

The Tower (will fall)

Rip had left Grace behind in Fester to travel back to his hometown in Fort Façade. The path out of Fester was long and winding, but it became straight and narrow as Rip approached a crossing, a fork in the path: "Left or Right?" He thought. "What's the difference?"

And he went the other way regarding his inclination. Rip didn't trust intuition; it was like faith, and what was that but reasoning with chaos, choosing between three extremes: left, a path to utter destruction; right, a trail to damnation; and dead center, a road to certain death....

"There is only one Fort Façade," Rip would say to Grace.

This is true everywhere, but it is especially true for Fort Façade. In Fort Façade, Rip would act as a political auditor for the Tower. Rip traveled for a month afoot to the Tower, which he approached now and saw only a single buzzard circling it. Rip could see the flag of the Tower flying half-mast in honor of a dead soldier killed somewhere, somehow, for some reason. It was more like mid-winter than the first day of Spring.

The Tower was not much, though. It was several stories tall, while the surrounding buildings were almost all single stories tall, apart from a few two-story buildings that were apartments and public housing for the thousands of poverty-stricken residents living under its shadow. The Tower was a cloister of the political and religious, both zealots and bigots alike. It housed President Crow and Pastor Godman, the Vice President.

Rip was to meet up with his old friend Elder, who said Rip could stay in his cabin, which didn't have running water or electricity, nor did it have a bed. This didn't deter Rip, who slept on a bedroll to begin with where he was from in Fester.

Rip got nearer to the Tower and crossed the peripheral border of the city limits of Fort Façade. He decided he would go ahead and stop in the office of President Crow. Rip made it to a gate on the road that led up the hill to the Tower, where he met Noggin, the single guard of the Tower. Rip knew Nog from childhood and was not surprised to see that Nog was a supporter of the controversial figure Crow. Nog had a long beard that looked as if it had gone unkempt for a decade. And it had been this long since Rip had seen Nog or Fort Façade. But Nog greeted Rip with friendly warmth and told him he would have to return later and make an appointment. Rip asked why a person couldn't make an appointment now. Nog simply refused him and said he had been fishing lately as if to ignore the request entirely. Rip was tired from his journey and said he would return later.

"Nog was just being an idiot." Rip thought.

Rip made his way through Fort Façade. He passed the Buffalo Saloon and saw Elder coming out of it. Elder was half drunk but was glad to see Rip. "What the hell are you doing here, Rip!?" Elder asked.

"I told you in a letter I was coming; you said I could stay in your old cabin atop the hill." "Well, let's get going, it's getting dark, Elder said.

"Let me buy a paper to see what's going on. I might just read something about old Crow." Rip said.

Rip bought a paper from a newspaper stand and read one of the headlines:

"Crow to put prayer back in schools."

This caught Rip's attention because, as a political auditor, he was sent to investigate this type of thing in Amerika. But the Tower assumed it had special privileges over ordinary politicians; its egoism knew no limits. Rip looked for him to cease trying to have prayer put back in schools or removed from office. Crow was making it legal the next day for each resident to open-carry a sidearm or a gun in Fort Façade, and Rip thought this would align with the Constitution. The Open-Carry Law went into effect the day after Easter. But the prayer or Crow had to go. The Separation of Church and State was critical for a Political Auditor.

Rip and Elder walked to the edge of the city of Fort Façade. They stopped by their friend's house, a recluse named Lucky. He was a loner but kept in touch with Rip by mail. Rip knocked on the door to his cabin, which was close to the one Elder owned. Lucky came to the door, off-the-grid as he was but still a loyal friend.

The three hung out and drank some beer Lucky had made home. Then Lucky gave Rip an Equalizer, a .45 caliber revolver pistol. It was a gift. A grand gift. He had been wanting a gun again after not having one for several years. Lucky had secretly won a lottery a year ago, a damn fortune. And Lucky wanted to share his wealth with his friends at that time only.

"He got me one, too!" Elder told Rip.

"Well, that was nice of him. I hope we can reciprocate the gift someday." Rip said. "Ammo as well, what a gift!"

Rip, Elder, and Lucky went and shot off several rounds of ammunition at targets Lucky had in the back of his cabin. The target was steel pig silhouettes that Rip had made when he was a child and given to Lucky. The three were brothers in spirit. Nog was like a stepchild of another family, a fourth peg trying to fit a three-hole block, and there just wasn't room. Elder had deduced with his irritable disposition that Nog would show up, snooping around like a dog.

"What the hell are you doing here, Nog?" Elder demanded.

"Thought, I come to say hello to my old buddy Rip, seeing how he's back in the Façade." Nog paused.

"Wonder what old Rip is up to, anyhow. Have you heard you were auditing Crow?" Nog pried.

"Yeah, what's it to yeah, Nog? You're still sucking up to Old Crow?" This was what Rip called the President.

"Old Crow is right!" Lucky added.

"Y'all don't gang up on Crow, now." Elder put in his thoughts. "He did get us where we'd be able to carry a gun on us again, didn't he?"

"Well, hell, every one of you fellas voted for him, but I aim to stop him from putting prayer back in schools, is all," Rip said.

"What you got against prayer, Rip?" Elder asked.

"I ain't got nothing against it; it just goes against the Constitution and what the founding fathers wanted in Amerika. The Tower is for the Devil, anyhow. What y'all care if I bring it down? It will fall eventually; all towers do. If you're looking for God or good juju, don't look to the Tower. The only thing up there's a greedy and corrupt Old Crow! Satan will eat his soul and shit out gold," Rip laughed.

"I'm a Political Auditor, that's all."

"Auditing is a crusade of the Far Left, ain't it?" Nog insinuated.

"That's what they say." Rip agreed.

All four of the fellas were from Fort Façade, but Rip wanted out and swore he would never return except to be burned and buried, perhaps. Then, Rip decided to audit the Tower over prayer being made legal in Fort Façade schools. A political auditor was an elected official everyone wanted to be but hated.

Therefore, Rip returned to reckon with the religious Evangelical Ministry that put Crow into the presidency. Putting spirituality into the institution of Education was intellectual blasphemy, and it was unconstitutional. This was the consensus of the Left, anyhow. Rip's position stood in the Center.

Rip left Lucky's place and headed to the top of the World's tallest hill, Catapult, as it was named. The old rustic cabin was the only dwelling at the top of Catapult Hill. There was even an old woodshed in the back as if to rub in an old sore for Rip. Tales of children being whipped in the name of God crossed his mind as he looked at it from the back porch of the cabin. The cabin wasn't much, just one room, with an outhouse for eliminating. Four blackjack oaks were in the backyard, one for each of the comrades. And there was a Southern live oak hovering over the four. Rip called it the Reaper. It was thought to be 400 years old, older than the nation and the Tower, and as old as the Christ Caucus that plagued the land from the old Southern Live Oak's birth. And it was said the tree would outlive Amerika, maybe it will.

The Evangelical Ministry is the tail end of the Christ Caucus. It believed the founding fathers were Christians, but they were Deists. Rip was aware of this and worked against it as a political auditor, a position invented to balance the two rival political parties of the Left and Right. Rip considered himself neither a "Far Left" nor a "Far Right," as the Liberal and Conservative parties were called. He considered himself Dead Center. He said this once when asked if he favored the Left or the Right politically, and he said: "I'm not of the Left or the Right. I'm the center. I'm an auditor." And then added, "But if I had to choose, I'd say I'm a Liberal-Conservative, which is both, yet neither." Rip made him a bed with his bedroll beside a potbelly stove he'd lit a fire. And he drifted off to sleep, without dreams or troubles, for now.

Rip woke to Elder beating on the door.

"Rip, you fucker, wake up! Nog went and shot Lucky last night!"

Rip woke confused about why Nog would kill Lucky but could easily imagine.

"What the hell's he done that for, you think?" Rip asked Elder.

"Not sure... but it had something to do with Lucky buying us that set of Equalizers. Nog figured Lucky owed him one, too... Lucky figured otherwise, I think." Elder said.

"What are the police going to do with Nog?" Rip asked.

"Well, they got him detained, but the word is they're not gonna do shit 'cause that damn Old Crow will just pardon him," Elder said, shaking his head in disgust. "But that's what I'm going to find out, for certain, before I do anything." "Before you do what?" Rip asked.

"Before I do what needs to be done, you know, that fucking Nog done snooped around the wrong backyard this time."

"But I thought y'all got along, except for that incident with the pig hunt, that time... hell, I was the one who shot the damn thing, anyhow." Rip continued. "Now I know he called you 'cheapskate' cause you wouldn't help us pay off Hick, but I paid your part, and another thing is Nog's just a damn liar; it wasn't his cousin's land we went huntin' on anyhow, it belonged to Hick.

Now Nog's just a damn monkey, you know, got the brain of a jackalope, hollow and stuffed with all kinds of nonsense!" Rip laughed.

But Elder wasn't laughing. The two loaded their pistols on this first day of Open-Carry Law, as it was called in Fort Facade and all over Amerika. The two made their way down Catapult Hill into Fort Façade. Elder went to the Buffalo Saloon, and Rip headed for the Tower. Nog was there. He had been released and held up a document as Rip approached the Tower's security shed.

"Got me a pardon!" Nog laughed.

"What the hell you go and shoot Lucky for, Nog?" Rip asked. "And how'd you get pardoned already and unless you were guilty fucker?"

"Cheapskate didn't get me an Equalizer! And you know he won the Lottery?! I helped that asshole out when I worked at Stickman Lumber and Timber, Co and made good money. Still, now that I'm trying to make it as a security guard, he won't even loan me the money to get an Equalizer, and I need it in this line of work, so we had words, and I dusted him with his own Equalizer! Just saw it there and, on impulse, shot his ass; now where equal! He wasn't too Lucky, now, was he?" Nog laughed at his stupid puns.

"Well, you might want to avoid Elder, he's pissed," Rip told Nog.

"Fuck him!" Nog shouted, "I thought he'd be on my side of this; I guess he's still sore about me making him pay for that pig?" "Guess so," Rip said.

"I got some Vitamin THC, maybe that'll change his mind about me," Nog revealed.

"I need to some smoke clear my head," Rip said.

Rip and Nog smoked the medicinal herb and conversed about the situation. Then, out of nowhere, Elder walked up smelling of whiskey.

"Die, you fuckin' monkey!" Elder shouted.

Elder had already drawn his Equalizer out of its holster and shot Nog right in the head, "between the eyes," as they say. Nog dropped like a rock, and his left leg twitched a couple of times.

And that was all of Nog.

"What the fuck, Elder!?" Rip asked loudly, as both their ears were ringing from the loud blast of the Equalizer.

"Son-of-bitch got what was coming to him, fuck him, almost got me killed over a stupid pig and then shot old Lucky out of spite," Elder said.

"I aim to use my powers as an auditor to see they don't get you for this, Elder," Rip told him.

"I ain't going to prison, Rip. I plan to go down fighting!" Elder said, drunk and unrelenting.

"No one knows 'sides us that you got that cabin. You head on up there and let me handle this." Rip said.

Elder stumbled off, and Rip looked at Nog and then looked up. One of Nog's kin, who was also a guard, came up. He was named Rot, and he seemed unmoved by the situation. Rot asked who had shot Nog.

"Just some monkey with a gun," Rip said.

Rot called the Tower and told them what had happened. He spoke with Pastor Godman. And it was Godman who told Rot that someone must pay for this "iniquity." Rip wasn't sure why Godman would suggest this was "iniquity," except that he must have known something about the pig incident. Rip asked to speak to Pastor Godman, but Rot told him: "Pastor Godman is in prayer for the deceased, and he cannot be troubled."

"Troubled" is the word Godman used for Rip, the auditor who looked to bother Godman's and Crow's plans to reinstate prayer in schools to gain the vote of the Evangelical Ministry and its followers. Rip was a public servant, just as Godman and Crow were. Even if Godman and Crow were stewards of the Right's Christ Caucus that looked to "rise again," as it was said in small circles. Rip was for the Constitution, not the Caucus, but now he fought for Lucky and Elder. Rip gave his testimony that it was "just some monkey with a gun" as a public record that day; whether the World went to shit was to be found out.

Rip made his way out of the city of Fort Façade and up Catapult Hill and found Elder dead under the stand of oaks behind the cabin. Rip did not waste any time and went into the cabin and smoked some more of the cannabis he had lifted off Nog's dead carcass. Rip checked his firearm, ensured it was loaded, and had backup "ready-loads." He walked back down Catapult Hill and into the Buffalo Saloon, where he spoke to Grace on the pay phone. Rip told her what was happening in Fort Façade and asked her not to come there as planned. Rip got off the phone and went and found Rot.

"Payback's a motherfucker, ain't it?!" Rip said to Rot and shot him in the gut.

Rip had thought this out. He decided that if the Evangelical Ministry prescribed "it is better to maim than to kill," then there was nothing wrong with what he had done. The police arrested Rip and locked him in a cell at the base of the Tower at the request of Pastor Godman and President Crow. It was told to Rip that Crow had to "pray about" what would be done with him. Which was strange, Rip thought, since that would, or should be left to a jury to decide.

Rip was given a public defender at his request. The lawyer's name was Mr. Lax, a former instructor of Rip's at college who taught Debate. It was known that Rip had told Lax to "Fuck off" once when Mr. Lax had told Rip his speech was "stupid." Mr. Lax told Rip that this incident would not affect his defense when he came and assessed his case. Rip said nothing. Rip was asked if he had anything to say to his interrogators and said thus:

"Look, you monkeys, I didn't kill Rot; he died at the hospital." Rip insisted on the persona of a criminal mentality.

And that was all he said. The press said what he said didn't amount to much but poetic nonsense, for it was self-evident that he would die and was sentenced to death. On the other hand, Rip would not resign as auditor and demanded to see the survey that Crow and Godman used to get prayer put back in schools. The Praying Youth survey was attached to the Open Carry survey; to kill one, Rip would have to kill both surveys. It was odd that no one thought to listen to Rip when he said that the people could just make a new survey that separated the two.

Rip was given a Death Clock by the Judge, which counted down the exact time of Rip's execution. But Rip would still have time to voice his findings in his "Iniquity?" audit just to make a point. People started to ask why it was called "Iniquity?" with a question mark, too. But Rip sat in his cell in silence. He no longer spoke. Doctors were ordered to examine him, but he seemed well. They said, "He's just acting like a man who got caught with his hand in the fire." Whatever that meant. It was thought it meant that Rip would have to say something eventually, if not out of guilt but because he would be "put to sleep," as the euphemism went for capital punishment nowadays in Fort Façade and Amerika in general.

Rip tried to get Crow to come and speak to him but was unsuccessful. It was said that Rip would talk again if Crow would only go and speak to him. Though this would never happen, and Rip knew it, the best thing happened though: Godman came and talked to Rip.

"I guess your iniquity knew no end." Godman began. "Well, I knew this all along. You can't be an atheist and have morals; in a way, it's not your fault you killed poor Rot and murdered him as you did. You never planned to maim him... I know. You merely wanted him to suffer more. But you'll die soon... 'Eye for eye, tooth for a tooth.' I will see that you are disemboweled for what you did to poor Rot."

"Why don't you just crucify me, and then I can be like Christ!" Rip said and then began to strangle Godman, who turned out to be more challenging than Rip thought. The two wrestled around for a minute, and the Tower watchman restrained Rip, who bit Godman's ear, while at the same time, Rip tried to gauge one of Godman's eyes. But Pastor Godman came out of the altercation unscathed. Rip simply laughed and laughed.

Put a nail in the coffin, Rip had succeeded in setting in motion the Antix survey, which made it "illegal" to hold prayer in public schools. But Pastor Godman was putting forth another study to amend the prayer-in-school survey: a survey for "one Christian nation, under God..." to be added to the pledge of allegiance.

But Rip was not disemboweled; instead, he was asleep like a dog.... This was done by lethal injection, which is considered "humane." Is there a humane way to send someone to an early death? I think Rip would say this is the most stupid fiction. Rip was buried as a free man under the Reaper, that massive Southern live oak there with its four friends, those dense blackjack oaks that stood for the four friends in real life. And Rot was incinerated... cremated by the local government, who had Nog's kin Rot's ashes spread in an unknown location.

Underground

Rip went to the Gate. It was on a path to the Lake. The water itself was a gateway to the Underworld. Rip was going there to rescue a friend who had been sent there by God. Rip wandered around for years and finally heard about the Gate from Mr. Slither. Rip met Mr. Slither on a path above the Lake one morning, and he told Rip about the Gate, where one paid a fee, and the ferryman took them across the Lake to the Underground. Rip said farewell to Mr. Slither and went to the Gate, which he had known about the place's existence all along: It was just a dock with a rope strung out across the water into the fog. Rip approached the dock with an elevator that went nowhere in particular... and the gatekeeper appeared out of the fog. He introduced himself as Ward. He told him he could pass if he had a key to the Underworld. "Very well," Rip said. "I have a key."

"Well, you'd be the first since I started working here on the dock," Ward said. "I am that I am not," Rip told the keeper what the watchwords were. "Where to, sir?" Ward asked. "I want to go to the other side, and I have a friend I need to fetch from God," Rip said. "Okay, let's go," Ward said. And they went out into the fog and never returned.

Pig Hunt

Rip was middle-aged and in his mid-forties when the calamity above occurred. But not too long ago, when they were in their late twenties, the friends I've mentioned above, and again here, Elder, Nog, and Rip went on a hunt one day at the Bottoms of the Omen River. It was later to become known as the Pig Hunt. The hunt was like most hunts to begin our story. The subject matter is hunting for those who are sensitive to the slaughter, butcher, and consumption of wildlife, and in this case, feral pigs. The three friends met at Lucky's place, but Lucky was not there; it was just his dad, the Captain, who everyone called him. I'm not sure what his actual name was or if he still had one, but everyone knew him then and now as the Captain.

Anyhow, Rip, Nog, and Elder met, and at the persuasion of Nog, the three went to the Bottoms to hunt pigs. Nog told the other two friends, Rip and Elder, that the place they were going to hunt was his kinfolk's land and that he had permission. The three got to the location in the Bottoms, just off the Omen River, which could be heard and even seen in the distance. The three of them drove there in Nog's pickup truck, and as soon as they made their way out into the open field of Nog's cousin's land, Elder, who was sitting shotgun, let Rip out the passenger's side... as soon as Rip got out, a herd of pigs came wandering across the field, and Rip, half-blind, shot and wounded one of them. Elder went after the central part of the herd of pigs and planned to cast devils into them and drown them in a sea of gunfire, much like Jesus of the Bible, only without Grace or mercy. Elder disappeared into the Bottoms, and Nog led Rip after the wounded pig, following the blood trail as Rip had gut-shot the animal. Nog and Rip made away from the Omen River and found the pig. Nog finished it off by cutting its throat as it lay there dying in the brush. It had been shot twice in the guts, and one bullet of the semi-automatic gun, an AK-47 rifle... one bullet had struck high in the middle region and crippled the beast. It had made it as far as it had on adrenaline, the natural stimulant.

Rip realized, though, that they had wandered through a barbed-wire fence and were standing on the opposite side of the Omen River. Elder came walking up; Rip thought anyhow and said this was private land, at which point Rip realized the man was Rustic Stickman, a man whose brother, Hick Stickman, owned land in that area. Rustic told Nog to kindly gut the sow, which it was, to see if she was pregnant. At this point, Rip, fearing for his life, told Nog: "You lied to me." And Nog said nothing because he had.

Nog gutted the pig, and indeed, it was carrying unborn piglets. Nog, more clever than wise, told Rustic that he would pay his brother, Hick, for the pig. Nog and Rip dragged the pig back to the truck and loaded it. Fortunately, Elder was there waiting and could not track down any more of the pigs because that would have just escalated the matter. Nog slung the pig into the pickup truck and shut the tailgate, and the silent three of them made their way out of the field, and the Bottoms, when they came upon Hick, who blocked the road with his pickup truck, got out and flashed a revolver, probably a .380, at them. Nog wasn't intimidated; he knew Hick, and neither was Elder intimidated. Rip began to shut down, thinking all three would be shot over a stupid pig... or rather a white lie: a near-fatal "Nogism" that Nog had told Rip and Elder to go with him.

Either way, they were in a dangerous situation, and Rip shut down from fear. Rip had given Elder his AK-47 rifle to defend them when they first left the open field. Elder had a .44 revolver, also. The situation escalated quickly, though, when Nog took out his wallet and paid Rustic the \$60 he had in his wallet. Fortunately, Hick told them to stay away from his land and pigs and made threats and other antics to instill fear in the young men. But that was all for the show, as Hick knew he didn't stand a chance against Elder and Nog and Rip combined. But they were in the wrong.

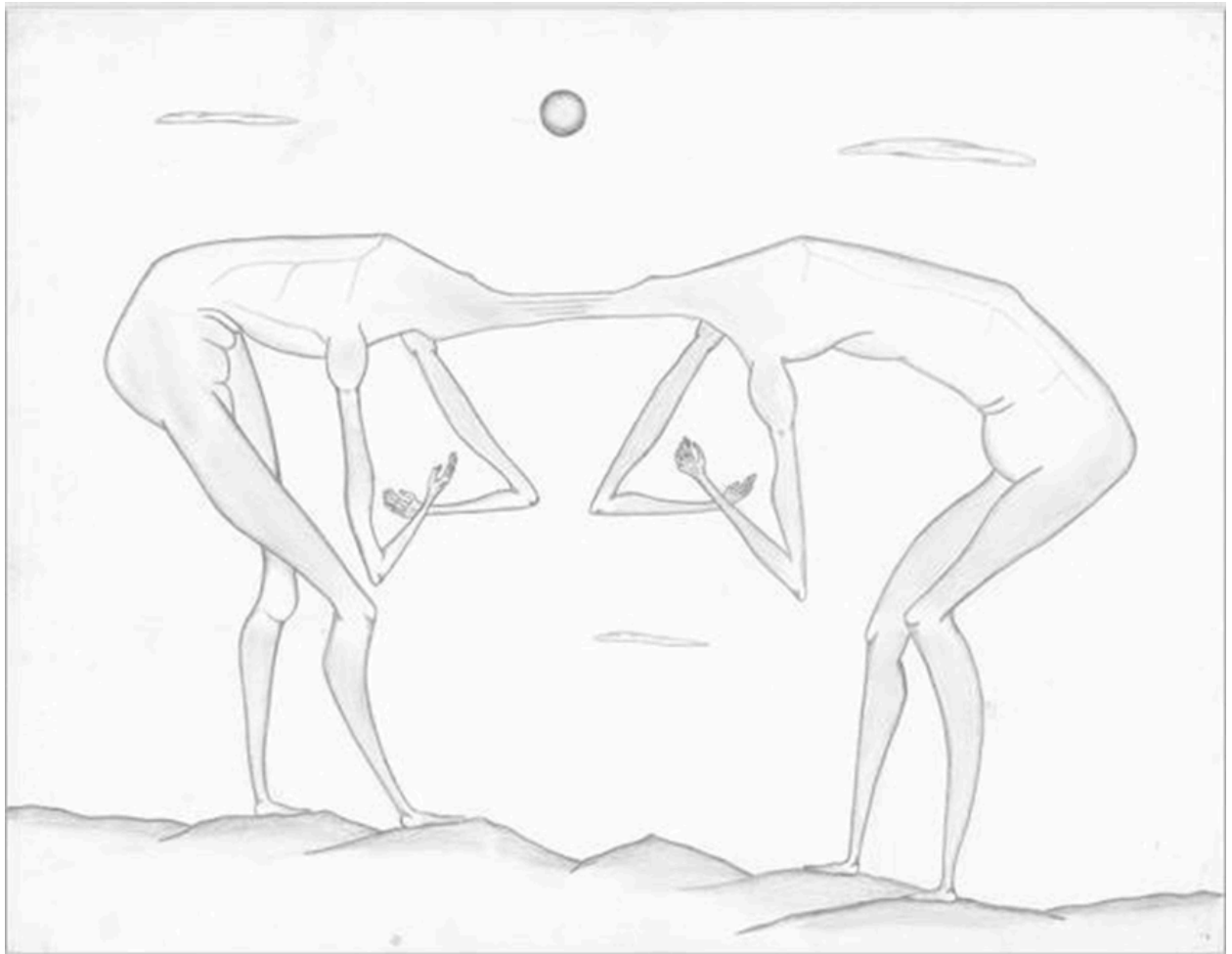
Rip, Elder, and Nog rode silently in Nog's truck back to Lucky's place. When the three got there, Nog tried to get Elder to pay his share of killing the pig, which was a mistake and wrong, for that matter, because it wasn't fair that Elder had to pay for a pig that he didn't kill. Elder responded with some cross words, and he told Nog to go to Hell, and he said:

"I don't owe you shit!" And Elder walked into Lucky's house to cool his temper down. On the other side of the coin, Rip told Nog he would pay his and Elder's share, but only because he shot the pig. And Rip paid Nog \$40.

And that's the story of a Pig Hunt that would alter the course of the circle of friends.

A History of the Pig

The City of Fort Façade has been the subject of gossip in the South here in Amerika, but the Tower was built here in the past and still stands today, as Rip expressed in his lamentation of doubt that the Tower will fall. But the Tower was built due to the government in Amerika first taking, then grating, then taking back, again, land from the Natives here in this part of the World... Regardless, through all of that, there was another creature here: the pig. The infamous feral pig of Fort Façade was not always feral. Still, it came from the domesticated pigs brought to early America as food sources, which escaped captivity. Now, after hundreds plus years of emancipation, Rip and company have sworn to exterminate the pig for rooting enough land up to destroy almost every other wild creature's native habitat in Fort Façade. Thus goes the wayward pig, rooting for years until being hunted down and killed for being a nuisance. Much the same was Rip hunted down and killed by the State. And this concludes our story, and even as Towers have fallen in the past, so too will they continue to be erected, but only to fail and fall...



Autumn Dance (a struggle)

