

Farlonne

Amnesic
archipelago

A short story by Laurent Fétis
set in the world of:

JI-HERP

Baltazar Grisand was well into old age when he was finally able to set foot on the basaltic lands of the Farlonne archipelago.

Legend has it that, this cluster of rugged islets, battered by a raging sea, was home to an ancient civilisation. The city of the free merchants of Sartene had shone with opulence and had once traded with three continents thanks to its proximity to the northern continental points of Tersainte and Aséan. A terrible cataclysm shattered the great island before encircling it in a maelstrom of violent gusts and blinding lightnings.

According to the best sailors in the Nordic oceans, crossing was not even an option, and the approaches to the legendary island were largely avoided or bypassed.

But thanks to his friendships with certain great dwarf commanders, Baltazar Grisand had managed to gain an audience with the navigator Ina Dunegär, a genius ingenomancer who was said to be the only person to have explored Farlonne and, more importantly, to have returned.

She was a dwarf several hundred years old, as thin as a nail but as strong as a rock, with a deformed right shoulder and that hobbled from time to time. Dressed in a rust-coloured uniform that had seen better days, her spiky grey hair was held in place by her thick navigator's glasses. After much discussion, she finally gave in and agreed to take the Low-felid explorer to Farlonne. She warned him, however, that she would not wait for him for more than ten days before returning to the continent.

They set off aboard the Dunegär aerostat, a unique craft consisting of a balloon made of thick, scaly skins held together by a mesh of dwarf steel wire, with a narrow blackened steel gondola, covered in rivets, underneath.

When they reached the edge of the maelstrom, Baltazar instinctively lowered his hears, trying to to put on a brave face, while Ina

concentrated on her instruments, particularly on a strange gyroscope whose basic element was a crystal as black as night which vibrated permanently. When the feline asked a question about the mechanism, the dwarf navigator gave him an ulcerated look which dissuaded him from continuing this ingeniomantic exchange.

The breakthrough was brutal, with the aérostat being tossed in the storm. But the navigator remained impassive, merely correcting their course by a few degrees. Their flying craft quickly rose out of the dark clouds, soon overflying an archipelago made up of a myriad of small, splintered islands, arranged around a large island in the shape of a half-moon, whose long western cove opened onto an inland sea, even more raging than on the periphery, the opaque heart of the maelstrom.

The weather was strangely mild and the bright sun shone down on a basaltic land covered with savannah and trees with solid, bulbous trunks. Ina flew inland, at a low altitude, so as not to provoke the great birds of prey that criss-crossed the desolate land. Then, reassured, she entrusted the piloting to an automaton of her own invention and faced the explorer with the first smile since their meeting.

– Welcome to Farlonne, Sir Grisand.

The Feline stretched and asked:

– This territory seems a little inhospitable to me.

– That's true, all fauna is predatory and even the rare herbivorous species can tear off your arm or trample you. And the flora is not to be outdone: every herb or flower can harbour a deadly poison. Survival is the watchword in the Farlonne archipelago. But don't fret, I'm going to take you closer to the city of Morilis, which is only a few leagues away. The city lies just to the east, and you can see its tall towers from here.

Anxiously, the explorer slipped another glance through one of the loopholes in the armoured gondola and was relieved to see villages, all

fortified, which seemed to be home to a larger population than in his projections.

Ina Dunegär continued:

— I'm going to give you a letter coming from here so that you can pass the lookout and meet Baronet Armand Foncel, one of the few scholars interested in the island's past. One last thing: your clothes are too conspicuous for those of a castaway. Avoid attracting attention, because even if Morilis is a more welcoming refuge than the town of Sartene, to the south, the place is crawling with scoundrels.

After a few hours, Ina brought the balloon closer to the dark ground and helped the explorer in his descent. She promised to meet him at the same spot within ten days. After that, he would undoubtedly become a new inhabitant of Farlonne.

Alone, Baltazar began by tearing off his cloak and shirt before taking out his compass and taking down in his notebook the essential landmarks for getting back to the rendezvous point.

The great birds of prey were becoming rarer in the skies and the explorer, feeling confident, leaned on his iron-tipped stick to begin his long walk. He took care to advance cautiously, avoiding the bushes with their weeping thorns and moving under the cover of the rocky outcrops until he discovered a path, made of cobblestones of black and grey stone, winding through a crevassed valley.

The explorer quickened his pace, already seeing the tapering peaks of numerous dark towers pointing toward a sea-blue sky on the horizon. After a few leagues, he guessed out blocks of rock, held together by metal chains, on which the inhabitants were growing cereals. Some of the farmers looked down on him, giving him just a glance, before tending to their crops.

Baltazar made no attempt to call out to them, especially as he could hear crawling sounds behind him. His hair bristling, he pulled up his robes and ran off at full speed.

He soon came across a group of men-at-arms, dressed in red tabards emblazoned with a black flame. The soldiers were largely of the ancient races and carried sturdy spears and shields eroded by many battles. As three of them rushed to throw their weapons at his scaly pursuers, an elf with tanned skin came to meet him and introduced himself as Sergeant Vennef Rikazio, a member of the army of King Kristott Mayer, the protector of Morilis.

Still shaking, Baltazar introduced himself as a trader from Aséan, who had been forced to leave Vitaca because of a trade dispute.

As Sergeant Rikazio frowned suspiciously, the Felid pulled the letter of recommendation from his lacerated pockets. At the sight of the baronet's name, the soldier seemed to relax and offered to escort him to the nobleman's mansion.

The explorer couldn't identify the rocky accent that seemed to be peculiar to the archipelago. Nor could he determine which elven family his escort belonged to. His rather tall and stocky stature suggested that he was of island crossbreeding.

The sergeant led him through gullies in the hollows where other soldiers were checking rough-faced pedlars dressed in dark robes and carrying bundles of food or trinkets. The exchanges were tense and some of the guards had no hesitation in ripping open the jute sacks with their daggers to check the goods, under the invective of the pedlars.

They soon reached the base of a huge staircase, its floating stone steps held together by strong metal chains. Baltazar hesitated for a few moments, but as the elf was already on his way up, with a martial step, he followed him.

The stones barely swayed and the explorer was able to get a good look at the high walls of Morilis, carved out of the rock over entire sections. The lower quarters had been built on other broad bases of flying stone and supported more opulent mansions topped by slender towers linked by floating bridges.

Baltazar had crisscrossed three continents and seen many wonders, both natural and built by civilisations past and present, but entering the city of Morilis made his explorer's moustache twitch.

“Travel the world relentlessly, ignoring fear and countless dangers.”



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