


THE ILLAWEN
a fable of early empire

ast herds of reindeer migrated across the tundra of the north, and the tribes migrated with them. It was a time before settlement, a time before animal husbandry and it was a time before nations.

The tribes would skirmish whenever two converged on one herd by accident, but the results were far from disastrous. Most often, the weaker tribe conceded without a fight, though sometimes they would raise the banners of war. On these rare instances, the larger tribe usually left rather than face such a risk to their people. Occasionally, neither side backed down and many, usually brash young hunters, would be injured or killed.

Prisoners were incorporated into the victorious tribe, a practice that kept the bloodlines diverse and strong.

This had been going on since the time before time. And, of course, one tribe almost ruined it for everyone.

THE *JAKKIOLENN*A WERE THE MOST POWERFUL TRIBE IN ALL THEIR FROZEN world, and so sure were they of their power that they eventually refused to

back down from any fight. As they won battle after battle, they brought more prisoners into their midst and soon the tribe was growing too large to sustain itself nomadically.

Previously, when something of this nature would occur, a tribe's priestess would dictate that more children should be sacrificed to Bear, Wolf and Raven. But the *Jakkiolenna* worshipped Iksi, a god of light and fire, a god who wanted his tribe only to grow.

The tribe sent an emissary to track the *Sekkiolummi*, the second largest tribe of the tundra. Their emissary reached the *Sekkiolummi* at the edge of the great North Ocean; he was escorted into camp as the sun began to set over the water, as the sacrificial fire took an elderly reindeer.

"I offer you the chance to serve the *Jakkiolenna*," the emissary spoke, and the chief of the *Sekkiolummi* laughed.

But as the cold and truth of night set in, the chief began to listen to the poisonous words of empire, and soon the first political alliance was formed.

The *Sekkiolummi* agreed to enforce the law of tribute upon any tribe they encountered. In exchange, the *Jakkiolenna* agreed not to kill the *Sekkiolummi*, and allowed them to keep a portion of these taxes.

Within a year, every tribe was paying tribute to the *Jakkiolenna*. Each begrudged the levy but had their own survival to think of; they could not spare any hunters for war. Nor could they deviate from the path of the herds. They felt that they had no option.

AS IS THE MANNER OF CHILDREN, THE YOUTH WERE LESS PRACTICAL AND more given to passion. One night, the children of the *Sekkiolummi*, aged eight to fifteen, gathered in the tent of Illakkes.

Illakkes—a fifteen-year-old priestess-in-training—followed Illa, goddess of the dark, earth and owl. Illa was quite displeased; meat intended for sacrifice to her birds was being given to the *Jakkiolenna* instead, and Illa had grown lean.

“Oh Illa, how can we break from this tyranny?” Illakkes asked her patron, while the rest of the youth watched on.

Illa possessed a boy of nine and answered in a pre-pubescent voice: “Fire is the refuge of cowards and tyrants, but the bold may walk under the moon.”

And thus were the *Illawen*—the dark-helpers—born. When their parents packed carts of taxed meat to deliver to their governors, the *Illawen* stole much of it for themselves. Winter was coming, and the tribes were headed south to the woods where the reindeer grazed until spring. The *Illawen* planned to

shadow the *Jakkiolenna* as they traveled.

Before they left, Illakkes went to the tent of her mentor. While the high priestess slept, her student crept upon her, bone dagger in hand. The older woman's eyes shot open and saw for the last time.

Illakkes spoke: "You ought not have allowed this."

THE JOURNEY WAS A DANGEROUS ONE FOR THE CHILDREN. THEY HAD LITTLE to eat and only their passion for warmth, but the moon cast light on them and they never wavered from their path.

With unforeseeable haste they came upon the trail of the *Jakkiolenna*, and the *Illawen* set about their work.

When a tribe was on the move, one man was given the role of ember-bearer. He carried a special shell wrapped in hide, which bore embers as seed for the next night's fires. The *Illawen* sent a scout to identify the carrier of the ceremonial coal, and the next day they struck.

As the ember-bearer walked past a cliff, an elder girl from among the *Illawen* cast a spear into his leg with her atlatl. The *Jakkiolenna* hunters set out at once to find the antagonist, but the girl hid in the recess of a tree too small for a full-grown man. She thus remained unnoticed.

While the imperial hunters ran in blind pursuit, a boy of eight walked calmly into the midst of the remaining tribespeople, found the leather-wrapped coal and stole off with it.

That night the wounded man succumbed to his blood loss, a slow and painful death, and only through great effort was a new fire begun.

The *Illawen* harried the *Jakkiolenna* incessantly for months, killing a few ember-bearers and a few sentries. At night they would extinguish the flames of the camp, until the tribe reinforced the watch.

But after several sleepless nights, the *Jakkiolenna* were too exhausted to hunt and they were forced to relax their guard. The fires were extinguished again, and the tribe grew weak from lack of sustenance and rest.

Illakkes—no ordinary priestess—befriended an old stag reindeer, his hide as dark as midnight snow. One night she rode off, leaving the *Illawen* in charge of themselves.

Illakkes visited tribe after tribe over the course of those months, bringing the news of the weakened *Jakkiolenna*.

“Ask them,” she suggested, “if they would not prefer a tribute of fire rather than meat. And then you shall know that they are weak.”

While she was away, one *Illawen* boy was speared in the moonlight by the

Jakkiolenna's guard as he crept into their camp. His body was taken to the priestess of Iksi, who stripped his clothes and revealed his chest. A black sun was tattooed on his sternum, a perfect circle surrounded by eight triangular rays.

"Illa," she said, "this boy serves Illa. Tonight we sacrifice an owl!"

But the attacks did not relent, for a god's power is not found only in symbols.

When the *Jakkiolenna* reached the winter woods, the *Sekkiolummi*, their only allies, were nowhere to be found. The other tribes, temporarily united, struck them down. The few imperial survivors were distributed amongst the coalition and the *Jakkiolenna* were no more.

"What of our people," one young *Illawen* asked of Illakkes upon her return, "what of the *Sekkiolummi*?"

"The gods direct us," she replied, "and when we don't listen, we are lost. Our parents are lost, and we shall seek them."

The *Illawen* set out north, toward the sea, to search for their parents. Led by a young woman on the back of a dark gray reindeer, they were never heard from again. Some say they died, of course, and others say they didn't.

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