

"What is your name?" Akarat asked.

"I am Jualin," said the youth.

By the Light, Akarat saw Jualin with great clarity. "You are like an eagle in a cage," he said. "You should be soaring in the sky, but you cannot even spread your wings. Do you want to be freed?"

The truth of Akarat's words stunned Jualin, who wept and said, "How do you know this about me, when I am a stranger to you, and even to myself?"

"None are strangers in the Light," said Akarat.

"Can you free me?" asked Jualin.

"No," said Akarat. "It is true you are a prisoner, but you are also the jailer. I cannot free you when you are holding the key."

Jualin asked, "How can I do this?"

“The answer is within you,” said Akarat. He laid his hands on the young one’s eyes, and it was in that darkness that Jualin first found the Light and saw the world anew.

That is how Jualin left the market of commerce behind and became the Sixth and youngest Dedicant of Akarat, joining the others in tireless effort to heal Nahantu until at last the waters there flowed once more in shades of green and blue, and the fruit that grew from the trees changed from bitter to sweet, and the animals returned to the places ordained for them. The wind and rain cleared away the festering odor of malevolence, and once more the natural perfumes of life and death rang out like birdsong through the air.

Every evening, Tusega stood in his doorway, breathed deeply, and marveled at its beauty. One night he said, “There were times when I doubted the old stories. There were days when I struggled to believe that the land they described had ever existed. But now I know our ancestors spoke true. At last, the Nahantu that the stories remember is *our* Nahantu. At last, the Nahantu of my dreams remains even after I have awakened, and I need not fear the pain of dawn.”

Akarat felt glad for Tusega, but his heart sat ill at ease, as if an unseen adversary stalked him, for he knew that such a great evil could not be so easily vanquished. He perceived that his work was not yet accomplished.

“Nahantu is precious,” he said to the Dedicants. “To me, it is precious above all. There is still much more for us to learn here, and the things that Nahantu may teach us cannot be learned anywhere else in all of Sanctuary. But to learn a great truth, we must all be worthy of it.”

This challenge caused the Dedicants to doubt, not in the Light, but in themselves.

Guilla said, “I come from the deserts of Kehjistan. I doubt Nahantu will recognize me, for my family has no roots here.”

Akarat replied, “Family is more than blood. Home is more than hearth. Family can be the people among whom you feel most at home, and home can be the place where you build your family. You are my family, Guilla, and I am of Nahantu.”

Then Istabela asked, “What secrets have we not uncovered?”

“Nahantu keeps no secrets,” Akarat replied. “Truth is only hidden from those who are not yet ready to see it. To learn a truth is not to steal it, Istabela, for truth is a gift.”

Then Adavin said, “Master, I have been mapping our footsteps. We have yet to explore the regions to the far south. Perhaps that is where we should search for this truth we now seek.”

Akarat replied, “Even your beautiful maps are merely records of what you already believe to be true. A new truth will not be found there. You must trust your inner compass to guide you toward the Light, for the Light will reveal all truth.”

Then Tusega said, “I was powerless to save Nahantu before you came. All my efforts amounted to nothing. Why would the land trust me now?”

Akarat replied, “Just as the smallest candle flame is made from the same fire as the sun, the smallest gesture of kindness is made from the same love as the greatest sacrifice. Light is Light, Tusega, and the Light within you makes you worthy.”

Then Jualin said, “You are all much wiser and stronger than I am. Compared to you, I am but a child in the Light. I am not ready.”

Akarat replied, “Two acorns fell in the forest. One landed near a stream, with sunlight all around. It took root easily, drank its fill, and grew. The second acorn fell on harder ground in the shadows of older trees. To drink, it had to dig its roots deep. To find the sun, it had to reach. Then one day a great blizzard came with brutal winds and ice. Tell me, Jualin, which tree best weathered the storm?”

“The second,” Jualin said.

“Exactly so,” said Akarat. “There can be no growth without challenge, and challenge strengthens you. You began your life like the first acorn, but then you chose the life of the second. Just because you do not yet know your strength does not mean you are weak.”

Then Ysevet said to Akarat, “With you, all things are possible. So long as you lead us, we will be made worthy in you.”

Akarat replied, “But I am also flawed, as you well know, my old friend. There is no such thing as perfection. We fail, we falter. We must reach within for the Light.



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The Light does not falter. And I will not always be here. Nor will you, Ysevete. None of us may live forever, but the Light within us cannot die.”

Thus comforted and renewed, the Dedicants joined with Akarat. For eight days they fasted and listened to the Light within them, and on the ninth day they journeyed into the jungle, guided by an upwelling of spirit as if following a river to its source. They came to a clearing in the rainforest that did not appear on any of Adavin’s maps. In our tales we call that glade Nahantu’s Gift, received with gratitude and reverence. Only the Spiritborn know what happened there, and we do not speak of it. It is too sacred and also impossible, for no words are strong enough or vast enough to contain it, and it would only be diminished by the attempt.

This can be said to you: after much contemplation and striving within himself, Akarat found a realm of spirit apart from our realm of flesh. It had been with him since he came to Nahantu but hidden from him until he was ready to see it. Akarat was the first to cross its border.

In the Spirit Realm, he found a land that was not a land, a place that was nowhere and everywhere. He encountered animals and plants and all manner of beings. Some of them resembled the creatures and things of living matter that Akarat knew. Others appeared strange, as if they had begun their existence as something familiar but had since then stretched beyond the bounds of their earthly forms. The perilous beauty of it all awed and bewildered Akarat. He wandered entranced until he realized he had strayed far. He feared he might be forever lost to that place, unable to rejoin the realm of flesh, but the Light guided him back. All of this he told of upon returning to himself in the clearing in Nahantu. The Dedicants struggled to comprehend it.

“Is this Spirit Realm part of Sanctuary?” Istabela asked.

Akarat thought long before answering. “I think it is as much a part of Sanctuary as the Twin Seas are part of Estuar. Land and sea are bound tightly together, touching at all times, and yet they are distinct from each other.”

“Which is first in the order of things?” asked Adavin. “Flesh or spirit? Sanctuary or the Spirit Realm?”

Akarat shrugged. “Does the sea confine the land, or does the land hold back the sea? I only know that the Light shines just as brightly on the water as it does on the land.”

“How long has it been with us, unseen?” asked Tusega.

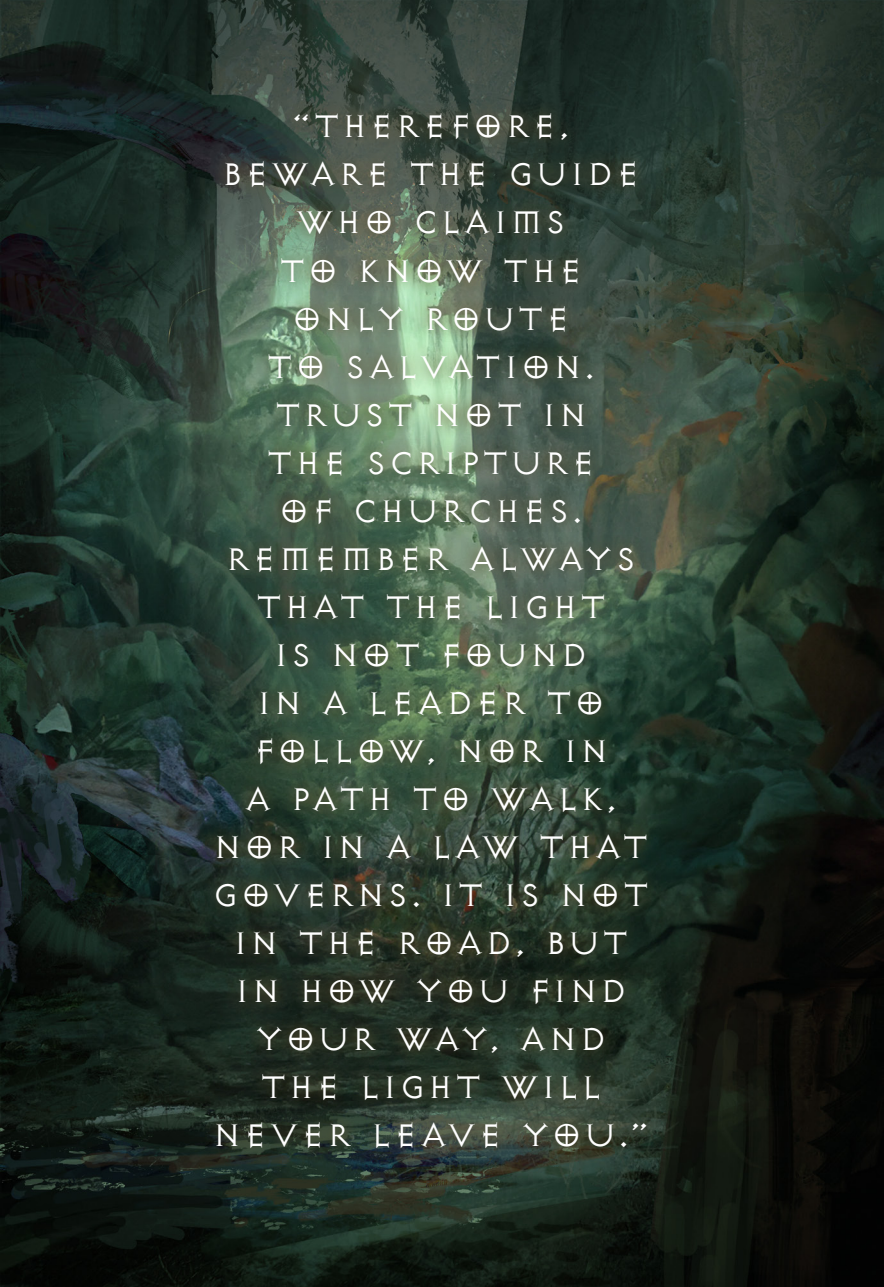
Akarat answered him, “Perhaps it was formed when Sanctuary was created. Perhaps it came into being later. I know only that it is ancient, and like the sea, it is immense and deep and not without danger.”

The Dedicants wished to go there. Akarat taught them how, and they spent their days treading the Spirit Realm. The Spiritborn had their beginning in what the Dedicants learned, but so captivated were the Dedicants by their discoveries that they failed to notice when evil crept back into Nahantu. In the deepest reaches of the jungle, the Seeds of Hatred regrew.

After Akarat’s first journey to the Spirit Realm, he often asked of himself why the Light had guided him to find it and what purpose he had there. Over time, he came to know the powerful beings who guarded that realm, and he learned much wisdom from them. Preeminent among those spirits stood Ah Bulan, who came to Akarat one day with a warning.

Ah Bulan said that corruption had returned to the land of Akarat’s mother and that the Seeds of Hatred would continue to grow until Akarat had found and destroyed their maker. Upon receiving this warning, it was as though the adversary that had been stalking Akarat’s mind and heart finally stepped out of the shadows, and he understood at last the final tasks that lay before him. He thanked Ah Bulan but said nothing of this revelation to the Dedicants. Instead, he instructed them to build the Vault of Light, a bastion that stands in both the Spirit Realm and Sanctuary, a place of safety from all evil, where those who seek the Light might find protection and peace.

On the eve before the vault’s completion, Akarat gathered the Dedicants in celebration. They sang, and the Light filled every note. They danced, and the Light flowed through them from the soles of their feet to the crowns of their heads. They shared stories and remembered all they had done together. Then Akarat stood

A dark, atmospheric forest scene with a beam of light illuminating a path. The text is overlaid on the image in a white, monospace-style font.

“THEREFORE,
BEWARE THE GUIDE
WHO CLAIMS
TO KNOW THE
ONLY ROUTE
TO SALVATION.
TRUST NOT IN
THE SCRIPTURE
OF CHURCHES.
REMEMBER ALWAYS
THAT THE LIGHT
IS NOT FOUND
IN A LEADER TO
FOLLOW, NOR IN
A PATH TO WALK,
NOR IN A LAW THAT
GOVERNS. IT IS NOT
IN THE ROAD, BUT
IN HOW YOU FIND
YOUR WAY, AND
THE LIGHT WILL
NEVER LEAVE YOU.”

before the Dedicants, and he smiled upon them with love and joy so great he shined like a jewel, and he spake the Valediction of Akarat.

“My beloved friends. By the Light that is in you, I see the Light that is in me. We are one. Even if we are parted, know that you are with me, and I am with you, and none can tear asunder what the Light has joined together. But there is a power that can divide us if we allow it to weaken us, and its name is Hatred. Though tonight we celebrate what you have achieved, remember that no victory against evil is everlasting, and that is why you must always be vigilant. Remember that just as rust will patiently corrode the hardest iron, Hatred will corrode the strongest hearts. Given time, Hatred will corrupt the noblest intentions, break the strongest bonds of fellowship, and turn the truest paths toward darkness. The Umbaru know well what the jungle makes of roads, and the merchants of Caldeum know how quickly the desert sands erase their tracks. Therefore, beware the guide who claims to know the only route to salvation. Trust not in the scripture of churches. Remember always that the Light is not found in a leader to follow, nor in a path to walk, nor in a law that governs. It is not in the road, but in how you find your way, and the Light will never leave you.”

Ysevete felt unsettled by what Akarat had said. “You speak as if taking your leave of us.”

Akarat embraced her and said, “We are mortal, and life is uncertain. Each word we utter may be our last, and every leave we take may be our final farewell.”

The Dedicants could not imagine their lives without Akarat, and so they dismissed any worry he had given them and returned to their music and dancing. But Ysevete’s concern for her friend of old would not let her be. She kept watch over Akarat that night, and when he rose before dawn and went alone into the rainforest, she followed him to see where he went and what he did.

Akarat traveled to the Seeds of Hatred that had returned, and where they grew the jungle was again how he had found it when he and his Dedicants first came to Nahantu. All was misshapen by a black and noxious bile flowing outward from a distant, hellish spring.

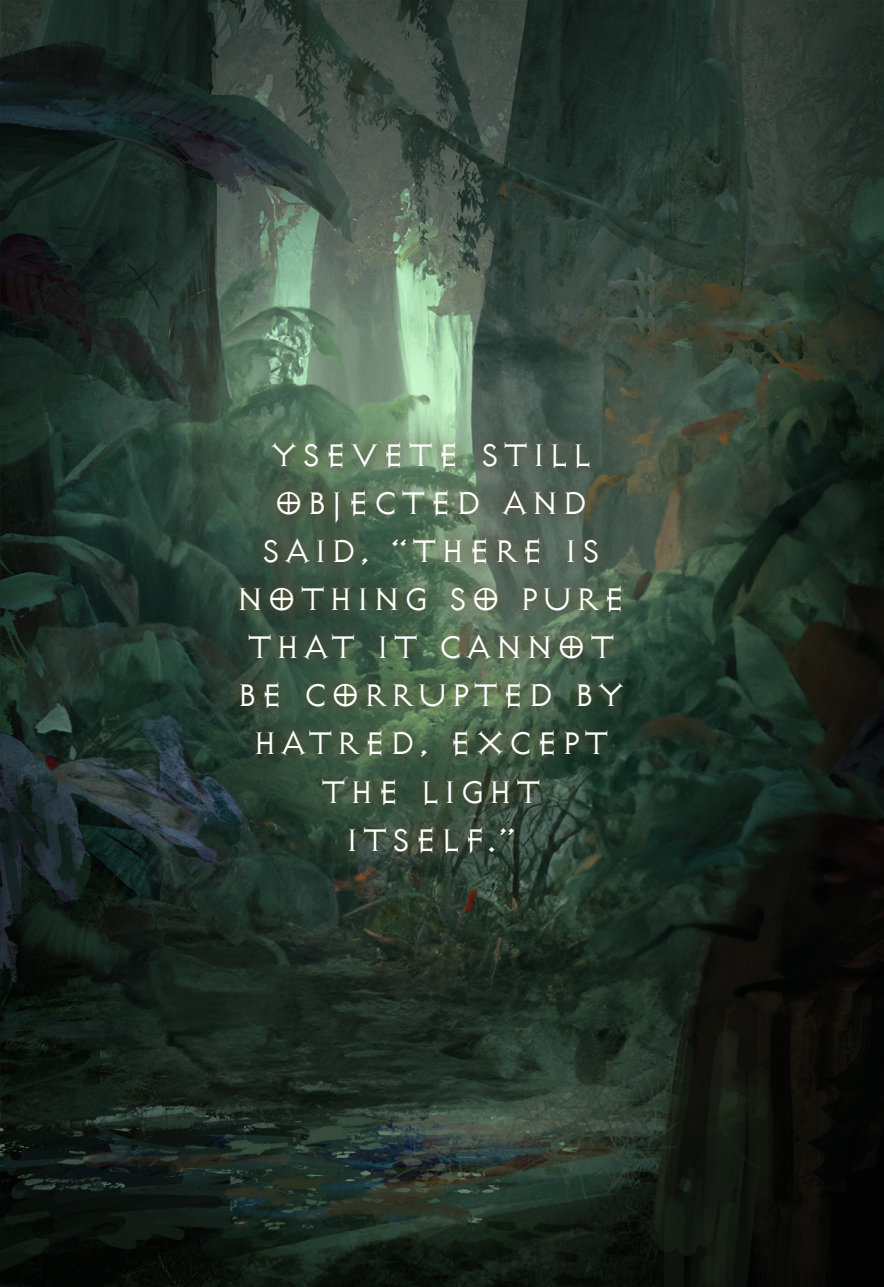
Akarat purged the Seeds of Hatred as he went, cleansing the land a second time.

Ysevete would have aided him, though it meant revealing herself, but his Light proved strong enough without her. When the bile-maddened animals of the jungle attacked Akarat, again Ysevete almost went to his side, but he needed no help from her. Whether serpent, bird, or the mighty gorillas, Akarat did not fight the sickened creatures but healed them with the Light. So Ysevete kept herself hidden from him, unwilling to let him go alone into darkness, though her secrecy shamed her.

The jungle deepened. The corruption grew stronger. The air that Ysevete breathed seemed to burn her tongue with the taste of Hatred. The evil there felt close enough to crush her, body and soul. She almost turned back in fear, but looking to the Light gave her strength. She followed Akarat and watched him enter a cave of darkness, where she knew dwelt the author of Nahantu's curse. Despite Akarat's power, she feared for him. Never had she felt evil of such strength. Never had her heart and mind been touched by such burning Hatred. It surged through the corruption around her, ravenous enough to swallow the whole of the jungle.

Inside the cave, Akarat met the Wolf. If it had been a wolf of flesh alone, he would have healed it. But the Wolf he faced was but a stolen shape, little more than a pelt in which a demon moved and spoke. The sound of its voice pierced Ysevete to the bone, and its words flayed her. She could neither move nor speak for the agony of it, but that suffering was not as great as the pain she felt at her failure to stand with Akarat, though many have come to believe it was the Light that held her back, so that she might live as witness to his sacrifice.

It is said that Akarat's battle with the Wolf shook the land. All Nahantu trembled at their confrontation. Trees fell, rivers changed their courses, and the animals bellowed and trumpeted and shrieked. Though Akarat fought hard and well, he contested with a deathless foe, and he was a mortal man who knew the limits of his strength. As the battle wore on, he felt in his limbs the weariness of flesh to which we are all subject. Rather than fight to his last breath and risk leaving his enemy undefeated, Akarat ended the battle in the way of his choosing. With a feint he lured the Wolf to bite him, for he knew its hunger. The Wolf sank its teeth too deeply, allowing Akarat to trap it in an embrace from which it could not escape. Then Akarat set free the Light that filled



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him, and the Light poured forth from him in unforgiving splendor, as if the sun had left its seat in the sky and come down to that cave.

The Wolf howled. The Wolf burned. The Light peeled the pelt from its face, and beneath that its bones were charred like spent firewood. When Akarat's strength came to its end and he could hold the Wolf no longer, he let it go, and the demon fled deeper into the cave, down and down until the tunnels touched the realm from which it had come. Never had the Wolf known such pain. Never had the Wolf known such fear. The Wolf would remember, and from the soil of that memory, its hatred for Akarat and Nahantu would only grow.

Ysevete raced to Akarat's side, where she knelt and cradled him, and her tears fell upon his cheeks. He had not enough life left in him to speak, but as he died he smiled in joy at the sight of his beloved friend, and his smile remained on his lips even in death.

Ysevete bore his body out of the jungle, and there was no lament in any tongue that could hold the grief of the Dedicants.

"I failed him," said Ysevete.

"We all failed him," said Istabela.

"I do not believe that is true," said Jualin. "I loved him as you loved him, though you loved him for longer, and I believe we only fail him if we fail to honor his sacrifice."

"How should we honor him?" asked Adavin.

Guilla answered, "Now that Akarat is gone, his purpose falls to us. It is our duty to make sure that all are offered the truth and protection of the Light."

"Yes," said Jualin. "We must write down all that he taught us, so that we can spread his message."

Their words roused Ysevete to anger. "You would have us write scripture? Were you made so witless by your revelry last night that you have already forgotten what he told us? The path of Light is not the road but how you find your way."

"Look at us," said Istabela. "How can the six of us teach all of Sanctuary?"

Then Tusega spoke, saying, "Among the people of Nahantu, the old stories have

safely carried truth from generation to generation across the wilderness of time.”

“That is a wise proposal,” said Jualin. “We will place the truth of Akarat and his teachings within stories, fables, art, and songs, and these will spread like seeds on the wind.”

Ysevete still objected and said, “There is nothing so pure that it cannot be corrupted by Hatred, except the Light itself.”

“That is true,” said Guilla. “And that is why we must make sure the Light is in everything we do, to safeguard it against corruption.”

Istabela, Adavin, and Tusega agreed with Guilla and Jualin. So Ysevete set the conflict aside, despite her misgivings, and together the Dedicants prepared Akarat’s body, cleaning his wounds and dressing him. Ysevete looked for the jade carving that had belonged to Akarat’s mother, so that he might go to his final rest holding it in his hands, but she could not find it, and she feared the figurine had been lost to the jungle during his last struggle.

“Let us place his body in the Vault of Light,” said Ysevete. “It will be safe there from those who would desecrate it.”

So the Dedicants carried Akarat’s body to the Spirit Realm, and they completed the Vault of Light around him. Istabela devised cunning wards and protections to guard his tomb. When it was finished, the Dedicants bid their final farewells, but their words were spoken in private, and not even the Spiritborn know what was said. Ysevete was the last to leave, after spending much time alone in sorrow. Then they sealed Akarat’s place of rest, and there he still lies, in the Vault of Light, beyond the reach of all corruption and decay.

Here ends the tale of Akarat when he came to Nahantu. I have allowed my words to be written down, though it is not what Akarat would have wanted, for such is their importance. I do this because of lies that have been written. If words are to be a battleground, then truth must take to the field. Have ye hearkened to me, ye who would pave the path of Light and then collect a toll in Akarat’s name? You are never so far down a road that you cannot turn. Though Hatred may consume you, the Light within you will never go out. Let it guide you back.