

The Cradle of the Worm by H. Landry

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## Chapter 1: Resurrection Men

The grass leading down into the valley looked blue this morning. In the distance, the sun was just beginning to show over the mountains. As its rays gradually crept into the valley, two figures made their way down the path to the village. They didn't speak as they walked, although occasionally their uneven gait would cause them to knock into each other. Their ragged garments flapped in the sharp morning wind. One raised a gloved hand to clutch at its broad-brimmed hat.

The village, called Charant, was little more than a few huts nestled together in the valley. The people here were shepherds and farmers, travelling to the nearest market town for anything the forest and fields could not provide. This settlement of less than fifty souls did not boast a church or a school, the villagers relying instead on the teachings of their elders. There was a local well and a crude meeting house for important matters.

This was to be Charant's last day as a village.

As the strangers made their slow descent into the valley, lurching along with no regard for the steepness of the terrain, the village slowly stirred to life. An old woman was already busy milking while her old man stalked through the outbuildings, clearly agitated. Finally, with an air of resignation, he turned to her.

“Well, where is he then?”

The woman did not lift her head from the flank of her cow. “Up in the woods. He said he had to gather flowers.”

“*Flowers?*” The man's name was Green. His voice was incredulous.

Now the woman known to the village as Granny looked up. “He said he needed one flower for everyone in the village.” She heaved a heavy sigh and shook her head in a way that was habitual to her when she was thinking of Corm. “Maybe we should have let him ripen a little longer,” she joked.

Green sighed. “He gets these notions—”

Granny stood up and gripped the bucket, feeling her spine crackle as she did so. It was not an unpleasant feeling and she stretched a little. “Yes, and forgets his promises. He said he'd help you chop the kindling and now off he goes!”

Whatever her husband was about to say in answer to this was abruptly cut off by the sound of running feet. The two old people turned to face the source of the noise, a young man of about seventeen or eighteen.

“Jan.” The old man's face showed joy as he regarded his visitor. They had only recently taken him in, but Jan was already a great comfort to Green in his old age. He was a strong boy and moreover he was not in the habit of shirking his duties to go off on wild jaunts whenever the mood took him. Green noted with approval that the sickle in Jan's belt already had grass clinging to it.

Jan ran a hand through hair like straw and nodded to them distractedly, looking around. He was still out of breath.

Granny spoke up warily, "He's not here if you're looking for Corm."

The boy grimaced. "Bad luck! Rosie's finally dropped her calf."

"He's gone up into the mountain." The old woman shrugged. "He'll come back when his stomach tells him to, I expect. I don't know what will become of that child when Papa and I are gone, I really don't."

"I shall take care of him, of course." Jan smiled. The smile was infectious and the old people found themselves sharing it. Their thoughts were interrupted by the harsh croaking of a bird.

Most people had risen by this time and a few of them glanced toward the center of the settlement, where a number of crows were beginning to cluster. Gossip about poor fishing and a recent lack of rabbits died down as more of them noticed the birds.

"Corbies." breathed Jan. "But why so many? There's nothing for them here."

Green furrowed his brow but then his eyes widened. Two figures had appeared in the square. They wore broad hats and gloves, with their faces buried under thick scarves and their voluminous coats closely buttoned in spite of the growing warmth of the morning. They swayed drunkenly up to the carrion crows, forcing more than one of the birds to scuttle ahead of the strangers' unmindful feet. The two came to a dead stop in the middle of the square and stonily regarded the small crowd who had by now gathered to stare at them.

The pragmatic people of the village had no great regard for beggars or drunkards, but no

one challenged the strange men. No one spoke at all. Something white showed where the taller one's sleeve ended well above the rim of a glove. It was bone.

Green's tongue finally loosened. "God help us. *Resurrection men.*"

Granny choked and one of the women nearby screamed. Several people dropped to their knees to plead for their lives. Jan tried to grab Granny and Green and drag them back into the nearest outbuilding, but time itself seemed to fight him. He felt like he was wading through mud.

The two strangers had not moved. "This place?" the shorter one rasped. Its voice was like worms twisting in a rotting log. The taller one nodded, the scarf slipping down from its chin to reveal a bare jawbone missing several teeth.

They opened their coats.

Up on the mountainside, a boy was gathering flowers. He was too far away to hear the noises in the valley. His expression did not change as he slowly counted the flowers again and again. This was typical of him, for he rarely smiled or frowned or made any kind of face. This was Corm, who had been taken to Granny Green seventeen years ago after he was found near the woods, whimpering and half-buried in mud.

It had not taken Granny long to realize that "something was missing in the boy," but she and her old man had accepted his care and the village had grown used to his peculiarities over the years. Granny made him shirts from old sacks and quilts and Green did his best to teach the boy useful things, some of which stuck and some which didn't. Corm felt nothing but love and gratitude for them, locked behind his passive face.

Down in the valley, the village was dying. The first to die saw what looked like a blurred gray cloud erupt from the ribs of the two strangers, before they went down under its tendrils. Those who lived a few seconds longer were able to see smaller masses squirming within the great mass—slick, smooth things which, though soft and toothless, ate a man to bone in seconds. People were devoured as they ran or as they huddled paralyzed with fear. Granny Green and her man died before their bodies fell to the dust of the outbuilding floor. Rosie's calf was consumed a scant hour after it had been born. The village was emptied of life in minutes.

When silence returned to the village, the two strangers looked at each other over the mass of busy crows. “Will he use any?” asked the smaller one, who called itself Culla.

“Who knows.” Moul, the taller one, seemed to have more difficulty speaking.

“Why this place?”

“Hrrh. Why does he do anything?”

Both of them laughed, a grinding, rattling sound that was more unwholesome than the sly feasting sounds of the birds. Culla clicked its jaw and the two braced themselves as the viscous mass that had eaten a village slid up into them again. Most of the hapless crows came with it.

“Heavy,” Culla remarked.

“No more talk.” Moul straightened up and drew its coat shut. Together, they departed the way they had come.

Corm came down from the mountain about mid-day. Usually at noon time there would be

smoke coming from one or more of the huts clustered there, but he saw none. Granny was not calling him to lunch. Papa and Jan and the other men were not working in the fields or talking in the streets. By now, even most of the surviving crows were gone. He saw no one at all; the only thing he noticed as he approached the settlement was that there seemed to be rubbish strewn everywhere. He kept careful hold of his flowers as he picked his way down the mountain.

The village had an overwhelming smell that Corm did not like. It was a blood smell, but it was something more than that. There hung over the valley a stench of something unnatural. He had never encountered anything like it, and he had to press his palm against his mouth to keep from being sick. As he looked down at the ground, dizzy from the smell, he saw what he had taken to be trash earlier.

Corm's expression did not change. He slowly lifted his head to take in the whole settlement, his eyes refocusing to admit the new truth they saw. Everyone was dead, the meat eaten from them. Some were in bones, some still had faces. He recognized many of them only by their clothing. A filthy grey film clung to all of them. Silently Corm broke into a run, looking to the right and left, darting in and out of houses. He clutched the flowers tighter to his chest as he came to the end of his grim inventory. No one had made it. Except...

He dropped to his knees beside Granny and Papa. Jan's sickle lay across them like a guardian. With one hand, Corm shifted their bones, feeling their cold guts under his palm as he cocked his head and frowned with real thought. He believed that there were only two corpses here. He had not seen Jan anywhere else. Jan was not here, he was gone.

Corm set down his flowers. There was no question as to what needed to be done. He

found one of Green's spades and for the rest of the day and into the night, he dug shallow holes. One by one, he tipped each villager into a grave and covered them loosely with earth. He thought about them through the tedious and repetitive work.

Corm had been teased for his ways. People lost patience teaching him, sometimes even Granny and Papa. Jan had been the only one who never seemed to mind. But as he studied each dead face, it was not these things Corm thought of. He thought of being taken fishing, and given the coveted job of brushing Rosies's coat. He thought of Granny's bedtime stories, and the little owl Jan's father had whittled him once. No one had asked for him, yet all had taken care of him. Corm knew this with an acute hidden perception. He mourned them deeply even if he did not weep.

The buck moon was high in the sky before he was done. He gathered the flowers in his arms once more and put one flower on each grave...one flower for every person in the village. When he had finished, there was one left over.

Jan's sickle lay where Corm had left it, reflecting the moon. He picked it up and put it in his belt, thinking that when he found Jan, he would give it back to him. Then he walked out of the village with nothing but the clothes on his back. The gray creatures had left him no food and no indication of what direction he should go. He knew only that he had to go after Jan.

It was the first time he had ever left the valley.

## Chapter 2: The Young Lord

After quitting the village, Moulton and Culla had returned to their master. Their lord called himself Ascaris, a name meaning “worm.” He had been born long before Corm was found on the forest’s edge, yet he wore the aspect of a child of twelve. He named his skeletal servants the *ankou* in accordance with the legends of his birthplace. They were known as “resurrection men” in Corm’s parts and had collected other names in their travels. These names often died along with the men who used them.

Ascaris was not concerned when his *ankou* failed to return with Corm. He was never concerned about anything, because he was no longer human. Some time ago, the same force that propelled his dead servants had entered into him and thereafter it was that force alone that made all the decisions. This intruding force did not have a name for itself, needing none. Soon, the worm would burrow deep into the Earth’s heart, and the Intruder would be the only thing left of the world. Names do not matter when there is no one to utter them.

The young lord did not have to ask his *ankou* what had happened in the village. He’d been there all along, in each quivering cell of the devouring wave. The slick gray things that ate Corm’s village had originally been flesh from Ascaris’s body, multiplied and sloughed off to go act in his place whenever the need required. With a gesture he called the flesh back, relieving his servants of their burden. They watched through eyeless sockets as the slight body of the boy absorbed the bloated gray mass. Not one inch of him was left sullied or distended by the grotesque process.

In this manner, he was in many places. His flesh occupied bodies that flew through the

sky, lurked below the sea, and crawled through the forests. Ascaris's was merely the first body to unwillingly embrace it. The human boy had died years ago, and at the moment his soul fled another mind had forced its way inside, pushing the blood forward once more, forcing the heart to beat and the eyes to feed it information. The Intruder's first act had been to rear up and consume the boy's killers.

Now, an outside observer would have been puzzled to see this angelic child dismissing two towering skeletal abominations with all the authority and poise of a king. The resurrection men slunk off out of his sight, leaving a wretched-looking bundle that had slid out of them along with the flesh.

Ascaris studied it closely. Carried within Culla's ribs, this mass had been mashed and compressed, only to be hastily and clumsily reassembled. Yet it still lived. With mounting interest Ascaris started to envision uses for it. It would need many months of refining first, but perhaps the visit to Corm's village had not been wasted.

The material on the floor began to stir and groan. Ascaris knelt down next to it and plunged two fingers into its forehead, knowing the necessary spots from the Intruder's long explorations of his own lifeless body. The object's screams and squeals eventually subsided, and it stared at Ascaris in placid, baffled obedience. Ascaris was satisfied. It was always best to establish dominance immediately.

He turned away from the creature, forgetting it entirely. It could crawl and graze later if it felt hunger or thirst. Such things did not worry him. He turned his vision outward again to the other bodies occupied by the thing that drove his consciousness.

He was striding through the steaming forest on legs longer than the trees. There was a

smell of meat. They were worshiping him again. Now he was beating coppery wings through the hot still air, alighting on a high stone table where a woman watched him fearfully through grit-filmed eyes and begged for water in a clipped desert language. Lastly his gaze took him to green cold depths, where the fish carry their own lamps on fearsome heads. Cramped hands fondled rusted and rotting treasures from old wrecks.

None of this was useful. They were lazy, his children.

Raising a hand unnecessarily, he commanded each of the Intruder's other bodies in turn. Spider legs juddered, paused, and lurched away toward the meat smells, dropping pieces of flesh that quivered for a moment and then rose to join their "mother" on her errand. The desert woman receded, her dusty throat too dry by now to even scream in protest, as copper wings took flight once again to scour the sands below for information. Ocean treasures were abandoned sulkily as the king beneath the waves left his hall to ask the fish for news.

Lastly came the crows that had lived to tell of their feast in Charant, and unwittingly eaten traces of the Intruder along with the flesh of its villagers. Nothing more than winged dead eyes now, they flew off to watch and watch until they fell to the earth, dead, or became some hunter's feast to start the cycle again.

Between them, they would find Corm. And they would find *her*.

### Chapter 3: The Army of Heaven

The massacre at Corm's village was the latest link in a chain of similar events stretching back decades. There was a kind of creeping death starting from the edges of human habitation that was gradually gaining ground. Corm's people were decimated by two messengers who carried death within their ribs, but death was also rising from the riverbeds and descending invisible from the night sky. Villages were disappearing.

Far away in the Antilha island chain, plague and strife had begun to reign. But this went largely unnoticed by the people on the mainland. Instead, the West and the East alike were seeing a resurgence of old superstitions, up to and including human sacrifice. Cults that had been discarded in more civilized times regained popularity as the people struggled to retain a sense of safety.

The western countries, insular and disorganized, were slow to realize what was happening in isolated settlements. So it was with Corm's village and so it had been for years. Half a world away in the East, men had been aware of the enemy for longer. Their lands, more densely populated, had seen more of the Intruder's forms. But even they did not know what was happening or why. Governments became more restrictive out of fear.

Out of this chaos rose the Army of Heaven.

It was natural for the countries of the East and West to retain standing armies, even in times of peace. But while the West dragged its feet, the East assessed its situation and came to the conclusion that the regular army was not sufficient to combat the new threat on its own.

A new fighting force was established, one that promoted inhumanity to combat the

inhuman agents that were wiping out whole villages and towns. A soldier of the new army had to kill without remorse, judge without sentiment, and act without thought. These ideal soldiers were likened to gods, and they took the name Heaven.

The new army's first action was to assume control of the state in the name of national security. They were completely ruthless and the people were terrified of them. The regular army became the next example of the new army's effectiveness, sustaining heavy losses until it finally capitulated and recognized the Army of Heaven as the supreme defensive force of the land.

And so it was that in Corm's time, the Army of Heaven had reigned in the East for almost five years. The army stopped at no necessary atrocity yet took no action it deemed unnecessary. It loomed, serene and efficient, as the ultimate defense against the unknown threat to man, and it continued to grow.

The Army of Heaven accepted men above the age of thirteen only. The main body of the army was composed of sergeants and soldiers. A sergeant's primary job was to train more soldiers. Upon training a new squad, the sergeant released them to the nearest captain and repeated the process with new men.

There were very few captains and this was the highest rank. No one outside the army, not even those in the regular army, understood the organizational method by which the Army of Heaven acted in perfect unison. Many thought there must be a leader, but no one knew what kind of man he was or where he was.

If he existed at all.

At the time that the ankou entered Corm's settlement, a small group of men in the Yikuron Province had just completed their first phase of training. Their sergeant studied them

carefully. Not one pair of eyes looked back into his; everyone stared straight ahead.

All the men here were on the verge of being soldiers in the Army of Heaven. They were disciplined, ruthless and unattached to any place or anyone. The only thing for them now was the Army.

The Army is the end.

Now, he lifted his voice to them. "Your training is complete! Tomorrow we will begin Gauntlet. One Gauntlet per day until we are a unit. Understood?"

"Sir, yes Sir!" There was no dissonance. Not so much as one voice was a half-second off. The thirty or so men before him breathed and thought as one.

"There are two kinds of men in this world: soldiers and dogs!" The sergeant strode up and down the line. "The soldiers have the thankless job of protecting the dogs. But in return, the soldier is free. A soldier stands and fights while a dog cowers in fear. In this world, where the weak are devoured by the strong, Soldier is God!"

"The Army is the end! Soldier is God!" The men knew what to say and when to say it. The men believed.

The sergeant stopped and nodded, satisfied. He could taste their belief. He was confident that many of these men, perhaps even most of them, would survive Gauntlet and become soldiers. It was not boasting to say that one soldier in the Army of Heaven was worth ten or twenty men from the regular army.

He did not reflect upon which men would make it and which would not. The Army of Heaven did not refuse any man from joining simply because he was too old or too small. Anyone who could survive the training and Gauntlet would become a soldier. Anyone who did not was a

dog.

"Dismissed!" The sergeant left for his tent. Unlike him, most of the men were more than willing to amuse themselves with predictions about who would become a soldier and who would end life as a dog.

While the main body of men bragged and fought, a few others withdrew to the sides to eat or take their rest before early morning when Gauntlet would begin. Most of these latter men were automatically marked as dogs by the others.

Father was one of these. He had never given his proper name and this did not matter in the Army of Heaven; frequently new identities were created here. The Army of Heaven did not care if a man was a fugitive or a priest, so long as he could kill.

Father was more like a priest than a fugitive, and though he was strong he was old enough to be father to most of the men there. These singularities had earned him his name. He went over to one of the youngest squad members, with whom he spent much of his time.

"It is not too late." The old man put his hand on Vata's shoulder. "You could leave tonight...I could help you."

But his friend only turned aside. Possessed of a slight build and stature, Vata was perhaps the most certain bet for "dog" among the other soldiers if betting had been allowed in the Army of Heaven.

It did not help that Vata never spoke to anyone or tried to make friends. It was only a dogged persistence on Father's part that enabled their strange friendship. Perhaps the old man was moved by pity for this child who had chosen isolation even in this rigid army, where being too different or too aloof could be lethal.

"You really won't go?" Father's face broke into a frown.

Vata said quietly, "The Army is the end."

"I fear that will be especially true for you!" The old man walked off, disgusted at such obstinacy.

Vata watched him before turning and noiselessly going to bed. In the main body of the camp a fist-fight broke out among the men as tempers rose over slurs fueled by false bravado. Everyone was privately scared of failing.

Normally by this time the sergeant would have come out of his tent to cuff one or two of the men upside the head and send them all back to their barracks, but he was currently busy. So focused was he that he did not even hear the gruff voices outside or the fighting.

"This is very unclear." The sergeant was speaking to a courier. "Are you *certain* nothing happened between your departure and your arrival at my camp?"

The courier's back became more rigid. "Sir, no Sir. The message was not tampered with in any way. The colonel's seal was unbroken."

"Yes..." the sergeant stroked his chin. "Very well, get a meal and then return to me before you leave camp. Dismissed."

After the courier left, the sergeant re-read the message in his hands for what seemed like the tenth time. An aerial attack...what did they mean by an "aerial" attack? He felt uneasy. The colonel's messages were normally very concise and unambiguous, but this one was completely jumbled.

Were it not for several phrases that served as a rough code between the two men, the sergeant would have doubted the letter's veracity. As it was, he still had difficulty believing it.

What the sergeant might have called an aerial attack involved things like ballistics, but this message seemed to imply that the enemy was in fact approaching their troops *from the air*.

And such a thing was impossible...the sergeant paced his tent, then sat down to write. Clarification was needed. There was no use panicking until then.

When the courier returned he was handed a new message. The sergeant wrote to the colonel as if he, and not the colonel, was the superior officer. This was not unusual for an officer of any rank in the Army of Heaven. Those in the regular army were respected above dogs, but they were not treated the same as those within the circle and they were not wholly trusted.

After seeing the courier off, the sergeant spoke with the sentries and then walked back to his quarters for the night. By the time he crossed the camp even the quarrelers had gone back to their barracks.

At dawn, the trumpet sounded throughout camp and the sergeant's voice thundered after it:

"Roll out! Roll out for Gauntlet!"

## Chapter 4: The Gauntlet

Father rolled to his side and craned his neck to look for Vata's bed. He was hoping to see the bed empty and the pack gone from under it. His eyebrows lifted as he saw that it *was* empty...then, a moment later his hope was shattered as he glimpsed Vata, up and in uniform, vanishing through the doorway.

Father scowled and rose to get dressed. Vata was a fine warrior but there was no ignoring the size disadvantage. If his friend's Gauntlet was called today, it would mean certain death. And yet Vata seemed willing to rush right into it. Suicidal!

“Roll out! Roll out for Gauntlet!!” The sergeant's voice seemed hateful to Father now. He filed out with the last stragglers and shoved his way into line firmly beside Vata. He scanned Vata's face for any tremor, any sign of anxiety, but he found nothing. Completely focused on the sergeant, Vata didn't even seem to notice Father was there.

The sergeant looked his men over for a moment, thinking of the time they had spent together. He made his choice quickly. He was not a cruel man and he knew that his men were not soldiers yet, and that some of them were therefore still capable of fear. That would all change after Gauntlet.

“Peccary.”

“Sir!” A young man not much bigger than Vata stepped forward and saluted.

“Today is your Gauntlet! Are you prepared?”

“Sir, yes Sir!” Peccary's voice was brave and unwavering.

The sergeant nodded, then withdrew a few paces. The men knew what they were expected to do and they formed two lines facing each other. Each man held either a smooth truncheon or a macana. These were not the usual weapons of the Army of Heaven, but were reserved almost exclusively for Gauntlet.

Peccary had no weapon. He took his place at the starting point of the two lines, standing between them, and waited. One of the men in line grinned slyly, taking this freedom because his back was to the sergeant. Another man licked his teeth inside his mouth. Both of these eager ones were men much bigger than Peccary or Vata. Vata's jaw tightened. Father looked down at his feet.

“Begin.” The sergeant did not shout but even so his voice rang out across the dead silence of the camp.

Peccary breathed in, and this was also magnified so that everyone heard it. Then he ran between the two lines.

There was a half-second of continued silence, where the only sounds were Peccary's urgent breath and his feet pounding the grass. Then came the low whoosh of a truncheon descending followed by another a moment later. There was a sickening hollow thud as the first blow connected against Peccary's back.

He gasped and swallowed hard, eyes bulging from the shock of contact, and his body tried stupidly to pause even though he needed desperately to keep running. The macanas were whistling through the air in front of him and behind him now, rising and falling in a dark forest he could not navigate. No one jeered or shouted, no one spoke at all, and it was much more dreadful this way.

Between the blows there was only the sound of the men grunting as they swung and the thick slap of Peccary's feet against each other as he stumbled forward. The truncheons continued to rain down on him in a dull rhythm punctuated by the occasional sharp cracking noise when a macana hit bone.

Peccary first managed to keep everything in his throat but as the seconds stretched on into infinity he could not withhold his cries any longer. No longer knowing what he did, he continued to stumble, blinded by blood, finally inching his way forward on his belly. Still the weapons fell.

“Sergeant!” Peccary's voice held none of its earlier bravery. The sergeant came over to stand abreast of Peccary's position. The boy was halfway through Gauntlet. “Sergeant!” Peccary was faltering now and his voice was huskier, and still the weapons rose and fell. “I...can't. Help! Help me!”

The sergeant squatted easily to look at him, putting his hands on his knees. “Peccary, listen to me carefully. Are you giving up?” He was utterly nonjudgmental. The question had to be asked.

Peccary barely heard him. He only repeated “I can't. Help me! Sergeant!”

The sergeant got up and turned away. “End Gauntlet!” he barked. The men on either side of Peccary straightened up and wiped the sweat from their brows, panting. Peccary sobbed with relief and started to crawl toward the sergeant.

But for some reason, the sergeant was walking away now without looking back. Dismayed, Peccary tried to call out to him, but a shadow fell between them and a hand grabbed him roughly by the cheeks, pinching his mouth shut. He heard laughter.

“Where are you going?” Wallow, the big man who had smiled earlier, was now blocking Peccary's view of the sergeant. Peccary clawed at Wallow's hand, trying to roll away, trying to follow the sergeant. But the sergeant was still walking away...away, and up to his tent where he drew aside the flap and vanished from Peccary's sight altogether.

Even then, Peccary didn't fully understand, even as the men formed a circle around him and shut him in. Instead of the freedom and light he had expected, he found himself stuck in a denser and blacker forest than before. It was hot, stifling; he could feel the stinking breath of the men against his lacerated skin.

Through puckered lips he tried to beg for his life. “Over. Sergeant...said Gauntlet was—” Some blood and spit ran down his throat and he coughed, dotting Wallow's hand with it. Wallow slapped him hard for that and Peccary's ears rang.

Father turned to look at Vata, who was watching the scene motionlessly. He found himself squinting stupidly at the truncheon at Vata's side, wondering what was wrong with it.

Then he realized the truth. Every man's weapon, including his own, was slick with blood. Vata's alone was clean.

Another man known as Saint spoke deliberately. "Dog." It was the same as a judge pronouncing a sentence and the others took up the cry. "Dog. Dog! Dog!!"

Father didn't take his eyes off of Vata. He knew that if he did, he would see what was happening to Peccary, and he didn't want to see.

Saint knotted his hand in Peccary's hair and ground the young man's face in the dirt, making him choke and sneeze as the grass went up his nose. He felt hands on his back next, ragged short nails biting into his skin as the men ripped his uniform.

"No," and he tasted dirt and felt the grit in his tongue as he tried to beg them one last time. "Don't kill me! The...the sergeant...! He said it's over!"

"Kill a *dog*?" Wallow laughed from back in his throat and Father heard, and did not want to hear, the leather sound as the man undid his belt. "Only a soldier is worth killing." Wallow's voice dropped as he said this and one or two of the other men laughed softly. Father knew then what was coming and he fought against a rising wave of sickness.

He reminded himself that he must only look at Vata.

"You won't kill...?" Peccary's voice was hopeful, but in the next moment it was clipped off as Wallow jerked forward and the men all leaned in to watch. Peccary seemed to regain his voice all at once and he screamed, a gurgling sound full of spit and dirt that went on and on.

Wallow breathed heavily, leaning in to shout against Peccary's ear so he would hear him. "This is what a dog is for!" He punched him in the ribs and the men all roared with laughter as Peccary threw up in the grass.

Father fought harder with his own stomach. His eyes were watering, making his vision blur, and he couldn't see Vata anymore...then he abruptly realized that Vata had left. And as he turned back to face that teeming pile of men, clawing and pulling and forcing themselves onto that half-dead and retching boy, someone laughed again.

The day passed slowly.

Dusk had fallen and the sergeant had still not left his tent. He raised his head slightly after hearing a feeble scratching sound against the canvas. Returning his attention to his equipment, he muttered "Enter."

The flap to his tent widened a little, then scraped slowly back into place as something caught in it. No one had walked in. This did not alarm the sergeant, and he continued sharpening his weapon until he felt a mute tug at his ankle.

Peccary was still alive somehow. They had used him all through the day, finally stopping when hunger and boredom took the place of novelty. He was torn and filthy and his body would not stop shaking. It taxed the limits of his strength to lift his head.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" The sergeant's voice was not the one Peccary had known up until now. He dully recognized the tone as one the sergeant reserved for addressing Dogs.

“Help me...”

“You've been injured.” The sergeant said this matter-of-factly, as if he hadn't been sitting here closing his ears to the awful sounds of the men all throughout morning and daylight. “This is not a medical unit. I regret that I have only untrained men here.” This, too, he said as if Peccary didn't already know the camp inside and out. But then, Peccary was no longer part of his camp.

The young man was wracked by a sudden bout of dry-heaves and the sergeant waited quietly for him to recover himself. He did not fault Peccary for it, nor expect differently from him. He was a dog and dogs were weak. Finally, Peccary managed to whisper: “Sergeant. I am...nothing now? You don't care if I die?”

The sergeant raised one eyebrow and stood up. He walked across the tent, sidestepping the man on the floor, and called out to the camp. “Volunteers for a detail! Two-man escort for a wounded civilian!” He waited silently at the opening to his tent while behind him, Peccary shook and started to cry.

Father came. The sergeant addressed him. “This man needs medical attention. Yandro is nearest and they have a doctor.” Father nodded. “See if you can find another man to help you,” the sergeant continued. “That is all.”

“Sir, yes Sir.” Father bent to pull Peccary to his knees.

“I am nothing?!” the young man sobbed, clutching blindly at Father.

The sergeant was under no obligation to answer a civilian. Without looking at him, he replied: “Even a Dog has worth. Most men never learn the truth about themselves. You have been taught the truth, and self-knowledge is the key to a fuller existence.”

“*Sergeant!*”

“I am not your sergeant.” Now the sergeant looked directly at him, a look devoid even of contempt. “This is a military camp. It is no place for a civilian.”

Peccary went limp and Father pulled him out of the tent, almost carrying him. The man's legs were near worthless. Vata met them at the edge of camp and silently took one of Peccary's arms, putting a shoulder under it to carry the young man between them.

Father waited until Peccary had lost consciousness before speaking to Vata. “You will leave *now?*”

Vata's head shook. Father gritted his teeth and spat. “You arrogant fool! The Army of Heaven is no place for a w—” he was sharply cut off by Vata's hand clamped to his mouth, hard enough to bruise the lips against his teeth. Father sucked on his lips painfully before speaking again. “I only worry about you because you remind me so much of my son.”

Vata's voice was quiet as always. “If I die in Gauntlet, is it so different than if I was living some quiet life in some quiet place, and the enemy came to my village? Anyone can die.” Father remained sullenly quiet, so Vata pressed the point. “I would rather face death than hide and hope for the best.”

Father's reply was bitter. "You're talkative today. So you *have* been thinking about your death."

"I'm talkative because we're alone. But yes. I've been thinking about my death."

"Because of this." Father raised his shoulder a little and Peccary's head lolled.

But Vata's head shook again. "No, he was fortunate. He didn't die."

"Fortunate!" Father spat out the word so violently that Peccary woke up.

"...Yandro?" the young man looked helplessly up at them.

"We'll be there soon." Vata looked straight ahead.

*You speak to him the same as you did before, thought Father. As if he were still human.*

The three of them walked silently the rest of the way to Yandro.

In the morning, when the sergeant called "Roll out for Gauntlet!" there were less faces in the line of men that formed for his inspection. One or two men always deserted after witnessing their first Gauntlet, in spite of the heavy penalties for desertion.

But Vata's face was still there, and so Father stayed.

## Chapter 5: The Sea Wolf

Panipe was the island witch. Like her grandmother and mother before her, she lived in a small cramped hut by the sea, with only the changing waters and the occasional furtive visits of the villagers to break the monotony of her lonely existence.

The people whispered of her wild and wicked ways, even as they feared and sought her power. Everyone knew that witches laid curses and consorted with the spirits that formed a bridge between men and God. No village man would court a witch...openly. Panipe was virtually isolated by the misconceptions surrounding her hereditary talents.

Her mother and grandmother had been the wild ones. Beautiful and disdainful of small ways, they lived as they chose. If a man caught their fancy, they took him, even if he had a wife and children. Panipe was a different sort. Even if she had wanted to wreak havoc among the village wives, she lacked the allure to tempt a man away from his daily paths.

And so the years sped by Panipe. Every woman she helped with a love potion, or those potions to speed or slow the coming of a baby, reminded her that she was alone. She knew better than to dance with any demons, but even that prospect started to seem attractive after a while.

Finally, she remembered a small charm her old grandmother had given her some years before, an antidote to loneliness.

As she hunted through dried aromatic plants and sifted through veves and powders,

Panipe remembered her grandmother's warning. "Cast this into the sea in the dark of the moon, and the man that comes to you will bring his own light. Enough light, my girl, to outshine any man in the village. But it's a strong magic this, and I never dared use it. For he won't be a man really, and you must keep his pelt hid or he'll take your heart away beneath the waves."

For all Panipe knew, this "man" might literally tear her heart out if she were to lose control of him. But what did she care? She wanted to taste the fruits of life like other women. When the moon was dark once more, she strode purposefully out to the waves, carrying the small stone charm.

What came to her was not a man at all, not at first. A slick bullet-shaped snout broke the waves near where she'd cast her charm, and though its fur was as dark as the sky above, she saw it clearly. It swam toward her, resembling what her people called a sea wolf though it was a very large one.

When the seal reached shore, the pelt slid off it and she was facing the strangest man she'd ever seen. His eyes were full dark within dark like a seal's eyes, and his skin shone more than a man's dull flesh, dark on his backside and lighter on the belly.

He did not speak. She later found out he couldn't form human words. But it was not pretty speeches Panipe wanted from this sea-child, and he seemed to understand what she needed from him. Their marriage occurred then and there, beneath the moonless sky. Her hair in the surf and her face tilted up to the stars, she feverishly decided he was worth even the heart from her chest.

But Panipe still remembered to take his seal's pelt after their nuptials, and hide it well.

She simply called him Mari, "Husband" in her tongue. He walked like a man, but lapped the soup from his cup like a dog. He wore the garments she made for him without ever looking quite proper in them. And when people came to the tiny hut for her help, they were only admitted after he had slipped out the back to spend long hours swimming and hunting.

The people of the village gradually began to suspect that Panipe was no longer alone. There had always been colorful rumors about her, and in other times the uncanny presence of Mari may not have mattered very much to them. But times had begun to change.

While the resurrection men stalked far away across the northern waters, the people of the Antilha Islands did not find themselves untouched. A plague had begun to ravage the westernmost islands of the archipelago. Many of the island folk blamed the pestilence on an evil spirit called Agwerot. He had lately risen to challenge Agive, the king beneath the sea. Ships were sinking in calm waters or washing up onshore emptied of their inhabitants, and they feared this was Agwerot's doing too.

This seemingly new evil spirit was actually one of Ascaris's children, but the folk of Panipe's island knew nothing of a world-wide invasion. Instead, their fears and suspicions naturally centered on the village witch and her demon lover. They feared she was a traitor in their midst, allied to the dark spirits through her abominable marriage. Many of them owed debts of gratitude to her. But first a few, then more of them reluctantly concluded that if they didn't act to save themselves, the plague was bound to reach them next.

By this time Panipe and Mari had welcomed a child into the world, a boy who had the amber coloring of a young seal. They named him Tife and he could swim almost as soon as he was born. Mari would often take his son to the water to play and learn, even as Panipe was still nursing him. The people of the village hardened their hearts and planned for a deadly confrontation as the happy couple nurtured their unusual son.

Then came the day their happiness was destined to end.

Mari looked at his wife in disbelief. Panipe had handed him little Tife and then taken his seal's pelt from her cunning hiding place and put it on his shoulder. He barked angrily, taking a step back from her. Panipe was surprised to see that his inhuman eyes registered betrayal, even deep hurt.

“My love,” she began to say. But she was cut off, forced to look over her shoulder as the sound of many voices singing became louder behind her. They must have crested the hill; there was very little time now.

Panipe straightened her back and looked at her husband and child again, an older and stronger woman than the lonely girl who had cast a strange stone into the sea. “I have prayed to Agive who brought you to me, my love” she explained patiently. “You must return to the waves. Take our baby to a far island and leave him at a crossroads. He was made when my world crossed yours, and I have faith that the spirits there will protect him.”

Mari jerked his chin up, finally noticing the singing that had begun to encroach on his wife's gentle voice. Something in it told him that his mate was in danger, and he lunged forward

and bit her hand, dragging her toward the back of the hut.

“I can’t join you in the water!” She reluctantly broke away, leaving a blood taste in his strong teeth. “Tife is half you, but I would drown. You cannot breathe for us both!”

Mari gave a deep guttural whine of protest. Panipe shook her head firmly and picked up a bundle. She held it to her breast as she would their baby, and turned toward the door of the hut. The singing had almost reached them.

“I go to meet them, and sleep amidst the flames. I will not be hurt.”

Mari noticed for the first time that there was an empty bowl on the table. His wife always made food for them to share, before. But today, she had brewed something and drunk it all herself.

Panipe’s gentle voice now held a hard edge to it as she watched through the door. “They will think they have burned the witch and her demon spawn, and are safe. And they will never harm you and our little bird.”

Once again Mari whined and then barked angrily, determined to make another try. But as he started forward his nose wrinkled and he smelled that Death was already caressing his wife. She had brewed it for herself in that empty bowl. She truly would not feel their flames.

Tife was waking up. Sorrowfully, Mari rasped a single human word, the only one he had managed to mimic somewhat in their time together. Then he took their baby swiftly out the back of the hut before they could be surrounded.

The approaching villagers saw him sprinting off and yelled, a contingent of them breaking off to follow him. But when they saw him revert to a gigantic seal they quailed, paralyzed for a moment in the face of the uncanny. By the time they recovered themselves, Mari had vanished beneath the waves. Those who had seen him closely enough to notice he was carrying something thought that it was his seal's pelt.

Meanwhile, numb Panipe smiled as they beat her and lashed her to one of the posts of her hut. She held her bundle in a death grip, telling the crowd that she had poisoned her unnatural baby and wished to accompany him to hell. Nothing they did could hurt her, and the hateful things they uttered did not even reach her ears. Her vision faded as they piled the plants and furnishings from the hut around her feet for fuel. Women she had helped, children she had saved, all shrieked for her death in mad panic over a world that was spinning out of their control.

Panipe did not mourn. Her entire world was the memory of her husband's warm inhuman eyes, the sweet baby in his arms, and his rasping voice calling her *madan*...wife.

## Chapter 6: The Five Children

Corm and Vata both knew something about the enemy at this point. It had only one attack, and that was to consume. And it had only one defense, and that was to grow.

This invader had been weakened and largely burned away from its journey into our world. It only had the energy to control one boy's unresisting corpse in the beginning. Ascaris was a tiny foothold in a new world. But cell by cell, it continued to grow in strength.

As it grew, it studied the world it had entered and pondered ways to extend its influence. Occupying dead organisms had severe limitations. The animated skeletons that served Ascaris were simple to maintain, but clumsy. As for the boy himself, the energy required to keep Ascaris whole and functional was considerable and demanded the periodic ingestion of living material.

At first this material was provided by animals. The far-spread peoples of less populated lands did not at first notice the disappearance of hives and warrens, or the unnatural silence of certain forests and fields. Humans first became aware of the threat in the form of mysterious sheep and cattle plagues.

The world was ripe for such an invasion. Corm and Vata were born in a time when both West and East had been lulled into complacency by decades of comparative peace. Both regions were rich in small outposts and isolated villages. Soon enough, these villages began disappearing. Years before the Army of Heaven began mobilizing, the Intruder had finally gathered enough energy to make its next move.

After learning the difficulties of occupying a dead host, the Intruder decided to try entering the bodies of living creatures. Knowing only Ascaris and the ankou as a home, it again

selected humans for its hosts. It wanted no resistance and no complications, and so it resolved to enter infants at the moment of their birth. One must command trust to make people give up their children. Ascaris accordingly styled himself as a holy man and began a journey for disciples.

He had no trouble finding worshipers. Men will rush to serve a charismatic leader with a bloody cause. Some thirsted for a sense of righteousness; others wanted power. Ascaris gathered many such people on his journey, playing on their fears of an uncertain world and the fearsome events they were unaware he had caused. He left a tiny seed of himself with each adherent and went on his way, knowing that when needed he could urge them to commit atrocities with a mere thought.

When he encountered a receptive group which included a woman whose time was nearing, he would stay in the area and preach. The moment the baby was born, if he judged it suitable, he laid his hands upon it and said a blessing. Ascaris would be gone by the time his blessings bore fruit. Those who had trusted him would soon be gone as well, eaten by their own children for more of the Intruder's ever-needed "material." In total, Ascaris chose five infants for this experiment.

At least two of these babies were female, and two of them were certainly male. History has swallowed any description of the fifth child or its parents, other than its existence. It is also known that Ascaris deliberately stopped in different points of the globe for his children. The Intruder's great mind wished to learn as much about its new home as possible and it varied its hosts to that end.

Three of the blessings were entirely successful. Before they had fully awakened to themselves, three souls were sped from three tiny bodies and replaced by limited pieces of the

Intruder. Once entered, the bodies became elastic and fluid. The children could grow to any size and take any shape, provided enough living material was consumed.

One tiny girl enveloped her parents and those around them, erupting into spindly legs a moment later and striding across the bamboo forests, taller now than the towering plants themselves. She was born and blessed in the East and would become the most known and feared of Ascaris' five children, stalking from East to West and back again. She was unmoved by the people's worship yet spawned cults wherever she went. She accepted their sacrifices when Ascaris urged it and otherwise often left them to rot. They called her Harvester, after the spider, or Long Legs.

One of the chosen boys slid off the side of the ship his parents were travelling on and shot through the waters, eating anything in his path. He settled, pale and bitter, in a shipwreck far to the south, jealously decking himself in the rotting gold he found there. He gradually grew more powerful and began to extend his influence throughout the world's oceans. Wary sailors the world over called him by many names, and one of these was Agwerot.

In the desert, after consuming the entirety of his nomadic tribe, a boy erupted coppery wings from his back and soared up into the blistering skies. He would be called a blood-angel by the fearful desert folk and Butcher Bird in the West. Other creatures that only outwardly resembled him would watch in confusion from their hidden city in the clouds.

The last two children were failures. In Antilha, not so far from Panipe's home, another girl was left seemingly alive and unchanged after the Intruder's failed attempt to enter her flesh. A fishing party returned to find that she was the only living thing remaining, surrounded by the blood and remains of the rest of her village and crying weakly from hunger and the cold. They

thanked the spirits for sparing the baby, and only later came to realize she never cast a shadow.

The last child was split in two when the Intruder tried to enter it, and these halves were thrown so far apart, so violently, that it was impossible to tell which part of the world it had been born in or what sex it had been.

## Chapter 7: The Dappled Man

Corm was still walking. That first night after he had buried his village, he had walked and walked until he had fallen forward. Vaguely aware that he shouldn't lie out in the open, he had blearily looked around for shelter. He ended up worming into an abandoned burrow and falling into a deep and dreamless sleep. When he had finally emerged, he noticed the trees seemed different somehow. Their leaves had gone from green to red and gold while he had slept.

In this way, Corm had avoided the Resurrection Men and the searching eyes of the dead crows. But his belly was emptier than it had ever been. He was becoming slower and slower, and he vaguely realized he had not eaten in quite some time. He looked at Jan's sickle, more rusted than he recalled it being. He remembered that the men of his village often used blades to slaughter animals for food. This was not the right sort of blade he needed, though, and in any case he did not know how to catch an animal.

He had a reasonably good grasp of what berries and mushrooms were safe to eat, but he hadn't seen any. In fact, he hadn't heard or seen any living thing for a while. Corm did not know of the silent, depopulated forests, but he had entered one. Exhausted, He dully thought that it would be nice if he found Jan soon. He did not regret the time he had lost in burying his village.

A glade stretched ahead, ringed with brilliant yellow shagbarks painted in full autumn splendor. He was following a path now and it seemed reasonable to hope that at some point a town or village lay ahead. As he approached the glade, he became aware of a rustling noise. It was all the more striking in the silence of the empty forest.

Somewhat curiously, he moved toward it, expecting to startle a deer. Instead, the sight

that greeted his eyes was a large dark man, naked to the waist and sporting around in the fallen yellow leaves on the forest bed. It was the first glad sight that had greeted Corm's eyes since the massacre of his village, and he ran to join the man without thinking.

His face largely expressionless, Corm rolled around in the leaves at the man's side until the latter sat up with a sharp exclamation of dismay.

“What's this! Who are you?”

Corm sat up and studied the man, mostly looking at his chin and chest. He never met people's eyes often. This man was a dark-brown color that Corm found interesting, though he also seemed to have blotches of light color more like Corm's skin. It reminded Corm pleasantly of Rosie, and then he dismissed it entirely from his mind.

“I'm Corm. Have you seen Jan?”

The man knitted his brow in annoyance as he cautiously retrieved his weapons, a sailor's knife and boarding axe. “Jan? Of course not. And anyway, I don't know a Jan. What is this 'Jan' like?”

Corm thought about it. “We were born on the same night, when the star fell. He is...clever. Everyone loves him.”

“No, I meant what does he look like?”

“He looks more like me than you,” Corm hazarded.

The man blinked, then sighed heavily in irritation. He had only dared to roll about in such a childish manner because he was sure no one was near, and this idiot had seen everything. As he was pulling his shirt back on and speculating on the best way to leave, he heard a horrible sound. Corm sat next to him impassively, his gaze fixed somewhere around the man's knee.

“Was that your stomach?” the man asked, alarmed. “When did you last eat?”

“It’s been a few days, I think,” Corm admitted.

“What! Are you some kind of fool?”

“Some have called me that, but Jan said I was never to believe them.”

The man looked at Corm closely after that, taking in his passive face and downcast eyes. Finally, he said, “And he was right, child. Now then, I shall walk you back to your village. I’m sure your parents are very worried.”

“They’re not worried. They’ve been eaten. And I’m no child. I’m Jan’s age and he was going to be a father and married.”

“What! Eaten?!” the man's eyes bulged at the alarming word, ignoring the rest for the moment.

“Yes, everyone in my village got eaten up.” Corm related the devastating news without his expression changing. “Even Rosie. Everyone but Jan.”

“Ah...” the stranger's face grew grave. “Was it...Ankou?”

“I don't know. Many were just bones. Granny and Papa too. But Jan wasn’t there. I buried each one, but there was one flower left. It’s Jan's.” Corm hunched down further into himself. “I must find him. He must be sad about his baby. Or...or scared.”

As the man digested this information, Corm drew Jan’s sickle out of his belt.

“You see, he left this. He treasures it.”

The man examined the rusted sickle without comment. Dried grass clotted with dried gore, probably from the boy's “Granny and Papa.” Yet, he didn’t believe for a moment that the boy was lying. He had not been the one to shed this blood. “You buried them all...” the man

remarked wonderingly.

Corm nodded expressionlessly.

*The child looks as if he could collapse at any moment*, the man thought. Out loud, he said, "I call myself Ardh. I have some food with me. We shall eat and you'll rest. Tomorrow we'll look for your friend."

Though Ardh had just assumed control of his expedition, Corm wasn't offended. He saw the help as a gift. He felt no suspicion about this drifter who armed himself like a pirate and was suddenly willing to help a complete stranger go on a wild chase. Most people might have feared they were putting themselves in the hands of a killer.

"All right," was all Corm said.

A few nights later, Ardh watched the young man sleeping on the other side of the fire. For the hundredth time, he wondered what had possessed him to take charge of the boy.

Corm slept motionlessly, not even making the flickering eye movements that Ardh knew heralded dreams. He had never seen Corm dream. They had only been traveling together a few days, after all. Then again, the boy was different enough in other respects that Ardh supposed it would not be overly strange if he never dreamed.

Ardh dreamed.

He often wished he did not. In his dreams, he saw the disappointment on his father's face, the shame flowing from his weeping, bent mother. But even these visions, tragic and painful as they were, were much better than the times he had to see Abra.

One thing that Ardh hadn't allowed Corm (or anyone) to see was his back. In Corm's case, he feared the awful scarring there would alarm the tender-hearted boy. As far as other

people went, he suspected that his whip-marks would lead to a lot of unwelcome assumptions. They might take him for a criminal or perhaps even an escaped galley slave.

He frowned and wondered what had made him think of Abra again. Perhaps it was Corm's stories of his friend Jan, the reason for their little expedition. Ardh almost regretted asking about him now.

“Tell me more about your friend,” he had said earlier that evening. “You said he was a papa?”

Corm knitted his brow and tried to explain things the best he could. Ardh had plenty of experience of the ways of the world, so he did not find it hard to piece together the real story from the boy's confused and inadequate descriptions.

This young man Jan had been full of life and had enjoyed sporting with the village girls. One of the girls, Molly, had “gotten into trouble” and Jan was going to do the right thing by her. Privately, Ardh suspected that Molly's papa and some of the townsmen had encouraged Jan. Possibly with scythes and pitchforks for added emphasis. But according to Corm, Jan was cheerful about it and by all accounts looking forward to settling down and being a papa himself. Old Green had taken him in after Jan's father disowned him, and they all were very happy.

And then tragedy had come and eaten up Jan's young lady and their unborn child.

*At least that didn't happen to us,* Ardh thought, and then grunted. No, he and Abra had been eaten up as well. It was just that their insides had been eaten instead, leaving them cold and hollow shells.

Their crime was innocent enough. They hadn't been very different from Jan and Molly. A beautiful summer moon, an understanding girl (what he inwardly called his “affliction,” the

vitiligo, had not spread as far back then) and a night of passion. Afterwards he was scared, excited, elated at the taste of Life in his young and foolish mouth. All the world was beautiful and Abra, most beautiful of all!

Then came the accusations, the disapproval and condemnation of the judge, his stony father and his weeping mother. They were marched into the square and there they were each given one hundred lashes of the whip. Ardh had tried to be brave, but after the first few blows he was no longer the new-made man he supposed but only a sobbing, screaming boy. Abra, mercifully, lost consciousness.

So much for youth, and love.

They had tried to marry him off after that, reasoning that if they gave him a lawful outlet for his desires, he would become an upright man. It was a well-known cure for wayward sons the world over, he supposed.

Ardh came from a good family, while Abra's was not as prosperous or influential. No mention was ever made of trying to marry them off to each other. Neither of them would have wanted it though, even if their parents had suggested it. After that day in the square, he couldn't have even looked at her. He knew she felt the same.

It proved difficult to get a suitable bride to agree to a match as his skin condition advanced, and finally Ardh asked his father to let him represent the family's trading interests abroad. The people of colder climes were hungry for exotic eastern spices and the men of Ardh's country had an active sea trade with them. With some relief, he thought, his family got him a good position on a merchant ship and ensured he was well-outfitted and provisioned so he would not bring them shame out in the world.

*Buying me off*, he thought. What his family really wanted was for him not to come back. His father had younger wives, and he knew his mother would love nothing better than to have new children to care for. Obedient children. Children without disfigurement. Accordingly, after a few voyages and the riches they bestowed upon him, Ardh decided to stay and see something of this strange green land with its forests and deep blue lakes and fiery golden leaves. He had thought he would never have a family again.

After all, he'd been cured of such things: cured of the desire for companionship and cured of the ability to love or trust another person. *Or so I believed*, he thought ruefully, glancing at Corm again. This defenseless boy would certainly lead them both to ruin if he allowed it. It was a miracle Corm hadn't died already, narrowly avoiding the Ankou and then managing not to starve or break his neck just long enough for Ardh to save him.

It was just a good thing they were together now, Ardh thought with a nod. He would save Corm from a life of abandonment like the one he had suffered.

And maybe, one day, the dreams would stop.

## Chapter 8: The Soldier

“Roll out for Gauntlet!” The hated words.

Father looked at Vata with a tightening in his throat and heavy stones in his gut. His friend was certain to be called today. He knew well enough of the sergeant's “kindness” in calling the smallest and weakest recruits first, letting their judgment be comparatively swift. He and Vata were the only two weaker prospects left. The others had deserted or been ground up and spit out like Peccary.

All save one, and he was changed after he came through Gauntlet.

It was probable this young man could barely stand, but he was a soldier now. The first one of their group. He was a tapestry of bruises and lacerations and his lip was a shapeless purple mass jutting out of the ruin of his once handsome and youthful face. He now bore the sign of the Army of Heaven: a broad black stripe under the eyes, ink sewn roughly into the flesh. His lower eyelids were swollen.

This young man watched nothing with the dead slits of his eyes, but he stood ramrod straight and answered in perfect unison when the sergeant called out for responses. He was the Army's machine now, perfect and deadly. Did Father even want Vata to survive, he wondered sickly, if his small friend was going to end up as a mindless weapon?

“Vata!” came the sergeant's call.

“Sir.” Vata came forward.

“Today is your Gauntlet! Are you prepared?”

*Say No, Father screamed in his mind. Run! Desert!*

“Sir, yes Sir.” Vata stepped into place.

The men formed two lines, the edges of their truncheons gleaming hatefully. Their first and only Soldier took a place at the end, where he could do the most damage. Wallow and Saint seemed almost to be slavering in anticipation. Early Gauntlets were an especially enjoyable time for the strongest recruits. It might be a long time before they had another opportunity to indulge their darkest impulses with such abandon.

And they shared the uncomfortable knowledge that after they became soldiers, they might not even want to.

“Begin,” came the sergeant's command, and Father felt sick with anxiety. But a moment later he was staring. Vata had sprung up instead of trying to run, and was attacking the other men. It only bought his friend a few moments of shocked disbelief, but moments are eons in Gauntlet. Vata was able to advance much further through the line than Peccary before a blow connected.

Even then, Father watched incredulously as his friend put into practice all the principles they had been taught by the sergeant: self-discipline, speed, methods to evade and disarm an enemy when the enemy has outclassed you in size and strength. He blinked as he felt a sharp tug, then with a whoosh all went black. He would not realize it until later, but Vata had taken his own macana and struck him with it.

The other men were screaming in outrage. A recruit, a pissing dog recruit, was fighting back! Every time Vata bloodied one of them, the lines surged with fury and surprise. It made the men disorganized. It made them make mistakes.

Cursing and clawing, Wallow broke ranks to chase Vata down. He was immediately

recalled by the sergeant. Once a recruit in Gauntlet was past a man, that man was to stand down and not pursue. Sometimes a recruit, disoriented and blinded by blood, would stumble backwards down the lines. Then and only then could they be attacked afresh. Wallow was out of line.

Despite the penalties for insubordination, Wallow spat and ignored the sergeant's command. The sergeant did not continue to order Wallow after that. Instead, he ordered the first several men in line to deal with him. Behind Vata, several recruits turned their weapons on Wallow, mauling him fearfully before he stood down. All of this happened in the space of a second or two.

Vata, bloodied and with a pounding head and broken jaw, barely registered any of it. There was only the new soldier left now, his weapon raised and his swollen eyes alert and dispassionate. Instead of going on the offensive, Vata attempted to evade him. It ended up being a mistake, bringing another man within attacking range. The soldier got a blow in as Vata was hastily reversing course. It ripped down Vata's uniform, breaking an arm in the process, but it didn't matter.

Vata turned slowly around to face the lines, a soldier.

The men stared back, unable to believe that Vata had made it out. Suddenly as one they began to cry out "Bitch! Bitch!" along with "Treason!" and "DOG!!" Her torn uniform had revealed what the men now screamed to the sergeant, that Vata was a woman and no fit soldier for the Army of Heaven.

The sergeant had registered no surprise upon learning Vata's sex. Possibly he had known all along. He strode in front of the shouting crowd of recruits and held his hand up.

"End Gauntlet," the sergeant said simply.

“Sergeant! Vata has disgraced our unit.”

“She must be punished for insubordination. Treason!”

“A woman cannot be a soldier, Sir!”

Each in turn, the men protested. Each demanded Vata's blood. The sergeant listened to them all for a moment and then shouted “Attention!”

The recruits fell into line silently.

“A recruit who makes it through Gauntlet becomes a soldier. Dismissed.”

The men stared in disbelief.

“Dismissed!”

Slowly, unwillingly, the men disbanded. Many of them were injured, Wallow the most severely. Vata stood silently at attention. The sergeant approached her.

“There is no rule that a woman may not join the Army of Heaven.”

Vata stood silently, her broken jaw slack, her shattered arm hanging at her side.

“This is because it was thought that no woman would be so exceedingly foolish as to enlist.”

Vata did not reply.

“You will receive the stripe and then report for Gauntlet tomorrow. If you attempt to leave camp to obtain care for your injuries before we encounter a medical unit, you will be guilty of desertion and executed on sight. You will heal yourself or you will die.” The sergeant paused, then continued. “It is probable that the recruits will attempt revenge upon you in your weakened state. If they do, they will be insubordinate and punished accordingly. I will make no special efforts to prevent them.”

“Ssir.” It was not an appeal, it was merely an acknowledgment, slurred through her bloody jaw.

“Dismissed.”

Vata turned and made her way back to camp. Father was nursing his head and watching her hatefully. When she sat down near him, he spat.

“How could you attack me?” he muttered bitterly. “I was on your side!”

“Not partissipating in Gauntlet...ssevere punissment,” was Vata's reply.

Father paused. Vata had managed to squeak by on the first day of Gauntlet when she had refused to attack Peccary, but she had taken a terrible risk doing so. The sergeant had been more watchful as the days bled on. Father knew that nothing could have compelled him to raise his weapon to Vata. And if that was the case, she had saved him from a more savage punishment the only way possible.

His skin grew sweaty and then cold as he suddenly realized that he would have been certain to fail his own Gauntlet if the men had been directed to punish him today.

“I’m sorry,” he started to say heavily, but Vata's good hand cut him off again and she slowly and painfully shook her head. There must be no appearance of them having colluded to cheat the process of selection. Father held his peace, instead contenting himself with splinting and bandaging Vata's arm as best he could, and tying her jaw.

When they took her to the tattooing house, Father had to help hold her down so she didn't break anything else.

## Chapter 9: The Unlucky One

The spirits had kept their promises to Panipe, for Tife did not linger at the crossroads long. A gaggle of women found him first, and thought him a pretty and peculiar little thing. They set down their pitchers to play with the child, still laughing and passing him around when a man of means came up the road and marveled at their conduct. His name was Foi.

“What do you women mean by hanging about, neglecting your work?” he snapped, and was immediately greeted by disdain and laughter from the women.

“Look at what was left for Papa Baryè! Did you ever see such a strange child? He must be a priest's bastard!”

Foi came closer and looked at the boy. And the boy looked back. Somehow, the man thought uncomfortably, the baby seemed to look at him with the intelligence of an adult. And in that look was an appeal. With his odd coloring, he probably really was the unwanted child of some pale and foreign holy man. Such men occasionally came to plague their otherwise peaceful islands. But even so, that was hardly the baby's fault. Foi took pity on him.

It turned out to be one of the wisest things he ever did.

At this time the warm islands of Antilha still teemed with life. But Death was fast coming to their bright sands. Agwerot's Curse was unlike other plagues of antiquity. Instead of rotting and feeding the fecund life of the forests, afflicted people and animals stayed cold and inert, not returning to the soil. Whole villages vanished, as with Charant. But the stunted orchids that swiftly came to blanket the bodies were not a triumph of life over death. They were more like snow being blown over a grave.

These dead villages were eerily silent, lacking the constant birdsong and hum of insects that wove the background tapestry of every islander's life. Even the mangroves and orchids around these mass graves had an unnatural, threatening appearance that could not be wholly owed to superstition. Fearful observers swore that the only signs of life in those blighted places were the shadows, which rippled and danced when the objects casting them did not. Such village-tombs were truly strongholds of the dark spirits, and they were growing in number.

Plague begat famine and after it, conflict and bloodshed. Afflicted islands often had no choice but to raid the lands of their unaffected brothers. Once an island fell under the curse, no fish or fruit was safe to consume. To the people of Antilha, it seemed that the very Earth was turning against them.

Foi's island had managed to avoid the spread of Agwerot's Curse for somewhat longer than the other islands, but eventually it too was touched. The child was the reason his foster father survived the wars and escaped the plague. He always knew when trouble was brewing and when it was time to move on. It was as if the spirits whispered in his ear.

Foi also did not fail to notice that his grave little man grew two or three times swifter than any boy child should, even though he ate sparingly. It was perhaps another good reason to change villages frequently. Still, he loved his unusual son, even when the child apologetically told him one day that his name was really Tife.

"My mother said I reminded her of a bird on the island where I was born," the child explained. "But you may call me the name you gave me if you like, Father."

"And how is it you remember your mother, or the island you were born?" asked Foi incredulously.

“I think it’s because of my first father,” the boy said hesitantly, worrying lest he hurt the heart of his current one.

The man leaned forward eagerly. “And who was your first father, boy?”

“The sea.”

After that, his second father called him Tife.

Evading war and plague, they traveled from city to city, island to island. Finally, in the year that Corm's village fell, they came to their last stop. The little village truly seemed to be at the end of the world, and it seemed impossible that evil could come here. But there was one very strange thing about the village all the same: the Unlucky One.

Tife was a young man now and he finally seemed to have stopped his preternatural rate of growth. Fofi cautiously hoped they might finally have a permanent home. The two men had been acclimating to their new village for awhile when they began to notice there was one girl to whom no one ever spoke. She dwelt alone on the edge of the village, fending for herself, pitied and feared by the other folk.

“Why is it that she must live alone?” asked Tife, who was never afraid to speak his mind, even to strangers.

“Avoid that one, son,” the old fishermen advised with wise looks. “We call her the Unlucky One.”

“And why is that?” asked his father rather irritably. Fishing was not going as well for him at the moment, and he was anxious to impress his new friends.

“Casts no shadow,” spat one. “And was found alone and squalling in the blood of her village as a babe. I was one of those who found her,” he nodded. “Poor, skinny little thing.

Almost dead.”

“Should’ve left her be,” suggested another one, and they all nodded gloomily.

Tife was nettled. “But is it her fault she casts no shadow, or that her maman and papa were killed?”

“No doubt your skin ain't your fault neither,” one pointed out. “We seen priest's bastards before. But all the same, most folk will pause to let you near their daughters. ‘Tis the world we live in.”

“Aye, my poor sister,” Foi hastily added, repeating their oft-used lie.

Tife held his peace after that, but later that night he stole away to the edge of town. He found the Unlucky One squatting over a tiny fire, warming her hands. She gave a small cry, startled, when he approached.

“Hello,” he began. “I'm Tife. My father and I are new in these parts.”

The girl blinked. “How can he be your father? The two of you look nothing alike.”

“Well,” Tife began, about to repeat the old lie that Foi was really his uncle, raising Tife for a beloved sister after her *blanc* lover had deserted her. Yet, something about the Unlucky One's luminous eyes made the words die on his lips. To tell this girl lies would be obscene, an abomination. “Well,” he amended, “My father is really from the sea.” And he told her of his mother the lonely witch, and his loyal sea-wolf father, and the crossroads.

Tife and the Unlucky One became close friends in no time. Each was starved for acceptance in their own way, isolated as they were from their countrymen by their strange origins. Tife was charmed by her nervous, bird-like grace and the strong will hiding beneath it. The Unlucky One thought him gentle and warm as the breezes that played over their island. The

old fisherman and goodwives shook their heads as they saw them walking hand in hand, but some of them also smiled indulgently.

“Maybe, after all, they can find happiness together,” they thought. “Perhaps the problem of our Unlucky One will solve itself!”

These folk may have taken a narrow view of the world, but plague had not come to their island yet and they could also afford to be kind. In a way they were not very different from the people of Corm’s village.

Tife's father was not sure what to think about his son courting an outcast girl with no shadow, but he ultimately decided Tife knew best. Foi made sure to invite her to supper with them, and he even bought her a pretty hair-charm he spied one day while he was aimlessly perusing the market. The look on his son's face when Foi presented it to the girl warmed the old man's heart, and she threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek as sweetly as any daughter he could have wished for.

Then one night his son woke him urgently, and Foi knew that it meant their happy time was at an end. Tife only did this when it was time for them to move on.

“No, my son.” The old man sat up wearily. “I will not be going this time.”

Tife's eyes started from his head. “But Father! It’s coming here! We must take Nadiyo and go!”

The word Nadiyo meant “We’ll tell them!” in their tongue.

Foi chuckled. “Is that her name, now?”

Tife flushed a little. “She chose it herself. She said---”

“Never mind, son. It is a good name.”

“Why won't you come with us!” Tife's face fell. “...do you hate her?”

“Of course not.” His father waved the idea away. “A better daughter I couldn't have wished for. And really, what's a fellow need with a shadow?” He chuckled raucously. “It is not her shadow that will warm you at night!”

Tife was red now, but he pressed on. “Then why?”

The old man sighed and rubbed his head tiredly. “I suppose I am just old and done with starting over. I wish to stay here and end my days among these folk. They are good people.”

Tife glared. “They're good *now*! How do you think they'll be after they have tasted war, or plague? They'll seek a scapegoat, someone to blame for their misery, and it will be us! And if Nadiyo and I are gone it will be you. They'll say you are a sorcerer who brought the plague!”

Foi looked unconvinced and Tife actually began to cry, something Foi had never seen the boy do even as a babe. “They will burn you as they did my poor mother. I can't lose you too! I love you so, Father.”

The old man was deeply touched. In his private heart he had always doubted that this adopted sea-boy of his could really love an unremarkable man such as he. Hearing how much his son loved him made him feel braver and more resolved.

“I love you too, my dear son. But I am willing to take my chances with them. I shall miss you, but it is time for you to live your own life, a new life with your young woman.” He shook his head resolutely. “My word on the matter is final.”

Try as they might, Tife and Nadiyo were unable to sway Foi from his course. With many a tear and a backward glance, they left the old man before dawn. The pair would never learn if he died among enemies, or hand in hand with friends as he believed he would.

## Chapter 10: The White Robe

By this time Corm had come to wholly love and trust Ardh. He unerringly saw the good things in the people he met, and there was much to admire about his new traveling companion. *He is like Jan*, Corm often thought.

For indeed, Ardh turned out to be kind, protective, and patient, even if he occasionally showed a grumpy side. It was therefore mystifying to Corm when other people viewed Ardh with open suspicion and fear. When a traveller saw them together, he or she would only speak to Corm. They were surprised when he simply turned around and asked Ardh.

In less terrifying times, people might have shown their better natures and seen Ardh for what he was: a good man. But this was now an age of suspicion and dread.

Just as Panipe's village had sought a scapegoat to vent their fear upon, the people Corm encountered often thrust their fears onto his new friend. Ardh was an obvious foreigner and they mistrusted the darkness of his skin and its variable color. It probably didn't help that he was a large imposing man who often wore a sour expression. Ardh still loved the autumn leaves of this strange country, but by now the cold damp weather and gray skies had worn the enchantment more than a little thin.

The two men had established something of a pattern after travelling together for a few days. Ardh would tell a tall tale from his homelands, and then Corm would tell one of Granny Gold's stories.

“And in fact, what he took to be a giant dome was a bird's egg. Oh, the biggest egg you

can imagine,” Ardh was saying. Corm’s eyes got wider and wider as Ardh wove a story of an island of vast birds and untold treasures of diamonds, and the clever sailor who always found a way to escape great perils while making off with the treasure.

When Ardh was done, Corm said eagerly, “Tell me another story about the sailor!”

Ardh shook his head. “Not until you tell me another of your Granny’s amazing fairy tales.” He acted indulgent, as if the request were more for Corm’s benefit than his own, a way for the boy to show off. But in truth, the big man hung on every word. He found the folklore of this heathen and uncivilized region fascinating.

Corm wrinkled his brow. “Have I told you about the man who stood godfather?”

“I do not think so.” Ardh was intrigued by this very lackluster description of what was supposedly going to be a fantastical tale.

“Alan and Elis loved the same woman.” Corm launched right into the story matter-of-factly. “They were the best of friends, and their rivalry was never mean-spirited. They were both good men and handsome and hard working, so Eira, their beloved, was sorely troubled because she found it impossible to settle on one of them.”

“Ah. Unfortunate!” Ardh nodded for him to continue.

“One day, a pauper woman had a baby. She had always been a little ‘touched’ and was unable to name a father. The poor little babe itself was sickly and ill-formed. No one wanted anything to do with either of them, but then Elis stepped forward to be the shunned baby’s godfather. Tongues immediately started to wag that *Elis* was the father, and the scandal stood to threaten his business. His suit to Eira seemed all but doomed. She made her decision that same night.”

Ardh had noticed before that when Corm told him a story, he spoke differently. His gaze seemed to focus and his voice became more confident, the flow of his words smoother. He wondered if the child remembered Granny's words so closely that he was able to repeat them almost exactly as they had been said to him, years and years ago.

"Eira chose *Elis* to everyone's shock. She knew very well that neither of her dear friends would take advantage of a poor crazy girl, and she was deeply touched by Elis's act. The baby died soon after, and Alan became sad and withdrawn at losing Eira. Some days later he was found hanging from an old oak tree."

Ardh was startled. Such a savage turn for the story to take all of the sudden!

"One night months later, the new husband was out later than he wished on business. He was eager to get home to his new wife. Sorrowfully, he drove his carriage past the hanging bones of his friend."

"Hold!" said Ardh sharply. "Why was Alan still hanging there!?"

Corm looked at him. "You're not allowed to bury someone who killed himself, or even cut him down."

Ardh stared at Corm in disbelief, but the boy only looked back placidly. Eventually he gave up and grunted, "Continue."

"Elis didn't like to look at his poor friend, so he busied himself with the horses. When he glanced back up at the road, his friend's body was gone. Alarmed, he was about to look around when two bony hands closed around his throat. He tried to fight his friend, but he stood no chance against a rage and jealousy that was too powerful for even Death to quench."

Ardh gulped in spite of himself.

Corm continued, “But then, just as Elis was starting to black out, a blazing light cut through the darkness. An armored knight rode up, as silver and bright as the full moon. He cut down the angry corpse, saving Elis’s life.”

“A knight?!” Ardh’s eyes bulged. “How foolish. What was a knight doing in those country parts, riding to the rescue of some small-time farmer?”

“Elis asked him the same thing,” Corm replied. “The knight lifted his visor to reveal a face shining with the light of Heaven. ‘You stood godfather for me when no one would,’ he said. Then he rode off, and Elis gratefully returned home to Eira and they lived happily ever after.”

“So the knight was a good ghost and the dead friend was a bad ghost?” Ardh asked incredulously.

Corm screwed up his face in thought. “Granny said the knight was like the *real* baby. It was strong and beautiful in Heaven even though it had been sick and ugly before. And the rotted corpse, that was like the real Alan. Even though he was handsome and respected while he was alive, he was rotten inside with envy the whole time.” He paused and looked a little wistful. “She said when it was *my* time, I would come out of my shell and be bright and beautiful too.”

“Now look here boy,” Ardh began. But then he stopped, frowning. Three strange men were approaching.

Ardh didn’t like the look of them. Their red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes glittered and blood matted the cuffs of their soiled coats. When he tried to speak to them, they didn’t reply. Instead, they studied him and Corm hungrily, scrutinizing them like a pack of wolves.

These were some of the restless men who had chosen to follow Ascaris years back, when he was on his grand pilgrimage. The things they had seen and done since then had eroded their

humanity. They no longer even spoke, but passed thoughts and impulses back and forth through the tiny fragments of the Intruder within them. But Ardh and Corm had no way of knowing that.

All Ardh could tell for certain was that it had been quite some time since they had eaten, and something in their look suggested they had not had the companionship of a woman in a long time either. With mounting alarm, Ardh realized he would have to fight or these marauders were likely to kill him and make away with Corm, for one of these uses...or both.

In the midst of the scuffle, Ardh (who was fortunately a good fighter from his maritime days) shouted at Corm to run away and hide. Obediently Corm did so, running off into a nearby belt of forest. He gathered that he was supposed to hide until Ardh came into the forest calling for him, and then they would continue on together. What happened was unfortunately quite different.

The first misfortune was that Corm began to lose his bearings in the forest. The second misfortune was that Ardh was badly wounded, knocked out cold by a treacherous attack from behind. They left him for dead and set off after Corm, superstitiously reckoning Ardh's "meat" to be unwholesome due to his unique appearance. And so Ardh lay safe and senseless for many hours, enough time for Corm to get well and truly lost.

Ultimately, Corm remembered something Papa had once told him: that when you are lost, you should sit down in a safe place and wait. So finally that is what he did, sitting with his back against the smooth bark of a tree. He never saw nor heard what happened to the feral men that set off after him into the forest. They were far enough distant that he did not hear their cries and screams as something descended from the forest canopy to snatch them aloft one by one.

The Intruder had reckoned them to be of no further use, and what was not useful one way

could always be used for material. After they had been devoured like the people of Corm's village, they were left to fall to the earth, rattling sacks of bone. Slender white legs like the trunks of trees stalked through the forest, ambling toward Corm without any real urgency. This was the most feared of Ascaris's children, the Harvester.

Corm had no knowledge of this treetop stalker. He was looking around and trying to get his bearings, wholly unaware of the danger, when he met the girl in the white robe.

She seemed to have materialized out of the trees. One moment no one was there, and the next moment Corm was facing a girl about his age in a frayed robe of rich white cloth that was much too large for her. The girl was shocked to see Corm sitting there and said so. When Corm explained that he had been chased into the woods and was separated from his friend, she looked even more alarmed.

“You can't go back that way!” She shook her head frantically.

Corm asked why.

“Tonight is the offering night. They will be out!”

“Who will?” Corm asked, thinking of the savage men.

“Lady Longlegs and her children. They visit, and take folk away.”

Corm stirred. “Maybe they came to my village. Everyone was eaten.”

The girl frowned. “I don't know...our village still lives. They only come on Offering night, when the white robe is worn. Longlegs allows us to choose who shall wear it.”

“And you're wearing the white robe. What's it for?”

The girl in front of him looked down. “They come and take the wearer.”

Corm sprang up. “What! Then you must take it off, right away!” He tugged at the robe,

but was kicked sharply away.

“You don’t understand,” the girl said, still not looking up. “I’ve chosen to wear it. I want to see my sister again. She ventured out last Offering night and was taken.”

“They can take you to her?” Corm was excited in spite of his shoulder throbbing from being kicked a moment ago. “Does that mean they could take me back to Ardh? Or to Jan?”

The names meant nothing to the girl, but she shook her head. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid not.”

“Oh.” While Corm was considering what he should do next, he felt something strange. The ground was shaking.

“They come!” The girl turned as white as her robe. “I must return to the meeting place. And you, you must flee!”

Corm didn’t understand, but he rose to obey. A moment later he gasped when the girl’s nails sank into his shoulder.

“It’s too late!” she hissed. “They are very near. Hide! Hide!!”

Corm looked around. Before he could make any sense of the uniform appearance of the forest around him, the girl had roughly pushed him into a rotten trunk and thrown one or two branches over him. He stared painfully through his screen of dead leaves, only to see a white streak go racing off through the forest. He thought he glimpsed something equally pale following it a moment later, something slender and titanic. The earth shook. Then they were both gone.

Corm waited a long time until he felt the ground shaking again. He went rigid as pale shapes, slim and tall as tree trunks, stalked past him away in the distance. Then all was still and he started breathing again. He gazed thoughtfully at the direction of the girl’s “meeting place.” Had she been reunited with her sister? Now that Longlegs and her children had left, he should

ask the villagers how to get back to Ardh.

Accordingly, he set off toward where he had last seen the girl. At one point, something stuck in the sole of his shoe and he absentmindedly picked it out. When he glanced at it he discovered it was a human tooth. Before he had much time to consider what this might mean, he reached a clearing. He took this to be the meeting place.

Corm scanned the area. The brush here was broken and bent as if a drove of oxen had trampled it. There was some sort of clotted gray slime clinging to the grass. It reminded him of the film he had seen on the friends and neighbors he had buried the day this all began. Then he saw the robe.

*She took it off after all*, Corm thought as he walked toward it. Did that mean she had decided not to meet Lady Longlegs? Perhaps she had gone back to her village instead. It must be beyond this clearing. Corm made to cross the clearing, automatically picking up the robe as he did so. He had some thought of returning it to her. But it was unnaturally heavy and warm in his hands, and he looked down at it.

Some of the girl had been left in the robe.

Corm stared at the mass in his hands. Then something hard and sharp struck him in the head and he blinked painfully, looking up to see several faces across the clearing from him. "Help," Corm began, but he was cut off by another rock whizzing at him. It was the people, he realized. They were throwing the rocks.

"You'll ruin everything!" a woman screamed shrilly. Another rock flew by. Corm saw that the faces in the crowd were twisted and ugly with fear. "This is a sacred place! You'll bring her down upon us!"

Corm shook his head. "Something has happened," he tried to explain. But once again he was cut off, this time by a man's hoarse voice.

"Drop the robe!"

The others took up the cry. "The robe! The robe! The white robe!"

Someone screamed, "Let him wear it!" and Corm saw that they were advancing toward him. Wordlessly, he dropped the robe and fled.

## Chapter 11: The Observers

The Intruder was far from the only inhuman influence in the world, as Tife and his first father, Mari, have already illustrated. There were peoples that existed alongside men but had no reason to interact with them frequently. Witches like Panipe knew slightly more about them than the common folk, but no one knew very much.

Mari's people, those sea-folk worshiped as spirits or gods, were one of these. The Observers were another.

The Observers dwelt in the Floating City and superficially resembled men, as folk like Mari did when they interacted with humans. In addition to arms and legs, they also had wings. They generally felt no need for eyes and faces, since they communicated mind to mind. An Observer knew another one by shapes of his thoughts.

The Observers looked somewhat alarming, since they had no need of a majority of the internal organs a typical man or animal would use. Their arms and legs flanked something more like an arch than a solid torso in appearance. They did not form hair on their heads, rather having a kinked and crenelated mass consisting of a thin membrane being stretched over the backs of their naked and powerful minds.

They typically affected a sandy color to match the stones of their city, but an Observer could technically change many things about his form, if he desired to do so. Observers desired very little as a rule. They called themselves observers because that was their function. Who had set them to watch the world, or why, or when, was unknown.

They had no desire to change history or affect the doings of mankind, no matter how

bloody or tyrannical they became at times. They only migrated on rare occasions, generally centuries apart, when they judged it was time to study a new region. But even the Observers became troubled when, on a certain day, they watched the birth of the Butcher Bird on the desert sands far beneath their city.

This was Ascaris's second successful attempt to infiltrate a living child, and the desert people began to whisper about an evil angel or sphinx that had risen from the sands. They hated and feared him, equating him with the evil djinni who prey upon the greedy and unwise in old legends. In Ardh's more sheltered country, parents had begun to tell their children stories as well. They spoke of a blood angel who smote all sinners, hoping to terrify their little ones into good behavior.

Like the Observers, he could manipulate his form, but he used this ability far more frequently. He could stretch his face like a hateful bird of prey and fly among those predators as their king. When he needed to consume other creatures, as all the Intruder's children did from time to time, he would proliferate his own flesh and give each piece wings of its own.

The Observers watched from their hidden city in the clouds and saw as the Butcher Bird scoured the desert for settlements, leaving the sands to bury the pitiful ruins he left behind. There seemed to be no limit for his potential for destruction. After ten thousand years of non-interference, the Observers began to wonder if it was finally time to act.

But as they were debating the point, one of their sentries informed them that the creature and its winged army of predatory flesh was on the move. It may have been that the blood-angel had exhausted his resources in those arid lands and was merely migrating in search of more food, but the Observers could not be certain.

Ultimately, they decided that they must continue to observe even if that meant moving the Floating City. If anyone in that region had been left alive by the angel's armies, they would have marveled at a vast cloud bank that seemed to suddenly move, steadily and of its own volition, and turn ponderously Northeast even though the wind was blowing to the West. But no one was left to see.

In the province of Honmion, Vata and Father stood shoulder to shoulder with the other soldiers, looking down at the ford. Dusk was coming on. Across the banks of the river, the town lay dark and silent. They had been sent here to recover any surviving civilians and aid in their relocation across the river to a nearby city.

A few of their fellow recruits stood with them. Wallow was not among them. The injuries he had received on Vata's Gauntlet day had proven fatal, and the experience made the other recruits hesitant to risk the same treatment by killing a soldier.

Through happenstance or design, the sergeant had next called Gauntlets for men who had protested the loudest before he called the more reasonable and obedient men. As a result, the main malcontents in the camp were shamed or dead, or full soldiers before anyone could muster the courage to try insubordination again.

And a soldier does not disobey his sergeant. The Army is the End.

Under Father's care, Vata had the use of her arm and jaw once again. She had looked indescribable by the time Gauntlets were ended and the camp was allowed to march to a location with medical facilities, which all the men had needed by that point. But her wounds did not get

infected as some of the men's did, and the rough setting job that Father had done that first night did not need to be re-broken. Vata privately thought Father may have been a doctor in his former life before the Army.

“Not a dog in sight.” Saint's voice was flat. He was a soldier too now, his sadistic nature reserved for approved targets on the approved occasions. It would no longer occur to him to gloat over a man like Peccary, or call for the blood of a woman like Vata, unless so ordered. He would die if ordered.

He was about to, in fact. They all were.

Their current sergeant was a different man, a field sergeant rather than a drill sergeant like the one they had left. He studied the silent village minutely and evidently came to the same conclusion Saint had. There was ostensibly no life anywhere. It remained only to confirm the destruction of the village, seize any valuables for redistribution, and burn the village if necessary to efficiently dispose of corpses and prevent contamination of the area.

There was a large cloud bank approaching from the West, and the wind was picking up. If there was need for a fire, the sergeant had no desire to combat a storm or quarter his men in a dead village.

“Advance!” their sergeant ordered, and they prepared to ford the river.

Intent on watching for any signs of danger or ambush, Vata did not notice Father's changed manner. Something about this town was deeply distressing him. His steps lagged behind hers as they marched to the bank, barely splashing in the still evening air as the first line of boots hit the dark waters. It was then that the river rose up to swallow them.

Vata was in the fourth row of soldiers and so she saw the men in front of her seem to

dissolve into blackness in seconds. For a moment she merely froze in place, watching uncomprehendingly. A hand roughly grabbed her collar and pulled her back, as the river reared once again for the attack. Vata wheeled around to face Father but then her eyes widened. They were surrounded, being attacked from the rear as well.

Only this mass was screaming and whistling down at them from the air. She saw myriad slick forms that she first took to be birds, but as they began to settle on the men in the latter columns she saw they must be the same dark substance that had risen from the river bed. She tackled Father to the ground and thus repaid him, momentarily, for saving her life. Then all was chaos and she was being borne high into the air by that unclean and hungry tide.

Father was screaming to her at first, then he became a gray blur lost in the darkness. She heard distant pops as the arquebusiers got off a few shots before they, too, were swallowed. Vata felt a hundred mouths tearing at her and thought she glimpsed a man, or an immense bird of prey, among the swarm. Her arm, newly healed, was showing bone.

The creature or man in the midst of the dark tide reached for her, grinning.

The very clouds seemed to envelop them, and the pain and the mindless dark slabs of hunger receded away. Then all was black. The Butcher Bird had won the day. So came the end of Vata's unit, and her brief career in the Army of Heaven.

## Chapter 12: The Cage

Tife and Nadiyo had a very rough journey, but they never regretted leaving. Even a life of privation and exile was preferable to their lives up to now, because now the two of them were living together. And when they finally arrived on the mainland, they discovered they weren't the only ones who had made such a gamble.

In fact, hundreds had fled from the terrible wars consuming the Antilhas. But of these refugees, many never completed the voyage. The sickness and war injuries they brought with them on their passage claimed many en route, creating ghost ships that quietly glided up to the rocky coast and smashed there. Those that did reach land had numerous alarming stories about how things had been when they left.

Evil was running rampant now, they said. Dark spirits had been seen on several islands, creatures so black no one could see any features upon them. These monsters had contributed greatly to the famine, for they were eating up all the birds and animals on the islands. Soon, it was feared, they would feed openly on men. It was well Tife and Nadiyo had escaped in time, they were told. Famine had led to more war as people fought each other for diminishing resources. Even the fishing had dried up.

Tife and Nadiyo heard all these terrible things, and prayed every day for Foi.

They were held for quite some time in a sort of ghetto that had been established on the coast where most of the Antilhanders were arriving. The local authorities were determined to quarantine these new "undesirables" who had flooded their southwestern coast with their dark faces and strange savage traditions. If that meant they all died of the plague within the camp

boundaries, so be it. There was no word on when any of them might be judged safe to formally enter the country.

One unexpected side effect of their internment in this drab place was that Nadiyo was able to completely throw off her stigma of casting no shadow. It was dull and gray here in comparison with their vibrant islands. Days were frequently cold and overcast, and there was no strong sunlight at this time of year. As a result, people had little opportunity to observe Nadiyo's peculiarity.

Tife was almost glad they had come as he watched his woman shine. Growing up, Nadiyo had been forced to become hardy and resourceful. She had learned to provide for herself and to stay sane and entertained in her great loneliness. Here, the refugee folk loved her colorful new stories and were bolstered up by her indomitable spirit. She saved many a soul from despair, even as she helped people establish routines and rituals that made even this drab ghetto seem a little more like a home.

As for himself, Tife took to wandering around the camp when his daily work was completed. There were tasks to busy the men and women of the camp all day, as they struggled to maintain their health and prepare for the day they might one day be freed from their cramped little makeshift city. Tife observed his companions closely along with the actions and attitudes of the guards and sentries, and he came to one unfortunate conclusion.

*They were never meant to leave.*

The people of their new homeland had pragmatically decided to cordon the Antihanders off. Soon, Tife was sure that there would be formal trade agreements: labor in return for food and supplies, probably of a vastly inferior nature to what most citizens of the country possessed. New

ghettos might be established as this one filled up, and ultimately this tiny section near the coast would be a separate little world where his people maintained themselves, living and dying within the cramped borders set by the local authorities.

Already, people seemed to be preparing themselves for this. Where there was life, there was hope, even in a prison. The Antilhanders were wonderfully adaptive. They had overcome many terrors and hardships to get here and were happy to still be alive. Even Nadiyo, with her respected role in the new community, was clearly much happier here than she had been as an outcast back home.

Tife thought on all this, and clenched his fists in defiance.

He meant to enjoy a life of *freedom* with his woman! He wanted a family one day as well, and he was damned if any child of theirs was going to be born in a cage. Their way was clear: they must escape.

Meanwhile, the time passed. Life in the ghetto went on peacefully.

One day, Nadiyo was walking with several of her friends. They were discussing ways to inject some taste and palatability to what the island folk considered to be the extremely lackluster fruits and vegetation of their new home. A few forward-thinking folk had brought seeds and things of that nature, or retained the ones from the food they had brought, but the seeds were not thriving in the perpetually damp soil and weak sunlight. Some of the men were doing well with catching the local squirrels and rabbits, and some rudimentary breeding had begun.

The talk turned to love and childbirth, and the women gently ribbed Nadiyo about her belly remaining flat in the months they had known her. It was clear that she and her good man doted on each other, so why no children? Perhaps she and Tife needed to watch and see how it

was done? Everyone laughed including Nadiyo, a beautiful sound like the lost bright birds of Antilha.

Then the women stopped abruptly and one began to wail. Nadiyo stared, uncomprehending for a moment, and then threw down her basket and ran for Tife. Two of her friends had sunk to their knees and were sobbing and clutching each other.

The shadow had followed them here. A small boy, Selondye, lay cold and contorted where he had fallen sometime in the night. Tife and one or two of his friends grimly knelt and studied the child's body.

“Don’t touch it!” warned an old man. “I’ve seen this back home. It came and struck our goats. First one goat, but in days all were dead. It is the plague that eats away at them!”

“No plague,” another man spat. “Shadows. I watched it one time. Black shadow touches them, pitch black. Sometimes it covers the whole face, sometimes somewhere else. They do when it's asleep maybe. Then later, you don't see no strange shadow, but animals is all eaten up in a day. Shadow hides nearby and sucks life out. *Shadow* touched this boy.”

The destruction wrought upon the poor child was unlike any Tife had seen. He seemed to have somehow been melted down. Much of his flesh was gone from within, as if from some long starvation, but they all played with Selondye and he had been merry and strong yesterday. Moreover his features were gone, replaced by something like pooled candle wax.

“We are cursed,” another man moaned. “We were not meant to leave the islands.”

Tife stood up, frowning. He knew from his mother that no spirits were truly evil. They could be entreated to spare a life as well as take one, and they stood for the brash defiance of Life even as they reminded folk of the certainty of Death. He couldn’t believe they would hunt

his people to extinction, for it was the Antilhanders who worshiped them.

But if it was not spirits, then what was attacking them so? Was it, after all, simply disease? Or if it was the shadows people kept claiming to have seen, how could he flush them out of hiding?

*I must ask Father,* he thought.

The entire encampment was devastated by the insistence of their overseers that the boy's body be burnt. This was strictly against their practices, for they believed a person's body was needed for resurrection into the next life. Fire was only for the wicked, and this was why they had burned Panipe. An evildoer, if burnt, could not persist in the next life to do evil.

Selondye's parents had to be forcibly restrained, and finally beaten near unconsciousness, for the burning to proceed. The entire camp keened and wailed as one at this destruction of an innocent's eternal life by their captors.

The local authorities were only trying to prevent further instances of plague, but as yet there was not good communication between them and the refugees. This sad incident only widened the gulf of understanding between them. The white men seemed heartless and the island folk seemed to them ignorant, and so the ill-will between the two opposing groups worsened.

After the grim-faced local men pushed the poor child's ashes into a hole and then burnt the poles they had used and buried the lot, Tife went to his wife. She had clearly been waiting to see what he would say.

“Well, Beloved? What shall we do?” Nadiyo had been crying, but her eyes were brave.

“I have to go to my father. He can ask Agive's folk what is threatening us.”

Nadiyo nodded. “How long will you be gone?”

Tife stared at his wife in shock. "I? Gone? You are coming with me!"

Nadiyo reluctantly shook her head. "I cannot. Acephie is expecting her babe any day, and I must be there to help."

Tife sputtered. "Any of the women can help! Have you taken leave of your senses?! If we are to prevent--"

"It is you who are talking nonsense!" Nadiyo's eyes flashed and even Tife, child of the spirits, shrank back. "To see your father you must reach the sea. *You* may make it past the camp sentries, I cannot. And if Agive summons you beneath the waves? You can make that passage, again I cannot. I am human, love, and you are not! I would hamper you."

Tife felt like a stammering boy as he weakly tried to protest. "But...to leave you here, when we do not know what menaces us...!"

Nadiyo put her hands in his. "I wish to be here. I love my friends and their children, and I wish to save them just as you do. My best way of doing that is to help them back here, while you are away. Who knows that dangers await them?"

Tife groaned. "And you!"

"Yes, and me!" Nadiyo raised her chin defiantly. "But at least we'll be together. I will give them strength, and we'll stand against this wretched enemy who has stalked us here. We will be here when you return!"

Tife put his head in his hands. "It is just like father." Here he meant Foi, and Nadiyo understood this. "They will notice, and they will blame you, and I will come back and everyone will be dead of the plague, and you burnt as a witch!"

"I won't let them," Nadiyo said firmly. "Besides, I have an entreaty you must bear to

Lord Agive as well. You must fly to your father quickly, and don't forget to give him my plea.”

“Your plea?” Tife looked up. “My love, what is the matter? What would you ask of my father's folk?”

Nadiyo's face softened. “Ask them to send us a child, Beloved.”

### Chapter 13: The Harvester

After escaping from the forest village Corm had run blindly, periodically falling and picking himself up again, scratching and bruising himself, and losing all sense of direction. After what seemed like an eternity, he came upon a scattering of fresh bones and teeth.

Fearing he had doubled back and reached the offering place again, Corm felt numb with despair. But the human remains that were scattered about did not belong to the girl in the white robe, he soon saw. After he calmed down, he realized that there was more than one body present, and large ones at that. These were almost certainly the strange feral men who had separated him from Ardh earlier.

At a glance, Corm thought he could tell that the men were all accounted for. He stood very still and could not feel any vibrations from the ground, so that seemed to imply that Lady Longlegs and her children were not walking nearby, either. Thinking these things, Corm finally dared to call out for Ardh. And so the two of them were finally reunited.

Ardh embraced him and even though Corm was not used to such displays of affection, he felt relief at the man's touch. Then Ardh had to grumble about Corm being lost so long and all the worry he had caused, and how those wretched men had hurt his head so, and the rest of it. Corm let his friend go on and on, comforted and reassured by the flow of Ardh's speech. Suddenly, he became aware that Ardh had stopped talking.

“What did you say?” Corm asked. He hadn't been listening to any of it closely.

“I said, you have a little friend from the forest on you. Here, let me pluck him off.”

Corm obediently held still while Ardh plucked a spindly, spider-like creature off of his

shirt.

“A harvestman,” Ardh nodded. “They don’t bite like spiders...Corm!! What’s the matter? You look ill!”

Corm couldn’t stop staring at the small squirming insect with its impossibly long, thin legs and strange flat disc of a body. He was shaking. Ardh had never seen him so overcome. He flicked the odd little spider's-cousin away and took Corm's shoulders. “What is it?? Corm!” Corm shook his head and abruptly passed out.

Time passed. Dawn had been some hours ago now. After much excitement and anxiety, Ardh finally got the story out of Corm.

“An 'offering place.' That means the people of this region have resorted to human sacrifice.” Ardh scowled. “A backward and savage land, this.”

Corm looked up. “That reminds me, Ardh. I have never asked you how you came to be here at all.”

Ardh shrugged. “Spice trade. I was a seaman on a merchant ship, until I tired of it and wished to walk on a ground that did not move and pitch constantly...although I suppose now, with such monsters about, I cannot even look forward to that!”

Corm shivered involuntarily.

“And you say it is a thing like that tiny spider-creature, only...taller than the trees themselves?” Ardh did not look very happy at the prospect.

Corm nodded. “Lady Longlegs ate her up. Those wildmen, too. Is that what you meant by ankou?”

Ardh shook his head vehemently. “No, indeed. Ankou are men. Or man-sized, at any rate.

They really are just hungry, dead things, withered and shriveled away under their loose robes and scarves and slouched hats. They lack enough flesh to move and yet they walk the fields...and eat. It is a story the northmen share, long nights on the trading ships.”

Corm thought he finally understood. “Resurrection men.”

“Is that what your people call them? Why?”

Corm shrugged. “Maybe because they have been brought back from the ground. I don’t remember. Granny didn’t like the men to talk about them. She swore it disturbed my sleep.”

Ardh softened. “Ah? And how did she get you back to sleep?”

“She would tell me my favorite story, about the night I was born.”

“Oh?” Ardh asked, leaning forward.

Corm’s eyes grew distant. “She said...I came to them on the night the star fell. She said I was half buried in the earth like an onion, and that is why she called me ‘corm.’ And she said I must have come from the star, and that made me a special boy.”

Ardh said nothing to this, but only put his hand on Corm's head. They were exhausted and hurt, but they still put many miles between themselves and the forest's edge before they settled in that night. They had no desire to come across that white strider, and be taken up high past the treetops by those thin legs.

After the incident with Longlegs, Corm and Ardh finally had a plan in their search for Jan. Since Corm did not remember feeling the earth shake (or seeing an immense white spider!) when he had returned to his deserted village, Ardh had decided to focus on pursuing the resurrection men. He felt that they were the most likely cause of the destruction, and it followed that whatever had destroyed the village must have spirited Jan away.

Corm fell into his suggestion immediately, prompting Ardh to pause a moment and ask, “But aren't you afraid, boy?”

Corm shook his head. “Are you?”

“I should be, but I am not. The only thing I ever really feared was dying alone. Now I have some hope that will not happen.” Ardh shrugged. “Certainly, if we find the Ankou we will die together.”

“Jan did not die, and he has seen them,” replied Corm placidly. Ardh shook his head but had no desire to alarm his young friend.

As they traveled the western lands looking for any signs of the ankou, they came to hear of strange things happening in the world.

In the East, the Army of Heaven was being beaten back. Whole platoons were rumored to have vanished, swallowed in one night. Order was breaking down in that comparatively new and unstable regime.

In a western island chain called Antilha, wars were raging. Refugees were flooding the mainland, bringing a plague with them along with outlandish tales of a black and fearsome monster that boldly stalked and slaughtered folk in broad daylight.

Tribes in the desert, villages in the West, ships at sea, were all vanishing or being depopulated overnight. Something was seeking to destroy men in the places they gathered. Right now, the settlements menaced were relatively small, but the enemy was devouring more and more of them. It seemed clear that soon, larger towns might be threatened.

Learned men of the world had begun gathering, and it was said they had built an immense facility called the Eudaemon. Here, they claimed, the agents of the mysterious Intruder

or intruders could be studied, and a countermeasure found. Their gleaming building had thousands of false windows and no doors above ground. To many, it seemed more like a monument to secrecy than to knowledge.

Ardh couldn't credit most of what they heard on the road. It didn't seem possible that the invaders could be coming from land, air, and sea all at once. Tall tales of ships being swallowed by leviathans and serpents were common enough in his former line of work. Copper-winged djinni with armies of birds were the stuff of legend and fantasy, not reality. And even the spider-thing had only been seen by Corm, not Ardh himself.

Corm's resurrection men probably weren't even real.

All the same, anyone could tell the world was changing, and for the worse. People were becoming increasingly guarded and fearful. He would have to get this child to a safe place soon, or persuade him to give up his fruitless search and accompany Ardh on a merchant ship back east. As much as he loathed the prospect of slinking back to his family, Ardh did not think he cared to tarry in the West too much longer.

He was walking along with Corm on a rather cold autumn day, thinking these thoughts, when something made him wrinkle his nose.

Burning.

Ardh quickened his pace and Corm followed. When they crested the next hill, they saw the source of the smell. It was a small town burning in the distance. They stared in horror for a moment before some flicker of movement caused them to turn their heads slightly.

It was something like a black wave or a black flame, followed by another, and then they were gone. But instead of breaking or dissipating, it was as if they shrank suddenly back into the

ground, sucked into some hidden vacuum Ardh and Corm could not see from the distance they stood.

It was Corm who spoke. "They have destroyed a town."

Ardh didn't have to ask who. "Come, we will follow them." He did not have the slightest idea what they would do when they confronted the ankou. Probably he had gone mad long ago, had his brains stolen by some siren or naiad, and he was playing out the last stages of his fever-dream on his deathbed below-decks.

Yet, Ardh felt excited.

Corm was excited too. "Finally, we'll save Jan." He quickened his steps, running toward death.

## Chapter 14: The Dog

“Heel.”

The creature growled and then whined, sitting back on its haunches.

Ascaris nodded. “Very good.” He looked up as a shadow fell across the floor. “Now go, hunt if you like. Do not trouble me again tonight.”

The creature whined again and licked the boy's hand, then shuffled off on hands and knees and thence out into the evening.

Ascaris turned his full attention to his guests, who stood silently at attention, waiting for him to speak. “Well?”

“Hrrrrhrrr. We got much today. Hard to carry.” The shorter one turned an eye socket speculatively to the left or Ascaris. “Just in time, hnh.”

Ascaris looked at his servant blandly and then followed its hollow gaze. His right arm had putrefied and fallen off. It happened, sometimes, when he wasn't paying attention.

With a murmur of indifference, Ascaris beckoned to the creature. It opened its greatcoat with one bony hand and a seemingly endless stream of flesh came out. The boy drew it toward him with another gesture, bidding it engulf his rotting arm and then shoot up the right side of his body, where it pulsed weakly before sliding off him again to reveal a new arm, smooth and perfect.

“Me too,” rasped the other one. “Have too much. Long walk. Tired.”

“And how can you be tired, dear Moul?” drawled Ascaris in his musical voice. “You are dead, like Culla.”

“Dead is always tired, hrrrr. You tired too. That's why it keep falling to pieces, that pretty corpse.”

Ascaris's face went blank. He always looked somewhat expressionless, with his eyes having long since clouded over, but this was different. The two other dead creatures grew very still. He was beautiful, this golden dead child, but right now he was very angry. Or rather, *It* was. The mind inside the corpse. The Intruder.

“I am not tired.” Ascaris spoke very softly and sweetly, and the creatures before him trembled and the flesh slithered out of them and vanished into the boy, up through the soles of his perfect feet. “I am not dead either, inside here.” The boy pointed to his chest. “And I am not alive. Death and life, they are for this world, for your kind. I eat them both. I am greater than both.”

Moult opened its mouth to speak and its jaw clattered to the floor, sending teeth skittering across the stones. Culla said only, “Yes Lord.”

“I am getting bigger too,” Ascaris said, stretching. Outwardly, he was still not much more than a child. His body had been twelve years of age or possibly fourteen at the most. He kept most of his skin bared, so as not to hamper his eating touch. The robes that hung down his back were often clotted with gore and teeming with maggots, but they were richer and more ornate than those of any living king. He looked like a cunning doll used in a nameless and unnatural rite. But he was no doll. And he was getting bigger, inside that outwardly frail body. Soon he would eat vast cities, and armies, whole.

“Yes Lord,” repeated Culla, seeming to wither and shrink before this pretty child.

Ascaris picked up one of Moult's teeth and sucked on it like a candy piece. “Why should

I not eat you as well, you useless sacks of bones? I have many ways to gather what I need. And you have already failed to get me what I needed most.”

“Hnnh. Let us try, *get* you thing,” Culla pleaded. “What you need? We get it.”

The boy spat the tooth out suddenly. It shot into Moults eye socket, where it rattled around. Neither Moults nor Culla dared move an inch.

“You brought me a man. But it was the wrong one. Find me the right man. I must get him back.”

“How we know?” asked Culla fearfully.

“Take the dog.”

Ascaris turned away, absent-mindedly rubbing his new arm. Moults fumblingly picked up its jaw and started out the door.

“And Culla!” Ascaris cried out suddenly, making the creature turn back.

“You must bring them both back. He, and the dog as well.” Ascaris paused. “I need them both.”

It was fortunate Moults could not speak at the moment, for it was wondering what their great and terrible Lord could need with one specific human. Even if a certain man was important to the Intruders plan somehow, why couldn't Ascaris simply fetch this man?

Why couldn't the boy keep his own arms from falling off, for that matter?

But Moults could not speak, and Culla, scrambling on ahead and looking frantically for the dog, thought only that it felt more tired than ever.

## Chapter 15: Naos

*Corm was standing alone on a vast plain. He stood astride a line that stretched, perfectly straight, into infinity. Half of the plain was black sand, the other half was pale. On the black half of the plain, several small dun-colored rocks glistened. On the light half, black rocks sat. After a moment, Corm realized they were sitting across from each other in the exact same positions, perfectly reflected across the line.*

*Corm stooped and picked up a black rock. He threw it into the black side of the plain...*

“I think she is coming out of it.”

“She?”

“Humans are typically divided into females and males for purposes of reproduction.”

Vata opened her eyes. She was naked, but she didn't feel cold. There seemed to be different projections around her, and some were moving. But they were all the same light sandy color as she had seen in her dream, and she could not differentiate them well.

Her internal organs were spread out on her body.

Vata's heart beat faster in alarm, as she was able to clearly see. One of the sand-colored objects moved closer to her and extended its limb to her kindly.

“Would you like to hold it?”

Vata blinked and then accepted her own heart into her palm, deciding that this was simply an extension of her dream about the boy throwing the stone. She touched it very gently all the same, thrilling at the sensations it caused.

“We recovered your body from a mass of gray tissue,” another object continued as the

first one helped guide Vata around her own innards. “We believe you were being rapidly ingested. This was causing severe distress to your body and would have resulted in all functions ceasing in a very few moments.”

Vata nodded. That sounded about right. She handed her gnawed intestines back to the first object, who proceeded to mend the tissue damage.

“We would like to apologize for interfering in your affairs, but we have reason to believe that this gray material, or rather the force driving it, has been artificially introduced into your world.”

“I see.” Vata finally spoke, thinking it might wake her up. Nothing happened.

The first object finished repairing her organs and ran a limb over her body, putting everything in place again as smoothly as sweeping sand into a hole. Her skin was unbroken, devoid of the ravages of the many mouths at the ford, unmarked even by the surgery that followed.

Giving up on waking from the dream, Vata turned to them and asked, “Who are you? I can't see you plainly.”

“We are Observers,” said the first. “This is my apprentice.”

“You may call me Naos,” said the second, making up a name on the spot for Vata’s benefit. “I will attempt to help.”

Naos reached a hand into the frontal region of its head and tugged at the center. It pulled out a nose and then pushed in a mouth and two eyes. Plainly craning its neck to better study Vata's features, it sculpted itself a face resembling her own.

“I hope this will be more comforting to you,” she concluded.

Vata felt as if she were going to laugh or scream. “I...I’m not sure. My name is Vata.”

Naos nodded and adjusted herself to be a slightly different color than the background.

Vata was finally able to see that she and the instructor didn’t have chests or stomachs. They were certainly very strange looking, but graceful in their way.

“Thank you. Where are my clothes?”

The instructor, who remained faceless, gestured apologetically. “Forgive us. Your military garb was partially devoured, but we will restore it to the best of our ability once it has been cleaned. We are removing traces of the invasive gray material for study, as we did from your body.”

“Here is something in the meantime.” Naos produced a drapery or blanket. It was unnaturally soft and light, and Vata suspected it was assembled rather than woven. These Observers seemed to have a far superior control of physical matter than she had encountered or imagined was possible.

“Do you know if anyone else survived?” was Vata's next question.

“We were unable to check. You joined us just as we were retreating.”

“Retreating?” Vata's heart sank. “Then the gray creatures are a threat to your people as well?”

“We are unsure. But we did not want him to notice us.”

Vata felt a coldness steal over her and she did not have to ask who “he” was. She was remembering wings and a face, grinning at her from the center of the dark tide.

Vata stayed with them a long time, recovering.

*Corm was on the black and pale plains again. He picked up a dun-colored rock this time, and threw it into the pale side. The earth began to shake.*

*He thought he caught a glimpse of something, a strange white ship sailing in the sand. Someone was in the ship, facing away from him. As the sand beneath his feet began to give way, he thought he saw that the ship was really a ribcage...a colossal ribcage, bigger than that of a whale, gliding towards him across the sand.*

*The person in the ship was*

“Vata. Vata. Are you all right?”

Vata muttered and fought with her arms, slashing them back and forth through Naos's face a couple of times before she woke up. This did not distress him, though it made Vata gasp when she woke up enough to see her wrist buried in his neck.

She hastily pulled her arm out of her friend and sat up. “What is it?”

“You were moving in your sleep, and talking, though the words did not seem to make any sense.”

Vata rubbed her dark hair, the only patch of darkness in The Floating City besides her eyes and the ritual tattoo beneath them. Naos's instructor had informed her that she had a foreign ink under her skin and asked if she would like them to take it out, but Vata had refused.

“Oh? What did I say?”

“I could not tell.” Naos had assumed a more male aspect lately. When she questioned him about it, he had said the features were averaged from Vata's own memories and he hoped she found it less alarming than his first face. Most of the people Vata knew had been soldiers, so she

supposed it made a certain kind of sense.

Now that face was regarding her with something like a concerned expression.

“Well,” Vata sighed, “There’s no need to wake me up from a dream. Dreams can’t hurt anyone.”

“A dream...what is that?” Naos sat down next to her. The familiarity didn’t bother Vata.

“It’s like pictures or a story I see while I sleep. Dreams are nonsense.”

“Do you remember the story?”

Vata frowned and thought. “I think I keep seeing a man.” She shook her head. “I don’t know the man, yet I’ve seen him off and on for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, so was he.”

Naos scratched his ear even though Vata was aware that such an action was entirely unnecessary on his part. “...perhaps the man is real.”

Vata shook her head, then stood up. “How much longer do your people plan to study me? I need to find another unit and report what happened at the ford.”

“I do not want you to go.”

Vata turned back to look at the Observer questioningly.

Naos persisted. “You are a human. Your life is very short, and may be ended easily in an infinite manner of ways. Is this not so?”

Vata nodded.

“And you are exponentially more likely to die in the Army of Heaven, correct? Because you must face these enemies, without knowing how to defeat them.”

Vata raised her eyebrows. “Yes. But I joined the Army in order to make a stand. I wanted

to have more control over my death.”

Naos took her hands in his. He always worked very hard at having normal human hands for her along with the human face he maintained each day. “You can have control over your life if you stay with us! I could teach you how to assemble things, and change them.”

In spite of herself, Vata was somewhat intrigued. “Are you saying you think a human can learn to change things like an Observer?”

Naos blinked unnecessary eyelids. “Of course! I would merely have to change your composition,” but Vata had drawn away, shaking her head.

“There’s no evil in you, Naos. But to me, being something other than strictly human seems like an evil thing. I couldn’t do it.”

Naos was clearly crushed, and Vata felt sorry for him. She asked, “Why don't we walk? I want to hear more stories about your city, and the things you’ve observed.”

So Naos told her about the great castle of glass that men had built, and the horrible and futile experiments they did there. Unlike the gentle Observers, when the men of the Eudaemon looked inside a person's body, that person no longer awoke.

He told her of the copper angel, and how it sat sometimes like a sphinx in an eyrie on the highest rock in the desert, motionlessly watching the silent and depleted sands of which it was king. It was he who had eaten her platoon, and the winged gray creatures were from his own flesh. He was a prince of the powers of the air, and his children stalked the skies between the Floating City and the earth below.

Naos also warned her that humans were starting to uproot and move more in these times than before. They had been watching the movements on Antilha and were concerned that the

people there were being driven north to the mainland by some external force. At the same time, more and more people from the northern continent seemed to be drifting to the center. The Observers did not know what the outcome would be.

As they walked, Vata took in the uniformity of the Observers and their city, everything seeming to blend into everything else. The clouds beyond offered the only real variation as the sky changed with the advancing of the day. Occasionally an Observer would break off from its friends and ask her a question. She always did her best to answer, although she didn't usually have the kind of precise scientific explanation they might have hoped for.

Vata was free to talk as much as she liked here, and it was liberating. As a recruit in the Army of Heaven, she had to limit her speech and disguise her voice in order to keep her sex a secret. As a soldier she continued to keep talk to a minimum, partially from habit and partially from a desire not to stand out too much. Vata suspected that even the training of the Army might not be infallible. There was no sense borrowing trouble. Here in the Floating City, she wanted to learn as many things as she could before she returned to the Army and rigid silence descended again.

She noticed that some Observers had wings and asked Naos about it. He replied that any of them could shape wings, it was simply something they did when they had a reason to leave the confines of their city. Vata wondered if anyone had ever seen an Observer traveling in this manner, and if such a sighting had given rise to legends of things like angels.

But legends of angels and fey were very old. Vata began to wonder how long the Observers had been there among them, and she asked Naos if there were such a thing as age, or death, for his people.

“All of us awoke at different times, and that is age,” Naos agreed. “None of us has died. It was warned to us once that our role is one of peaceful observation, and that if we broke that rule and fought one another, and did one another any injury, our Floating City would fall.”

“Who warned you?” Vata asked, but Naos did not know the answer to this.

## Chapter 16: Silence

Tife and his father stood at the edge of the encampment and stared in disbelief. The sentries were gone. The gates stood open, one of them hanging by a hinge. They heard no one, they saw nothing.

Mari looked at his son anxiously and barked a word that Tife understood to refer to his wife Nadiyo. Suddenly in a cold sweat, the younger man broke off and ran through the open gates. Mari followed more slowly, looking about him. By and large the world of Men was a nonsensical place to the sea-wolf. Mari was used to the underwater halls of Agive. He had little experience with the structures of men, and these ramshackle tents and squat prison buildings were even uglier than the usual things men built.

He knew the smell of death though, and he wrinkled his sensitive nose in disgust and alarm at the pervasiveness of it here. Mari would have never gone near this place but for Tife, and the new daughter he had come here to meet.

Heedless anymore of being stopped by guards, Tife was running through the camp, shouting for Nadiyo and for the friends they had made here over the months. No one answered. He began to feel as if he were losing his mind.

Finally, Tife came upon the missing people. Near the rear of the camp, where the guards had burnt little Selondye, a great trench had been freshly dug. In this hole were the remains of an immense pyre, sodden and extinguished from a rainstorm two or three days past. Even so, amidst the blackened ruins of the fire, Tife was able to glimpse patches of color. There was the occasional unburnt scrap of blue or scarlet that he recognized as part of a scarf or shirt. A

brilliant emerald-dyed veve was almost completely intact.

Tife was more confused than ever. Why would the guards burn everyone's possessions? More to the point, why would the island folk let them? They were largely peaceful and adaptable, but he did not doubt they would stand up for themselves if necessary. Why, that bracelet he spied hanging off a charred stick nearby was Acephie's most treasured charm! She always wore it, and had been talking of making Nadiyo a similar one.

Tife squinted suddenly. This was no stick.

He was looking at a burnt and blackened arm bone. With his mind freezing in rebellion against the horror of his realization, Tife's vision unwillingly adjusted. His mind reshuffled the shapes in front of him, re-aligning their images into something impossible. For Tife was staring at the charred remains of Acephie and the rest of the camp, all heaped in a great untidy mound and burnt together in the hastily dug trench.

So it had been plague after all.

Blinking, his eyes picked out one or two guards among them. He knew this only by scraps of their clothing. In one or two instances where some flesh had remained, he saw the same pattern of melting that had stricken Selondye. The plague had eaten refugees and guards alike. At some point, he realized, the remaining survivors had abandoned the camp, possibly bearing the plague with them out into the world.

Looking around, he had no way of guessing how things had ended for the ones who had opened the gates and fled. Had the islanders revolted, overpowering the guards and tearing down the gates? Had the guards abandoned their prisoners to their fate? Had they all fled together? There were no answers, and the only people left in the camp were in this trench. He had to know.

Tife plunged into the trench. He tried to begin in an organized manner but very soon he was shaking with revulsion, maddened by the true significance of what he was doing. Screaming now, he flung bones left and right and tore clothing. He had to be sure Nadiyo wasn't among them. Right now he little cared if a thousand good people had to hunt for their limbs on resurrection day. He didn't worry that he was wading through flesh and bones that were steeped in the plague. He only screamed, and searched, and screamed. Mari, on hands and knees next to the trench, howled along with his son.

Finally, Tife found her, near the bottom. She was holding something tightly. It was fused to her body, either by the flames or by a horrible mingling and melting of their tissues from the plague. He stared stupidly for a moment, convinced he was a helpless babe again. He was weeping with his father and watching Panipe and her pretend-child burn. But it was not his mother, it was Nadiyo and she was clutching Acephie's baby.

Tife realized that the baby must have been born with the plague, or gotten infected shortly after it came into the world. Acephie may have been dead by then. Still his wife had loved it and protected it, even though the baby spelled her death. Nadiyo, Nadiyo...

Tife lay down with the two of them in that pit of horror and waited to die.

He lay there senseless for a very long time. He did not move, or close his eyes, or think. He did not see. The darkness might have come and the dawn after it, but Tife did not know. After what may have been days, he sat up. He was filthy, and he had lain among the dead, but he was not sick. He studied his hands, but there was no corruption upon the flesh.

Mari had waited by him at the edge of the pit for all this time. He beckoned to Tife now that he saw his son had returned to his senses, and slowly and reluctantly, Tife obeyed. He allowed his father to lead him away like a little boy.

Once again in the ocean, they cleansed themselves and discussed what they should do. Here in the water where he belonged, Mari could speak perfectly well. It was not how a man would talk to another man, but Tife understood his father as Panipe had before.

“You cannot die with your wife, because you are not a mortal man,” said his father.

Tife refused to let go. “Yet I am half man. Did my mother not teach me the gift of dying?”

Mari shook his head. “Nor of making. It is only the greatest magic that allows our kind to love a mortal woman, and give her children.”

“Then what shall I do now, Father? I have lived and loved as a man. I want to die as a man! There’s nothing for me now that my light has left me.” Tife hung his head.

Mari considered. “If there is no light, then it is time to chase the shadow.”

Tife looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Agive has said that there is another king beneath the waves. This King Agwerot and his people pierce holes in ships at sea and devour the men who sail them. We fight them when we can. But Agive has said that dark creatures like these walk upon the earth, also.”

Tife's eyes widened. “You mean what my people were fleeing. Some thought it was a sickness, others said they saw a black shadow. They came here hoping to escape it.”

Mari nodded. “No mere disease, my son. It is Shadow, sure enough. It burrows in and then hides in a creature's natural shadow, staying until it sucks that creature dry. And it can split

into smaller shadows, to attack two or more at once! The parasite has finally moved to men.”

“So that is how it was done...” Tife shook his head. “But then, we are lost! What fire, or medicine, or prayers can avail against a shadow? There is nothing to grasp, nothing to fight!”

“Now listen to me, son. That may be true for men. It is not true for us.”

Tife began to see. “Your people have fought such creatures.”

“Yes. Now this shadow, it stalks the lands above. I am not a man, and I cannot walk long on the land. I am weak and foolish there. But you, child of your mother and of me, can walk in either world.”

“Then...”

Mari leaned forward. “Men and women cannot withstand him. And on land even the great Agive himself is no stronger than they. But you! You can hunt him and slay him. This is your mother's gift to you. And when you come face to face with this shadow, if you cannot beat him alone,” Mari put his hands on his son's shoulders. “Bring him down to my folk. *He will not come up again.*”

## Chapter 17: Memory

The dog was onto something. It kept letting out little grunts and whines, and finally it hung back and growled continuously, refusing to go on. Culla tried to tug it further but the creature only wrenched its head back so sharply that Culla's hand came with it. As Moulton watched and sniggered, the dog shambled away through the tall weeds, whining and pissing as it went.

Culla watched to be certain the dog was at least fleeing back towards home and then turned back to its companion. "This rate, we in pieces before we get to man."

"Hrrrrrrr."

"I took too much trouble with jaw. You better without it." Culla clacked at its friend and turned back to scan the horizon where the dog had been taking them. Suddenly, it stood straighter.

"Man...two men!"

Moulton turned to see incredulously. "Two men? How we know which one is him then."

"We take both?" Culla wasn't sure either.

Moulton shrugged, then nodded.

Ardh stopped Corm with a protective arm. "Wait. There! Coming towards us."

Corm looked. "I see two ladies. They're hurt."

Ardh started and swung around to face Corm despite the lethal danger of turning his back on the Resurrection Men. "Ladies! Hurt!" Had the boy gone mad?

Corm nodded. "One's jaw is loose, and the other one has lost her hand...they need our help."

“Corm!” Ardh snatched desperately at his friend, but he was too late. Corm had run on ahead. Cursing, Ardh followed, expecting the strangers to unleash death upon them at any moment.

Culla pointed a bony finger at Corm. “*That* man,” it said. Moulth nodded and opened its cloak.

Nothing happened.

Moulth turned to Culla accusingly but Culla shook its head helplessly. “Our Lord take back fleshes, remember? He need them more.”

Moulth clacked its jaw in annoyance and turned back to face Corm.

Corm reached them. His intent was to ask the ladies he saw if they wanted help with their injuries. As he opened his mouth to speak, Moulth opened its body. The Intruder was the only force driving the resurrection men. So it was nothing for Moulth’s bones to spring apart and then crash together, enveloping Corm like the twin halves of a bear trap. Corm stood there uncertainly, looking like a bird in a cage. The bones began to constrict. Moulth had reasoned that breaking the boy’s arms and legs would make him easier to transport.

Ardh ran up screaming and brandishing his boarding axe. “Demons!” He roared. “You’ll not take my boy!!!”

Moulth’s gap-toothed grin mocked him. “Hrrrrr. And what will you do, O man?”

In response, Ardh swung his axe to knock off Moulth’s skull. But it did nothing; every time Ardh would have sundered a joint, the bones would just separate in anticipation and then rejoin a moment later. He next tried to crack the skull itself but this did nothing to Moulth. If the Intruder had decided once to replace Moulth’s skull with a milking pail, or leave the skeleton

without a head altogether, it would have made no difference. Every bone was a weapon and one particular piece was of no importance at all.

Desperate, Ardh pulled out his knife next. But there was no flesh to cut, no blood to draw, except Corm's. Ardh found to his anguish that there was no way to attack Moul't without wounding the boy trapped inside the monster. While Moul't leered at Ardh through its dislocated jaw, Culla flanked him. It intended to pull Ardh to pieces, or tear his throat out with its teeth.

Or both.

Corm reached up painfully from inside his snake-cage of crushing bones and managed to touch Moul't's face. His hand strayed dangerously near the loose jaw, the gnashing teeth. Ardh screamed. Time stopped.

Moul't froze, its eye sockets turned up to the sky. Then the mind controlling it began to shift and blur, and the skull swung down to regard the earth. Moul't was staring at someone that the Intruder could not see.

Corm stood patiently frozen, his own bones on the verge of breaking.

In Moul't's mind, a chubby little boy was tugging its coat, demanding another piece of meat pie, slyly looking out from under his untidy tangle of red hair and calling Moul't by name, saying...

"...Grandma..."

"...what?" Culla turned to stare at its companion. What Moul't had just uttered made no sense.

Moul't reeled back and collapsed. It did not fall backwards or to its knees in the way a whole man does. Instead, it fell to pieces, a pile of disorganized brown bones littering a dark and

dusty coat in the grass. Corm stood in the center of it all as if Moul't's bones were a fairy ring of mushrooms left after the rain.

Culla rounded on Corm. "You hurt Moul't, you bad."

Corm replied, "Where have you taken my friend Jan?" Ardh could not believe his ears or his eyes. The boy was so calm.

Culla was not calm, it was enraged. "Other man? Took man to Lord, then *no more man*. He eat you next!" Its good arm shot out, the cruel finger bones digging into Corm's arm hard enough that blood seeped thickly through the sleeve.

"Let him go!" Ardh hacked at Culla's wrist and elbow joints, trying to loosen the creature's grip on Corm, but to no avail.

Culla grinned (it had no choice but to grin, having a only naked skull for a face) and dropped Corm for the moment, swinging its arm almost casually at Ardh. All it took was one blow for the big man to go flying.

Ardh landed some feet away, his brains momentarily rattled.

Corm's head swam with pain. His arm was throbbing, but the agony of this paled next to being told Jan was dead. Nevertheless, he reached up shakily and touched the stump where Ascaris's dog had somehow managed to tear off Culla's hand, when Ardh's blade had done nothing.

"And who has done this to you?" Corm managed to whisper.

"Lord's stupid dog. You become the same..." And then Culla, too, felt a change come over it. The *dog*, that was right. They had raised it from a pup. Her husband had brought it as a present for her, to keep her company until he could give her children. They had played in the

fields, and one day her poor sweet pup had come home with white foam on its mouth, and bitten her...

Culla stood back, and turned away. It realized, just for one moment of clarity, what they had been. A plump grandmother who had lived a full life. A young wife buried by a grieving husband. Two graves at the edge of the kirkyard, in a nameless village Ascaris had passed through long ago. Two graves...it was utterly unimportant whose.

“Rhhhh. Just...material.”

Ardh had pulled Corm back and now he kept hold of him protectively as he eyed Culla suspiciously. “What's that?”

“Just material to him...Moult, you. The dog. That boy. Just...”

Ardh watched incredulously as Culla cascaded into a small pile of bones, as Moult had done.

“What did you do to them?” He stared at Corm frantically.

Corm looked down at the two piles which lay rather pathetically at their feet. The bones were much smaller with the Intruder gone from them. They were nothing but markers now, cairns for two feared monsters that had devastated countless small villages, bearing Death within their coats. Or they were all that was left of two good women who had lived and died and gone to bone, only to suffer one final indignity.

“I didn't. They remembered.”

“Remembered? Remembered what?”

Corm took Jan's sickle from his belt and began loosening the ground with it. Now that Jan was gone, there was no reason to keep it in good condition. “They remembered who they

were, before.”

Ardh sank tiredly to his knees and started helping the boy dig as best he could.

“Before...what?”

Corm looked at him. “Before the Lord came.”

Ardh had no idea what to believe anymore. The Ankou had been real; he had now seen the dead walk with his own eyes. Even if he wanted to forget the encounter, Corm's arm was an ongoing reminder it had really happened. It had been terribly mauled and bruised, and Ardh ended up having to cauterize some of the deeper lacerations made by the bony fingers. Even after that, the wound had to be watched religiously for signs of infection.

The terrible strength of these dead creatures was evident from all of the villages they had destroyed, yet they had turned out to be curiously powerless once Corm had touched them and spoken to them.

Why? Was Corm somehow more fearsome and powerful even than they?

Moreover, they had shown no signs of being able to unleash the kind of attack that had taken the town he and Corm had seen in their pursuit. That town had been full of people and animals who had in many cases been eaten to the bone, even dissolved. Yet the Ankou had fought him and Corm as men would, with blows.

Granted, without Corm's unexpected intervention the resurrection men certainly would have won. Such strength as Culla had briefly shown would have easily broken their necks or crushed their skulls, and the already-dead servants could not have been wounded or

overpowered. But why not use the most powerful weapons in their arsenal from the start, and kill him and Corm instantly as they had all those townsfolk?

Ardh tried to come up with a reason. Perhaps the Resurrection Men had a certain period between such large-scale attacks when they were comparatively weak. Or, maybe their ability to consume people depended on some additional element that had not been present when Corm and he had surprised them.

This latter seemed more likely, since he could not imagine why the resurrection men, being dead, would need to recover between attacks. But perhaps it was not like that. Perhaps they had been controlled, like puppets. If that were so, their limitations would have been those of their master, The Lord.

On the one hand, Ardh wanted to know more about this “Lord.” After all, their master had forced two dead persons into his service and through them, caused the death of hundreds of people (or perhaps more). He had killed Corm's “grandparents,” that Jan fellow, everyone Corm loved. It would not be unreasonable for the boy to seek revenge, but Ardh knew he would not. For all he knew, if Corm met the Lord he might try to help him as he had attempted to help the resurrection men.

Ardh looked up. Perhaps they had helped the Ankou, after all. It was true they were at rest now, having remembered their former human lives. Had they *chosen* to fall to the earth lifeless? If so, Corm might not have the sort of malign power Ardh was worrying about. Rather, Corm might have simply seen who the monsters really were. Having recognized them as the human women they had been, perhaps he had saved them.

Ardh had often watched the boy's face, thinking that Corm looked as if he were staring at

something no one else could see. He had found it endearing, then. Little had he known it might be *true!*

He would not waste his time worrying about Corm being a threat. If he was being a fool, so be it. But Ardh did wonder what the two of them should do now. Their quest to find Jan was over; the man was dead. This land held nothing for them anymore, but then, what land did? Back home, Ardh would only shame and inconvenience his family. Corm would not know the language or the customs, and would be in constant danger of offending against the land's strict laws.

Their answer seemed to lie on the road once again. More and more people were traveling each day in these chaotic times. They would not seem a very unusual pair if they turned their steps to one of the great cities and sought their fortunes there. There were many jobs Ardh could do, and he imagined he could train the boy to do something simple. Together, they would be the family each man was lacking. They would reinvent themselves.

Ardh thought that the great city of Chorazin was their best bet. He had passed through it before, occupying as it did a prominent place on the spice route. He remembered being impressed by the variety of the peoples and customs there. Here would be open-mindedness and opportunity. He knew that a large and cosmopolitan city would carry its own dangers, but to his mind it was well worth it.

He began to daydream fondly of walking on paved streets again, watching a performance, eating a meal someone else had prepared. He could even find a courier and send a letter home to his family. There would be public baths, libraries, colleges, tea and coffee houses. Ardh had come from a very civilized region in many ways even if its laws were restrictive. There were

things he had come to miss.

Accordingly, when Corm returned with that night's firewood, Ardh asked the boy what he thought about seeing a big city.

“Will I see ships like the one you sailed on?” Corm asked.

“Of course. There will be ships, horses...perhaps even a camel, or an elephant!”

Corm had no idea what camels and elephants were, but he could tell his friend thought he should be excited by them.

“It sounds nice, Ardh.” Corm wanted to please his friend, but he also felt empty now that Jan and everyone else was dead. Going after Jan to bring him back home had been the one time in Corm's life when he felt like he had some sort of goal or purpose, and now it was gone. “Do you think...I might find something to do there?”

Ardh understood. He put his hand on the boy's good shoulder so as not to give his wounded arm any further pain. “We both will, child. We will find our place in this world. You will see!” Corm seemed heartened by this, and Ardh felt more confident still.

It did not occur to either of the men to worry about what the Lord was doing, or whether Ascaris was willing to forget about the two of them like they had forgotten about him.

## Chapter 18: Landfall

The ground was shaking. People were screaming. Only, it wasn't the same way people screamed down below, in the world of men. In the Floating City, the screams were inside her head.

Vata looked around frantically, clutching at her ears even though that did nothing to stem the cacophony of voices inside her mind. Observers all over the city were crying out in agony. Senselessly, Vata waded through an invisible barrier of sound, looking for Naos.

He burst in upon her and he was unlike Vata had ever seen him. The eyes stared blankly and expressionlessly out of his manufactured human face because he did not have time to manipulate it into emotions for her. Instead, his whole being seemed to be a frenetic blur, every part of him vibrating with the deep panic and anguish he felt. The strength of his despair warped the very air around them.

“What's happened?” Vata whispered, although somehow she already knew.

The blood angel, the Butcher Bird, had found the Floating City after all.

Naos didn't have time to answer. He grasped Vata's shoulder in a manner more rough than she thought possible of any Observer, but especially him. For one last brief second, he looked her full in the face. She thought disjointedly that his face was suddenly a mirror, and she was looking at a pale reflection of herself... Then he plunged his fingers into her eye sockets and she lost consciousness.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on the floor. For the first time since she had come to the Floating City, she was cold. She was unclothed, even though she had been wearing her uniform before. Her head was pounding terribly, so it was a while before she realized there was

no more screaming. In fact, it was completely silent. There was no sound anywhere.

Panicked, Vata tried to sit up, and that was when she discovered something was holding her down. She clawed frantically at it and finally succeeded in pushing it away. Springing to her feet, the first thing she saw was black. There was a terrible black spray of liquid that had dried on her body in several places. The things that had held her pinned to the floor were wings, the pale wings of an Observer. It was from the jagged roots of these wings that the thick black substance had come.

Vata realized that these wings must have been torn off an Observer, and she felt sick with dread at what this could mean. Then she had an even worse thought.

“Naos!” Vata ran outside, looking frantically in all directions and calling over and over. “Naos! *Naos!*!” Her voice was the only sound echoing throughout a dead city.

They were everywhere. Observers littered the streets. Vata had no idea there had been so many. And now every last one of them was dead. The same terrible substance covered them all, blacker than night. So this was what it looked like to spill the blood of one of these innocent people. On a visceral level this blood was clearly a curse, an abomination. And the city was drenched in it now.

The shaking began first as a faint tremor, and Vata did not feel it. She was too busy staring at something she had come across.

Vata slid to her knees, certain that she was going insane. Dressed in her soldier's uniform, lying dead, was...Vata. There was her face, and her black hair, her dark eyes staring empty.

Then Vata frowned, coming back to herself a little. The tattoo across her cheeks was not right, for one thing. It was an uneven smear. The eyes looked strange as well, as if they were painted onto the face by a hasty doll-maker's brush. And then it hit her.

She undid the buttons of the corpse's uniform and peeled it down the back, just enough. Once she saw the fresh wounds there she screamed, and then cried out hoarsely and held the dead body tightly to her.

“Naos!!”

Shaking, eyes shut tightly, nose buried in Naos's new growth of bloody hair, she saw how it must have been. Naos had reminded Vata of a mirror at the last because that's exactly what he had done. He had reshaped his face to look like Vata's just as he had done her first night here. After Naos had knocked her out, he must have formed wings and then torn them off. Naked, bloodied and mostly hidden under Naos's wings, Vata had lain among numberless fallen Observers littering the city.

And then Naos had dressed *herself* in Vata's uniform and smeared her new face and hair with her own black blood. “Vata,” prepared for one last battle, had gone out to face the Butcher Bird.

The city was shaking worse now, but still Vata did not notice. She rocked Naos in her arms and stared blankly ahead, seeing nothing and thinking nothing. Finally, the city groaned and very slowly began to tilt, and Vata realized that they were falling out of the sky.

Ardh didn't know it, but no letter would ever reach his family again.

His mother was playing in their courtyard with a young brother and sister Ardh would never meet when she felt a shadow cross the sun. She looked up and slowly opened her mouth in

disbelief and confusion. The children never saw.

By this time, Vata had taken refuge in one of the Floating City's vaults. The Observers had plenty of places to store specimens, texts, inventions, and other products of their thousands of years of scholarly pursuits. She was lying curled up in total darkness, still holding Naos, when the city touched earth. The force immediately rendered Vata senseless and she remained that way as the Floating City crushed everything beneath it, causing ripples of devastation that extended miles from its point of impact.

The sky went black as dust and debris were flung up, blotting out the sun. One of the most prosperous and academically enlightened cities of the Southern Continent was obliterated in moments, leaving a massive crater. The resulting earthquakes traveled far enough to rattle the windows of the Eudaemon hundreds of miles away. Ships at sea were sucked beneath newly created currents and tsunamis lashed the nearest shores. In the watery halls of Agive, Mari thought anxiously of his son. Chunks of the floating city, some massive, flew wide and impacted nearby towns and cities.

Millions died.

In the days and weeks to follow, mankind deteriorated in the wake of this unprecedented tragedy. Each country and nation ascribed the event to a different cause, and Ascaris sent his human followers on a new mission. This time instead of reaping blood, the Intruder's agents went out to sow discord, fear, and hatred among the nations of men.

The Intruder required an immense amount of energy to operate so far from Ascaris, its stronghold. Even a single cell of itself was worth retrieving under the current circumstances. Accordingly, whenever an agent of the Intruder was no longer needed, it was immediately

consumed. Ascaris was aware that this would be his fate, and his “children” the Harvester, the Butcher Bird and King Agwerot knew it too. Lower servants like the resurrection men and the human worshipers were given much less of the Intruder's power and this came with less insight. They generally never suspected how expendable they were.

Yet, the Intruder had not reclaimed anything when Vata was destroyed. It began to wonder if, after all, she had escaped somehow. But surely there was no need for alarm. Even if the wretched woman were still alive, the Intruder had seen her face through the eyes of its blood angel. The same went for that empty-headed man. Before the resurrection men had suddenly blinked out of existence, they had seen Corm and his self-appointed guardian Ardh as well.

The great mind of the Intruder paused. Yes, that had been strange. A group of its human worshipers, and now a pair of its dead servants, had somehow been destroyed shortly after coming into contact with Ardh and Corm. Absorbing the feral men so quickly had been a mistake, but at least the tiny bit of power they had been borrowing was now back with the Intruder as a result. But it had never gotten any energy back from the resurrection men. ...why?

Where had that power gone?

The Intruder spoke once again to all its agents. It showed them a woman covered in jet black stains and a childlike man. It told them what it wanted. As long as one or both of these people was still alive, the Intruder could not help being uneasy.

They belonged back inside.

## Chapter 19: Shadow

Tife had been tracking the shadow long when he encountered the old man. He wore a tattered black soldier's uniform, the uniform of the Army of Heaven. There were many such men on the road these days, after the Army's collapse. Some of them had a black band beneath their eyes and some did not. This one did.

He called himself Father. He did not seem wholly in his right mind and was searching for a “dark thing” who had taken his child away. Suspecting this dark thing was the same shadow he was hunting, Tife contrived to travel with him and one night as they were warming themselves before bed, he learned Father's story.

The man had once been a physician. After a chance encounter with a younger woman in a village he was passing through, he later learned that a child had resulted from the union. The woman and he meant nothing to each other, but he sent money for the boy when he could. He had seen him for the first time shortly before he enlisted.

Then his platoon had been sent to investigate reports of the enemy at Honmion. The site was not far distant from where his boy lived. Father could not give his mind to fighting, so anxious was he that his son might be dead or in danger.

“I couldn’t be there for my son while he was a child, you see,” Father muttered as he listlessly prodded their campfire. “The Army is the End. That wasn’t *my* plan though. I never really believed the doctrines, that there would be no life outside enlistment, that we were gods. I was in it for what I could get and then I was getting out. I had a plan, for after.”

“Yes?” Tife encouraged him.

“When I had made my fortune and seen what was to be seen, I would retire a hero, with a grateful son to keep me in my old age. I would send him money all through my tenure as a soldier, to ensure this. And then I would reap the rewards of my investment at the end of my life: living in his house, teaching him to heal men, playing with his children.” He ended brokenly. “My simple dream. That thing ate my dream.”

Tife looked into the flames. “It ate mine also. A life with Nadiyo, children. I failed her when she needed me. I let that creature take her.”

“You are not alone in your shame,” Father said darkly. “I couldn’t save my friend Vata. She was the bravest soldier I had the honor to fight with. And yet she too perished at the ford, borne up on the black wings of death.”

“A woman, you say! I thought the Army did not accept them.”

“The Army did not,” Father confirmed grimly.

Tife didn’t know what to say to this, so he held his tongue.

Father went on to describe how he had managed to make it out of the slaughter and confusion and had run for most of a whole day to reach his son's village. Death had been there first, but his son had hidden himself and survived. They had been looking for a safe place to hole up for the winter when the dark man had come.

According to Father, they had been standing a little ways away from each other, gathering wood. Then he had heard a dreadful grating voice and seen his boy jump up. The child called “Here I am, Papa!” and ran toward a dark shape. The thing looked vaguely like it was wearing the same uniform as Father, and it stood like a man as well, beckoning. Fooled by the apparition, his poor boy had run into its arms and been carried off.

Tife had no desire to add to Father's suffering by reiterating that the boy was no doubt dead by now, like his Nadiyo. Doubtless the poor man knew that well enough already. Instead he expressed his desire to help Father locate his son as soon as possible. If nothing else, Tife hoped to avenge the man along with his own people when they caught up with the wretched beast.

He did wonder though, why the shadow had gone after the boy in the way it had. According to his own father, it had been attacking animals and later humans by latching onto them and then hiding in their own shadows, eating away at its victims like a hidden parasite. What, then, was this bold attack out in the open?

Was it the next natural step? Now that it was stronger, did it want to attack men openly, like the other creatures his father spoke about? Was it simply tired of hiding?

Perhaps it was simpler than that. The thing had begun consuming men. Maybe it believed it was another man. A shadow takes the form of the object it originates from. And he already knew that it started with smaller things before it tackled something more difficult. On the islands, it had eaten their livestock. When it followed them to their settlement on the mainland, it started with little Selondye before becoming strong enough to eat grown men and armed guards. And now that it wanted to walk in the open, as men do, it had started with Father's little boy.

*Coward. Coward!*

Tife felt his blood turn to fire as hatred for the shadow surged through him. So it wanted to be a man, did it? Very well. Tife would show it what it was like to be a man. He did not know death or sickness, it was true. But he had known dread, and despair, and loss, and he would teach these things to that foul creature before he wrung its neck.

## Chapter 20: Prison

Ardh slowly became aware that things were worse on the roads now. Generally, folk kept their heads down and did not trouble them, but occasionally they encountered others with the brittle, furtive eyes of the savage men they had fought before. Such men invariably tried to lay hands upon them, with no explanation.

Ardh was no longer allowed to pretend to himself that nothing strange was going on. He had been doing an excellent job defending them, and so it was a little while before he saw it happen. But the first time someone had finally managed to lay a hand on Corm, that man was reduced to a babbling idiot in moments. Shaken, Ardh hadn't been able to stop Corm from approaching another man, and this one, who had been leering, began to cry.

Ardh had been frightened and angry, and he grabbed the boy by the shoulders and demanded an explanation after the men had run away. But nothing had happened to him. His wits didn't desert him, he felt no desire to sob or run away. He was still Ardh, at least he thought so. Then what was the boy doing to these others?

Corm looked down, which was nothing unusual. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I talk to someone serving the Lord, they act strange."

"How do you mean?" Ardh raised his eyebrows. "Are you saying these wretched men who dog our steps, they are sent by the same one who sent the Ankou?"

Corm nodded. "They feel the same. There is something about them all. When I touch them, that thing goes away. But...then there is not much left of them, I think."

Ardh felt cold all over, but he also felt somewhat relieved. "Then I suppose you will not

hurt me,” he mused.

“I would never hurt you Ardh.” Corm actually looked a little distressed by the notion and the big man hastened to comfort him.

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, child. I know you would never do such a thing. You are a good boy.”

Corm knit his brow. “I’m not a child, I keep telling you.”

“Yes. You are a fine young man, I meant. And I am going to see you safely to Chorazin, and we will have a fine little house!” Ardh always got overly cheerful when he was worried, and it always fooled Corm. The boy smiled hopefully, and Ardh spent the rest of that evening enumerating all the pleasant things they would do and see in Chorazin.

The next day, they were captured.

They had been walking along as usual when they came across a shallow but merry-looking stream. Normally they would have taken turns bathing, but it had been a rough couple of days and Ardh didn't feel like waiting around. He was from a land that practiced ritual cleanliness, and these things were important to him. Corm was still like most boys in that he didn't particularly relish baths, but he always obeyed Ardh when the man told him it was time for one.

Ardh made sure to put their things aside carefully where they would not tempt any passing thieves, but this also resulted in him not being able to lay hands on his knife quickly. Then he grinned and splashed Corm. After all this, Ardh was still the same man who had once rolled around in the autumn leaves. They were both splashing in the water, laughing and scaring the fish, when the wagon rolled up. It was a heavy wagon, tall and with thick sides. The back and

part of the roof were open to the elements, but barred. It came to a stop behind a copse of trees and Ardh and Corm did not immediately notice it.

They were just emerging from the stream when three men sprang out from the copse and ambushed them. There was nothing that Ardh and Corm could do; the men were heavily armed. They were permitted to dress, and then the rest of their belongings were bundled up and stored somewhere out of sight in one of the wagon's compartments.

Then they were bound and hustled into the back of the wagon, none too gently, and they saw that they were not the only people there. Ardh assumed that the armored men were more agents of the Lord, but Corm shook his head. "They don't have that feeling about them."

"Then what do they want us for? We have done nothing!" Ardh exploded, and was quickly jabbed with a pole and told to keep silent.

After the wagon had picked up speed and was noisier, they were able to speak with their fellow captives. They were told that these were the King's men, and the wagon was bound for the Capital.

Ardh spread his manacled hands. "But which king? There are many, you know."

One of the other men shook his head. "Not anymore."

And that was how they learned how bad things truly were for the world of men.

Ardh and Corm rode for many days in this fashion. Ardh watched the towers and spires of Chorazin looming closer each day and wondered what work the King had for them there. But before they came to Chorazin the wagon diverted its course. To Ardh's real alarm, the wagon

stopped in the middle of nowhere instead, a mere blank field with a pit. Had they come all this way to be slaughtered like beasts and discarded?

As they were marched towards the pit, he braced himself and prepared to fight. The odds were terrible, but he owed it to himself and his boy to try. Just as he was about to try his luck, however, he noticed the stairs. The sight was so alien and nonsensical that he froze in place, staring uncomprehendingly, until he was struck by a guard and shoved forward again. For the dark pit was actually a tunnel staircase, leading into the earth.

They were marched down into the pit. The stairs seemed to go on forever. For a short time they marched in pitch darkness, and then gradually the path lightened and they were even more amazed to behold ash-white walls and evenly spaced lights. The stairs finally ended and then they were walking down a seemingly endless white hall. The very end was brightly lit.

Once they arrived at the far end of this hall they were stripped and tattooed with a number, then washed and shaved. Ardh decided this must be a prison, but it was unlike any prison he'd ever heard of. As weeks passed and they were never charged with any crime or told when and if they would be released, Ardh began to fall into real despair.

The only way to mark time had been by the growth of his hair and nails, for no natural sunlight or darkness came to them in their cells. But after long days and weeks of maltreatment, his hair had begun to fall out and so it was harder to tell. And they periodically kept his nails pared, so he could not do injury to them or to himself.

He had no way of seeing or speaking to Corm. He had no idea they were the only two people left alive from the wagon they had come in with. When the big man thought of how scared and confused the boy must be, he wept. In time though, his emotions became dulled and

he moved from day to day in an almost dreamlike state, between sleeping and waking. When he did sleep, his nightmares were terrible.

Most often, Ardh dreamed of his mother and father and Abra, as he had before. They were coming to welcome him with loving, open arms. They accepted him! But then a tremor ran through their flesh and their faces began to run and melt like wax. As they sank before him, moaning, into disgusting shapeless lumps, he looked up in horror and dread to see the Fiend who had reduced them to this.

And it was always Corm.

Ardh would always wake up screaming, and clean white-clad men would come in with their writing instruments and demand to know what he had dreamed.

It was these men (sometimes women) who were Ardh's jailors and his tormentors. They deprived him of food, water and rest. They kept him away from other men. They kept him clean, or in filth, as they liked. They refused to tell him what they had done with Corm or the others. They gave him things to make him sleep and when he woke up he was covered with fresh wounds, some of them sewn back together. They were killing him.

Ardh tried everything he could to escape. He beat at the walls until his fists were bloody, he tried to feign sleep and overpower his jailors, he attempted to hide things and fashion tools. The one thing he never tried to do, no matter how terrible things got, was kill himself. That would be abandoning Corm to them.

He knew in his heart that Corm must be dead by now. If their treatment had reduced him to such a pathetic shell of his former self, what could it have done to that sweet, vulnerable boy? Surely he was at peace now, in heaven away from these monsters. But he did not know, and so

he kept himself alive and tried every day to escape.

Corm, meanwhile, was doing comparatively well. This initially excited, then baffled, and finally enraged his captors. For they had treated Corm even worse than Ardh. They had done things that had killed other prisoners. They had starved and denied him water for days longer than the extreme end of the range for human survival. They had removed vital organs and put something else in their place. They had taken all of his blood.

Corm simply did not change, and he certainly didn't die. He held his knees and rocked back and forth, and he thought of Ardh and Granny and Papa and Jan. He thought of flowers and mountains and how good Rosie smelled when Jan let him brush her coat, and what it had been like to laugh with Ardh and scare fish in the stream. He forgot for long periods of time where and who he was.

And he never dreamed.

## Chapter 21: Four Horsemen

Ascaris sat silently. Yet, inside him was anything but silence. He was watching and listening through all of his eyes and ears out in the world. He had somehow lost sight of Ardh and Corm and he hadn't yet seen any proof that Vata had survived. Not completely reassuring, but he was getting powerful enough now that these things were becoming less of a worry.

As for its other children, the mind within Ascaris had more to be satisfied over. The child the invader planted among the people of Antilha had done well even if its origins had been humble. Once it had finally succeeded in reaching the mainland and consuming its original host, the shadow had become exponentially more powerful. Using the woman's desire for a child had worked perfectly.

The Intruder's presence beneath the waves also had been steadily gaining in power. King Agwerot and his hordes had thrown all the coastal peoples of the world into utter despair as ships and sailors alike disappeared. Those who worshiped Lord Agive and the benevolent spirits of the sea had begun to doubt that the water offered men anything but terror and sorrow.

The Harvester had lurched indifferently from forest to steppe to desert all this while, sowing fear and reaping flesh wherever her terrible legs set down. Most people on Earth knew her as the face of the invader, and her cults continued to multiply and intensify their activities. Crusades raged, countless victims were heaped upon her pyres in a futile effort to stop the Intruder's rapacious march. She was utterly indifferent to all of it, but she knew her function.

As for the Butcher Bird, he had claimed the most staggering victory of all. The destruction of the Floating City had changed the face of the planet. It had killed millions of

people and animals and brought misery of a lasting kind to millions more whose cities and habitats had been choked with dust and debris or lashed with great waves. It had brought the despair of the human race to a fever pitch, causing various savage dictatorships and unforgiving theocracies to arise.

Many people were fleeing to Chorazin, occupying as it did such a central location in the human world. For the first time, there was talk of a World Capital, and a World King. The mind inside Ascaris noted with approval that the world of men was crumbling at an accelerated rate.

But the blood angel's victory had a more devastating result still: the destruction of every Observer on Earth. Humankind had never known of the Observers, and so they were not aware of the significance of their sudden loss. But the Intruder knew that Someone had set the Observers to watch over Earth, and that now Someone was blind to the events here. Where once Earth could have counted on help during its darkest hour, it was now utterly alone in the universe, an isolated ball of mud.

Ascaris blinked and these thoughts receded. The dog was tugging at his hand.

He looked down at it with an expression that was not even strong enough to be irritation. Sliding his fingers into its face, he started to idly rearrange things and squeeze them in an effort to cause the dog distress. But as it slumped down in front of him, twitching and foaming, Ascaris noticed something in the quality of the starlight outside and released the creature.

He said a few more words to King Agwerot, a last word of instruction. Then Ascaris drifted gracefully from the room, leaving his mangled dog behind. It did not matter if the dog lived or died, he could still use it in either state when the time was right. And it looked as if the time was about to be right.

Ascaris walked out into the night and studied the skies above. He stood motionlessly for a long time. Then four points of light detached themselves from the sea of stars and came to him. What came to Ascaris was not something that could be seen or described by Men. They were the same sort of creature as the Intruder itself. With supreme effort they pierced the atmosphere of our world, able only to flicker in and out for the briefest of moments before being compelled back to their point of origin.

Ascaris loaned them his flesh. He reached into his belly and then cast four slabs of gray corruption upon the grass. They began to inflate, taking on new forms from the beings that filled them. These things towered one moment and slid and puddled the next, not having any experience with terrestrial forms and forces.

“What have you come to say? Speak.” Ascaris paid little attention to the horribly grotesque masses swirling and seething around him, even when they occasionally engulfed him before sliding away again.

“You do not command us.” The Voice that came out of one of the masses caused one of Ascaris' human ears to bleed and then slide off. Throughout his exchange with these others, Ascaris's flesh continued to wither. He automatically repaired the damage without taking much notice.

“I have settled here. This is my place,” he responded mildly.

“Not yet your place,” another shape spoke. “Not until you have slid into its veins and penetrated into its heart.”

“I will do that when it is time.”

“It is time *now*.” The shapes reared up, four immense monoliths towering into the

blackness above.

Standing in the middle of them, Ascaris looked very small. “Tell me then.”

The monoliths quivered. It may have been with laughter, or rage. “Why should we? It is better to consume you, now that you have gotten a little larger. Then we will eat the meal you have prepared.” In the next moment they covered him, burying his tiny human frame in a mass of putrefaction.

The mass quivered triumphantly and for a while all was silence and darkness in a field that had long been depleted of any insect or bird life. Suddenly, it seemed to contract painfully. It shuddered and extended as if to dart away. Then it was sucked back, vanishing out of sight, leaving only a small pale shape.

Ascaris.

Ascaris looked up into the sky, taking a few moments to adjust to the enormous amount of power and knowledge it had just consumed. Their wills dissolved into its own, and though inside the Intruder their agonized screams and pleas echoed deafeningly, still all the world saw was a young boy standing motionless in a silent field.

Then the four heralds were gone, the Intruder’s was again the only mind, and it knew exactly what to do.

## Chapter 22: Stains

*Corm had thrown the black rock this time. The sands shifted beneath him, starting to suck him down into a vortex of black and bone. The woman in her ship of ribs was bearing down upon him, and he knew that if she reached him and touched him, he would cease to exist.*

*Frantically he turned away, not wanting to see her face. In his terror he dug down now, wanting to sink even deeper into the sands. If he could be covered before he saw that deadly face, it would be better.*

*His bleeding fingertips started to slip and glance off against something hard and smooth. Choking on dust and sand, Corm looked down to see something like mercury, or glass. He clawed, he pounded with his elbows and fists, trying to get it to shatter, chip, anything. And then, suddenly, he was through.*

Vata coughed, gasped, and surfaced through the rubble she had been buried in. The entire world seemed to be dust; certainly she was covered in it. Nothing she saw was left unshattered. A few larger shards were recognizable as pieces of buildings, or statues. Nearly everything else had been obliterated beyond recognition. She had no idea how long she had lain senseless in the vaults of the dead city.

Now that she had finally awoken, Vata wasn't able to find Naos. She searched for hours in the uneven and treacherous ruins, her eyes wild with despair and panic. But somehow, just like that, Naos was gone. As she crawled painfully through the wreckage, Vata realized she had seen no Observers anywhere. Yet earlier their bodies had littered the city.

The ground began to shake again and Vata looked around wildly for a more stable spot.

The rubble beneath her began crumbling and sliding as the remains of two cities shifted and resettled. She clung to a partially intact pillar as the shaking got worse. It would stop for a moment and then resume again, as regularly as waves breaking on the shore. Vata wondered how this could be, and then she saw the cause.

Off in the distance, she saw something enormous silhouetted against the sky, striding off across the desert on eight spindly legs. The earth shook each time it put a foot down.

Momentarily stunned from the sight, Vata's grip on the pillar slackened and the next one of the monster's footsteps sent her skidding and sliding pell-mell in a sudden avalanche of stones and tiles. When she finally picked herself up again, the faraway monstrosity was almost out of sight.

Vata had lost Father, and now she had lost Naos. She had been living in a floating city that changed locations constantly, and now had no actual idea of her current location. She didn't know they had crushed a city when they crashed. She had no idea how far the deserts extended in any direction, or if there was water or where. The only living creature she had seen in days was disappearing over the horizon.

And so perhaps it wasn't altogether insane when Vata turned her steps toward the white spider, and began to follow its immense footprints across the lonely sands.

Vata tracked the spider across the desert for days. The winds began to fill in the great circular tracks by the second day, but by this time she knew the spot she was making for. Far off in the distance, there began a great cluster of rock formations. She could glimpse natural arches,

tall cliffs, and standing stones. The spider had scaled the tallest of these, gleaming whitely against the redness of the rock in the setting sun. And as the spider clung to the rock's side, something had flown down to join it.

Now the spider was gone, but it didn't matter. Vata was after the indistinct dot she had seen alighting on the highest cliff. She was convinced she had found the eyrie of the blood angel. She would climb up to him, confront him, and kill him. She would try, anyway.

The stones seemed always the same distance away, and Vata's trek through the desert took on the same timeless and dreamlike quality of her blind and desperate groping through the ruins of the Floating City. In all this she could not remember eating or drinking, although she must have done so. Even the desert had *gueltas*, hidden patches of wetland the nomads and camels knew about.

But she could not remember finding one, could not remember anything but ceaseless walking, walking, on the hot sands, the sun burning into her black uniform and the new black patches on her skin. She quickly learned to find shelter when the sun was highest, and travel when the sun was low or down below the horizon. The stains on her body did not fade with time and Vata realized she was probably marked for life. Had Naos told her once that the shedding of an Observer's blood was an unpardonable sin? It seemed to Vata that she bore tattoos of all her failures.

In Vata's uneasy dreams, Corm no longer ran from the woman in the ship. Now he was walking across an endless blank desert just as she was. In the distance, strange raised lumps loomed, roughly corresponding to the cliffs and rock formations Vata saw upon waking. One of these lumps shook and something immense and shining began to erupt from it all at once.

*Heel flies*, her mind whispered inside the dream. *It was like those. They hid their young in deer and oxen, even in people.* She had never taken to thinking of people as Dogs.

But that had been a dreaded breed of fly that laid its eggs in flesh. Vata had watched Father tend to an unfortunate villager beset by them. This creature in her dream was more like a gigantic trapdoor spider, if it was like anything on Earth. *As Corm stared in horror, the thing slowly turned. In a moment it would see him...*

..and Vata would wake up, and resume her endless lonely trek across the wasteland.

In reality, Vata never encountered anyone who could help guide her way because the Butcher Bird she sought had long since eaten them all. But even if there had been tribes left in the area, it would have done her no good. Those black bloodstains would have made her outcast.

Any people who encountered her would be struck by hatred and fear on a visceral level. Without knowing the cause, they would have the urge to shout and snarl, to throw stones, or to organize mobs and drive her off. Such was the curse of spilling a real angel's blood. In light of this, the depopulation Vata encountered on her journey was almost a mercy.

When she finally reached the rock face she stared up at it numbly, momentarily forgetting why she had come all this way. Then a large kite or buzzard cast its shadow overhead for a moment. She watched the great bird fly off and remembered. Copper wings.

He, *it*, was up there. The blood angel. Well, now Vata was the hunter and it was the prey. As she began that endless climb, she thought of the countless ways she had learned to kill a man in the Army of Heaven. She would use them all.

She would make that angel bleed for Father and all her other fellow Soldiers who had died so pitifully at the ford. Even scum like Saint had deserved better. She would make him

bleed for poor Peccary, who had only wanted to be a soldier so he could stand against the creatures who threatened his family. She would make him bleed for every Observer in the Floating City.

Most of all, she would make him bleed for Naos.

As Vata climbed and climbed, she unwillingly thought more of Naos. She supposed that friends made faces to amuse each other, but she and Naos had taken it to an entirely new level. There had been long afternoons where she laughed and pulled his nose out to make him look like an elephant, or asked to see what he would look like with ten fingers on each hand. He had even taken her on little flights over the city, wrapping his flesh around her arms, letting her feel truly as a bird feels.

Vata never laughed. But she had laughed with Naos. And she never cried, not even when her jaw was broken, not even when all of her comrades were dying around her. But she cried now. *Naos was what a real angel should be like, Vata thought. This other whom I hunt is a mockery of her.*

“Well, I will laugh one more time in my life, and it will be when I walk over your corpse, Butcher!” Vata shouted, more than a little insanely, and received a throat full of sand for her trouble. She kept her head lower after that, only muttering now and then as she counted off the hand-holds. After a while she started a game, lying to herself that there were only one hundred to reach the top, and she was already on the twenty-third. Each time she reached the hundredth, she started over.

She was on the seventy-eighth hand-hold, which was actually more like the seven-thousandth, when it happened. There was a titanic Sound that immediately stopped her

ears. At the same time, the entire cliff-face shook, or perhaps it was the entire world. A standing stone off to the north toppled to the earth after millennia of balancing on its impossibly tall and slender base, causing more tremors.

Working her jaw, Vata clung desperately to the rock, unable even to turn and see what had caused the great quake, if there was a cause. Perhaps the world was finally ending.

## Chapter 23: The Key

This was the first time they had been together in many years.

King Agwerot was miserable on land. Everything seemed unbearably hot and he felt as if he were suffocating, a fish gasping helplessly on the shore. He struggled to control his revulsion and discomfort. The others must not hear his thoughts. No hint of weakness could be allowed to creep through. He was unaware of how pale and boneless he looked in the broad sunlight.

Lady Longlegs stood motionless, completely disinterested in the entire proceeding. She had retracted her legs, bowed her great disc of a body, and resumed the form of a woman. In truth she still did not look very human. She didn't care to try to recreate her human face. She never glanced closely at the folk she devoured and she didn't bother about the details of their anatomy, even if it had once been her anatomy too.

The nameless angel of the desert was the most human in appearance, although occasionally his face elongated to become more birdlike and predatory. He had no other life and no other thought than to obey the Intruder, so he was keenly excited when his sister had come to get him for this gathering. For these few moments his existence had meaning.

Ascaris led its dog to their midst and then stopped. "Sit," it commanded, and then paid the dog no more attention. The Lord examined the spear-like weapon Agwerot had forged for it in the depths of an active seamount. The king had poured himself into perfecting every aspect of this tool and he knew objectively that he had created a masterwork. There had never been anything like it on the Earth and never would be again. It was exquisite, perfect.

Ascaris balanced the immense spear boredly in its hand. "It's a little short. I suppose it

will work. I will exert myself to make up for your deficiencies.”

Agwerot stiffened under these insults but only replied, “Yes, Lord.”

“Now,” Ascaris drawled. “You children of the Earth. You who have swum beneath its waves. You who have soared through its skies. You who have walked through the fields and forests.” The Lord addressed each child in turn. “You three, do you give up the Earth to me?”

“Take the lands,” the Harvester replied tonelessly.

“The seas are yours, my Lord,” King Agwerot said through gritted teeth.

The Butcher Bird spread his wings and then retracted them. “The heavens, and all below, belong to you.”

Ascaris nodded. “The Earth is mine. The Earth is ours.” It raised the spear high. Seeing this movement, the dog turned its face to look at the boy.

The young Lord plunged the spear into the dog’s mouth and drove it deeply into the earth below. The three children, surrounding them with outstretched arms, watched the dog’s struggles and heard its wretched cries. The dog did not perish, although that would have been a mercy.

As the children and Ascaris watched, the dog’s screaming and squirming mass began to twist and twine around either end of the spear, flesh moving on its own. Veins and organs plunged into the soil like roots and burrowed far beneath the watchers while the dog’s jaw distended, breaking only to multiply and repeat the process over and over, crawling up the skyward point of the spear. It spread its arms in agony, fingers flexing and grasping at nothing, eyes sprouting from eyes and sliding further up the swiftly growing cone of flesh.

It tried to stand up on two legs for the first time in many months, but was unable to force itself off of the spear. Instead, the dog’s legs burrowed down into the soil as its viscera had done,

rooting itself more firmly in the earth. Screaming faces sprouted from its back and just as quickly erupted into unrecognizable tumors and masses of flesh, sliding either up or down the shaft of the spear. The dog's flesh multiplied and spread, multiplied and spread, until the unfortunate creature reached a sort of horrifying equilibrium as a stalk of shifting flesh and bone a mile high, stretching into the air, blotting out the sun. Miles away, the windows of the Eudaemon all shattered as one.

King Agwerot had long since turned away, but Longlegs and her brother the butcher bird remained frozen in place, staring at Ascaris' dog. He had been a man before the Intruder had come to his village, in the form of two strangers, and swallowed him whole. He was their brother, a fellow human corrupted and altered and twisted out of shape. He was the Intruder's plan for all life other than itself. He was their future.

Watching what became of Jan, brother and sister began to feel the first stirrings of pity and disgust. They did not yet understand rebellion.

As for Ascaris, it was very satisfied with how things had gone. Agwerot's spear had been forged of the planet's lifeblood and it was the key that was going to unlock the world. With this step completed, the Earth would begin to change into a place where the Intruder could walk free and unimpeded, somewhere it could finally cast off its human flesh like a chrysalis and reach its full potential as master and god of this world.

This was the ultimate goal of all Intruders, to find a fertile ground where they could germinate and grow. They consumed anyone and anything that stood in their way, including one another, until they managed to fully occupy one vast, grand space of their own. And then they found somewhere bigger, and started again.

Jan's screams went on and on, travelling up the length of the spear and into the sky along with his flesh. His body stretched and wound into something gargantuan and unrecognizable, rising mile by mile until it was too high to see the top anymore. This was what had almost thrown Vata off the cliff-face. At the same moment, the antipodal end of Ascaris' double-peaked tower erupted through the ice-end of the Earth in a twisted monolith of frozen red.

Here, the tower of flesh pulsed and quivered. A million different teeth and hairs and eyes shifted, disappearing and reappearing on its warm surface. Tongues slid, eardrums stretched, pores oozed and veins throbbed. It tried to speak but could not. It tried to move but was too insanely tall and vast. It was a mountain, rooted here, its eyes watching helplessly from all directions.

“Good dog,” Ascaris turned its back on the tower. “Stay.”

Then the Lord frowned. It had intended to absorb the three attending children, but perhaps they had sensed something in the wind, for they had all left. Well, no matter. The tower would irresistibly draw all the far-spread pieces of the Intruder, and all of them would be united again. Yes, even those wayward daughters and sons. It could wait.

## Chapter 24: The Red Tree

The ground got colder as they advanced southward. Snow began appearing in patches, and before too long they had better tracking conditions. Once they came along a short stretch of tracks that must have been the little boy's. But then they got further and further apart, as if something were helping him to run along. Finally they stopped all together, as if he had been sucked up into the sky.

Tife guessed that this probably meant that the shadow had realized they were leaving tracks in the snow and it had caught the boy up and finally carried him. The shadow evidently did not leave any tracks.

Father never despaired of finding him, though. When the trail stopped in this manner, he simply looked around keenly at the landscape they found themselves in. They were down near Whale Bay now. It was only by virtue of Tife's inhumanity that he was doing so well in these conditions; he had no idea how Father was managing.

But the old man charged along, driven by rage or desperation, or both. The Army of Heaven had trained him well, whatever his faith in it had been. The men soon realized there was only one way shadow and child could have realistically gone. They were on something of a cape, with water surrounding them in the far distance, on all sides save that which they had come. With the water hemming them in and narrowing the land they walked, the shadow must be making for the southernmost point of the cape.

But why? Was it expecting to be picked up by the undersea armies Mari had spoken of? Tife gritted his teeth. He couldn't let it escape! By this point he wasn't even sure if the boy was

still alive. It was just as likely that the little footprints had vanished because the shadow had finished consuming him. Another thought he dared not share with the anxious man beside him.

Suddenly, he heard the man beside him cry out. Tife looked up from his black thoughts and saw the impossible...a small dark dot coming back to them through the snow. The child! Without thinking, the two men shouted aloud and began to run towards the little boy. Tife did think to look around for the shadow, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Father closed the distance first, joyfully sweeping the boy up in his arms. The little boy hugged his papa's neck tightly and the old man covered him in relieved kisses, asking if he was all right, chiding him for worrying him so. Tife smiled and watched them both, and then the child looked over at him, past his father's shoulder.

Its eyes were black within black.

Tife started and then cried out hoarsely to the man, but it was too late. Blackness exploded from the little body, sending blood spraying across the snow. Tendrils of it buried themselves in Father's face. He did not even have time to scream before it was eating him from the inside out.

Tife did scream. He rushed up and beat at it, but his weapons did nothing. Finally, he clamped his hand around the creature's wrist and wrenched it away from his friend. Father fell to his knees in the snow and remained balanced there a moment before crashing forward onto what had been his face. His blood mingled with the blood of his child.

Tife did not even have time to mourn them. He stood there clutching the thing's wrist, frozen with horror and disbelief. For the thing had straightened up now, and he was face to face with Nadiyo.

“...madan mwen?” Tife asked in disbelief. The words meant “my wife?”

Nadiyo answered and the noise was a horrible, grating sound like what Father had described he had heard when his boy was taken. Then it assumed a sweet, singsong quality that almost lulled him into a trance.

“Mari mwen. I have missed you so. But now it is time for you and I to be together. Come and stay with me in my house of darkness. Come and sit with me in my hall of bones. Beloved. Beloved. *Beloved.*”

She put a hand up to touch Tife’s face and he pulled away just in time.

“Monster! You are she! The shadow that deserted my wife at her birth. You have slithered among the islands since then, growing as she grew, until finally you crept into my people and slew them!”

“I am no shadow! I have eaten her who was supposed to be my master, and now I am Nadiyo! Her life is mine, and her husband also!” She reached for him again. “Come, and dwell in me! I shall give you children, children she could not.”

“You will never be her!” Tife roared, and came at her. It seemed that he could only attack her with his bare hands, anything else passed through her.

The shadow fought back fiercely, digging deep grooves in his flesh, weakening him. All the while she continued to sing. “How else do you think you can ever see her again? As the creature you are, you will not die until the world dies. You will be separated from your human wife forever! It is only through me that you can finally learn death.”

Tife paused uncertainly, swaying, and she dug her talons into his face. They entered in through his nose, eyes and mouth, probing and worrying their way down his throat and into his

body.

“Beloved. Dwell in me. Nourish our children. Know peace!”

Tife considered it a moment longer as she reared up to envelop him entirely. Then with sudden decision, he clawed into her back and wrenched her off, throwing her down in the snow. She looked up at him balefully and sucked her hands, covered in his blood from their sudden removal.

“Perhaps, after all, you are just a parasite,” Tife mused, stepping back. “To eat, to grow, to reproduce, is all you know and all you wish. You are beneath even my hatred.”

“I am Nadiyo!” she rasped angrily, her voice losing its spell. “And I am stronger than you now. If you will not come to me lovingly, I will take you by force!”

“That you can never do, no matter how big and strong you become. Because I realize it now, joining with you is the only thing I could do that would truly separate me from her side forever.”

The shadow snarled and launched herself at him. Tife fought her with all his might, gaining ground at times and then losing it, and always becoming a little weaker. She was wearing him down, he knew that. He realized that if she ingested him, she would use his power to have many children, like the spider or the mantis. It was not for his sake alone that he could not let her win. Then he remembered his father’s words.

Slowly, as they struggled there in the snow, he began to inch his way to the edge of the cape, hoping to roll off it and into his father’s realm before she got the chance to devour him entirely. There he could either evade her, or defeat her side by side with Agive’s forces. But he never got the chance.

Close by them in the snow, something erupted. It began as a dark red spike and then shot high into the air, broadening and splitting the land apart as it widened the fissure it issued from. And as it climbed, it froze, until it had formed an impossibly tall monolith. It gleamed dully in the unnatural brightness of those lands and Tife realized that it was a tower of blood.

“*Bondye*,” the shadow grated, his people’s word for ‘God.’ But this was not the work of any god of Tife’s. The monstrous tower was an offense against sight. To look at it was to feel revulsion. It was with heightened fear and disgust that Tife finally perceived it was quivering slightly around the base.

As Tife and the shadow watched, the source of the quivering became evident. Tendrils like thorned vines were sprouting from the base and consuming everything in their path. Tife shouted and tried to make his way over to where Father and his little boy lay still, to pull them out of its path, but the shadow clutched and tore at his legs and he was unable to make it in time. As he watched in horror, the red roots consumed both of them. They disappeared into that wave of redness as it slithered inexorably forward.

“It means to eat us next!” Tife screamed.

“Not me!” the shadow-Nadiyo sang. “This is my mother, my master! It has come to give me strength! I do not even need you now, Beloved.”

For all Tife knew, that was true. Certainly he had no idea what this blood-tower was, aside for something that consumed flesh as the shadow did. “Then let me go, and join with your maman!”

“Husband, I cannot. I cannot leave you all alone. This world is Its world now! You are only food to it, only material. But you are special to me. Our beautiful children. You can have a

purpose in death...unlike..."

Tife waited for it to finish, but something was happening to the shadow. Its eyes were duller now, and its mouth moved but did not make any sound. Its grip on him loosened. Confused, Tife looked around. When he saw the red thorns protruding into its back, coloring its darkness red, he gave a great cry and leapt up. Somehow he managed to jump clear.

He stared for a moment, just for one brief moment wondering if it would help anything or anyone if he reached his hand out to help the shadow. But its head was slumping forward now and Nadiyo's beautiful face was melting once again like candle wax, and he realized that the shadow's loving "mother" was consuming it and had already eaten enough that she probably no longer heard, or thought.

With a lump of nausea in his throat, Tife turned and bolted for the nearest cliff. As he fell the thousand feet to the icy seas below, he watched the red branches overtake the land, digging themselves into the blue-white landscape above.

After Tife had taken his news of the shadow's death to Mari, he was offered a place of honor in the Halls of Agive. Moved, Tife explained that he wanted to continue to fight on the land for as long as there was a land to fight for. He still cared for the world of men, and he wanted to do all he could to prevent the Intruder's evil from spilling over even further into his gentle father's home.

"At present, there are two of those terrible 'children' left on land," said Tife. "If they consume everyone and everything on the solid ground, it is to your far vaster and richer realm

that they will turn next for food!” For it was known, although not often thought of on the land, that Agive’s watery realm was many times larger than the realm of men.

“And besides,” Tife added, “That little Lord is still there, too. Let us not allow them all to become strong enough that they can even challenge Agive!”

Agive and his people listened solemnly to Tife’s words and then the great lord of the waves extended his blessing. Tife was free to go and do what he could against these pretenders on the lands above. With his mother’s gift of living on the land, he would fight where they could not. The sea king gave him two blades made from the shells of great oysters to aid in the battle.

Mari was deeply saddened, but he nodded at the king’s decision. “It is well. But son, when you have defeated the intruder worm and his children, will you not come back to me? I miss you so. I know I am not your only father, but I love you too.”

Tife took his father’s hand. “When my work is done, I will return to you. You can teach me the ways of our folk, as you once did. I will look forward to it, Father.”

Mari smiled, but he still worried that he would never see his son again as he led him to the surface, where a small boat waited. Tife did not have to ask what had happened to the boat’s occupant. There were many of these tiny crafts, perhaps hundreds or more, that drifted silently across the seas of the world, empty and waiting for a sailor who would never return.

Dehydration, exposure, disease, insanity, or even the call of one of Agwerot’s folk...all of these could happen to a man lost at sea.

They said a prayer for the soul of the sailor who had abandoned this particular ship and then Tife was on his way. A lone sea wolf watched from the waves, far from its customary waters, until long after the boat had become a speck swallowed in the blackness.

## Chapter 25: The Eudaemon

Ardh and Corm did not know it, but they were in the legendary Eudaemon. The Earth's great men and women of learning had come here in these past months of chaos, determined to identify the cause of the new ills plaguing their world. Everything they had done, all the atrocity and torture, had been a desperate bid for more knowledge. In their way, they were trying to save the world. They had started timidly, from the highest motives of love.

Unfortunately, all of their experimentation had gotten them no closer to understanding the truth. They had managed to isolate what they called “the parasite,” the same gray substance carried by the resurrection men. But all of their efforts to destroy or control it failed. Its evil influence had been working on them long, and without realizing it their scientific and enlightened methods had withered along with their ability to think and plan critically. By this point, all they had managed to do was make a larger supply of it.

Ardh and Corm had in fact had this substance introduced into their bodies. Their food had been tainted with it at first. When this failed to cause any appreciable effect, they were injected with it. When this still failed to show any results, the scholars shifted their efforts to studying the men's blood and tissues, seeing if they could offer any clue to their evident immunity. Ultimately, Corm had “the parasite” directly implanted into him.

No answer presented itself. They began taking more and more out of Corm to see if his flesh or blood could be used as some sort of antidote, but it didn't work. Nor did anything they took from him deteriorate in the days after it was harvested. And when they bled Ardh or took tissue samples, it merely made him weaker and the blood and tissue rotted normally if not

preserved.

Finally, in a last act of desperation, the scholars decided to reunite them. After all, they were the only ones who had survived. Perhaps, if they observed the two of them together, they would learn the mystery.

Ardh could no longer walk by this point, so Corm was led to his cell. Weak and dying, Ardh was unsure if Corm was real. Sorely depleted, neither of them had the presence of mind to realize they were being observed. They spoke to each other naturally, without reservation.

“Corm? Corm? Is that you child?” Ardh reached for him and then paused fearfully, remembering his dreams where Corm's touch was death.

Corm nodded. “They said I can see you again.”

Ardh sat up painfully, leaning on the wall for support. “They are killing me, boy. They have bled me and beaten me and starved me. Is it...is it better with you? You look well...”

Corm shook his head. “They want to take all of me away. I feel tired...and sad.”

Ardh blinked and then gulped. He could see it was true now, the boy was terribly thin. Suddenly, he knew how he could help him. It was so simple. His dreams had not been a warning. They were heavenly comfort, a divine message. Corm only wanted to embrace them all. He wanted to reconcile Ardh and his family. Within Corm, this could finally happen.

“Then take from me, boy.” Ardh managed to sit up straighter than he had in weeks. “Yes! I had dreams...of our life together in Chorazin. I was going to make you my son. You see, I wanted you to be my family, Corm. And now, you can be.”

Corm looked at Ardh sadly. “I said I would never hurt you. Do you think now that I would?”

“No, no!” Ardh grasped his shoulders without fear. “I believe you are good! You are an angel sent to heal us all! I was foolish to be frightened by your power. And now, I want to stay with you, boy. Forever.” He kissed Corm's cheeks, a fervent blessing in his native land from an uncle or father to a treasured child.

Corm knew something was wrong with Ardh, something in his head. But he also realized that Ardh still loved and trusted him even if his mind no longer worked. So, he nodded. “I will take it away, Ardh.”

“My dear child!” Ardh shut his eyes happily and waited for oblivion. He prayed his flesh would be enough to heal the young man, and give him the strength to escape these beasts. Corm reached for Ardh's cheek, and as he touched him there was a stupendous crashing and a darkness, and the scholars and jailors shouted in terror and surprise as all thousand of the Eudaemon's false windows shattered as one.

Ardh did not remember much of how it felt to have his life restored. Bruised tissue was mended, organs that had been carved into were made whole, and new blood flowed into his veins. His starved and dehydrated flesh began to be firm and well again, and the cruel tracks of the surgeon's knives were erased. When he awoke, he was holding Corm. Ardh suddenly realized how well he felt and exclaimed aloud. Excited, he made to tell the boy. But Corm did not respond.

To his mounting horror, nothing Ardh did seemed to work. He finally dragged Corm out of the darkened cell, aware for the first time that something was wrong with all the lights.

The men and women of the Eudaemon were in a heightened state of disorganization. Scholars who had dispassionately ignored their prisoners' cries of pain and fear were now sobbing, shouting each other down, and running to and fro trying to seize items or burn incriminating documents.

It all made little difference to Ardh. He used their preoccupation to avoid them and carry Corm (who was terribly, terribly light now) somewhere safer. He was still trying to find a place further away from them when the boy suddenly stiffened in his arms.

"Corm!" Ardh hissed excitedly, scared to talk above a whisper. "My boy! I was so worried. Are you well?"

Corm put a hand on Ardh's arm, squeezing it weakly, but otherwise said nothing.

"Well at least your eyes are open. We will find a place to rest, and then..." But here Ardh cried out in disgust, for something was slithering up onto his friend.

"Off! Off! Leave him alone, fiends!!" Ardh forgot about not making any noise as he frantically tried to swat the terrible gray substance away. They were evidently in one of the rooms where samples of "the parasite" were stored, and the material had bypassed the security measures laid upon it and escaped in the mayhem. Corm's body buckled and then shook as the material slid rapidly over him, clinging to his flesh in spite of the convulsions. Ardh held fast to him in spite of the terrible danger, cursing and clawing at the stuff.

Then it was over. The last of it disappeared into Corm, absorbed by him through some unknown means, and he was able to stand on his own. He walked unsteadily over to a cabinet containing samples labeled with his own number. Heedless of Ardh's warnings, he wrenched it open and put his hands on every sample. One by one, Corm re-absorbed the misshapen lumps

that had once been parts of his body. Then he turned back to Ardh.

Ardh had turned a funny color and his jaw was working as he fought with his rising gorge. Corm's heart sank as he realized that now his friend would be afraid and disgusted by him, and he could no longer travel with him to Chorazin and be a family, as they had dreamed.

Then Ardh, still swallowing, held out his hand to him. "If you're through eating, boy, let us be off," was all he said.

Corm stared at him and then ran into his arms.

It took them a long time to get to the false front of the building, where they could see what was going on outside. The thousand "windows" of the Eudaemon were really mirrors. They revealed nothing, only reflecting the sky on one side and the awful internal workings of the Eudaemon on the other. Something had caused every last one of these mirrors to shatter, when even the impact of the Floating City had not been enough to do this before.

Whatever had happened had also thrown their captors into a panic and at least temporarily disabled the facilities of the Eudaemon, which Ardh and Corm could not fully understand. They knew the lights had gone out and the locks had ceased to hold them, and that was enough. And so they finally made it to the wall of windows, and saw through that vast expanse of holes what was maddening the men and women of the Eudaemon.

"What is it, Corm?" Ardh asked fearfully. By now he thought his young friend might have special knowledge about these kinds of things.

But Corm only shook his head. "I don't know. It's moving..."

Ardh narrowed his eyes, then nodded reluctantly. "Yes, I suppose it is. But how could something so vast be moving? Who is moving it? Surely it does not move on its own?"

Corm studied it for a while, then seemed to give up. "They're all frightened of it. We can go to Chorazin now."

"Well, that is true. We are only two floors from the ground. I think if we pick a softer spot, we may be able to jump from here. ...If you're not too scared?"

Corm shook his head. He didn't add that he could probably mend them if one of them broke a leg, and Ardh was grateful for that. He knew it was best for Corm and for his own sanity if they forgot what they had seen and done in the Eudaemon as soon as possible.

## Chapter 26: Jatayu

The Butcher Bird flew slowly back to his cliff, thinking nothing and desiring nothing. His part in that screaming boy's end, and what he had become, had been unpleasant. But Jan was no more unlucky than any of the other humans he had eaten, he supposed. All of them, even the blood angel himself, would end their lives in the Intruder's belly.

The angel had always known this, as his sister the spider had, and neither of them had ever wanted or expected more from life. His brother, King Agwerot, was a different matter. But the Blood Angel never thought of him. He seldom thought at all, because in his bleak, unchanging reality there was nothing to think *about*.

And so it was with real surprise that he noticed something new on his cliff face. Nothing could come up here, and yet here was a person clinging to the side. He couldn't tell if the person was still alive, but he supposed they must be if they hadn't fallen off. In no particular hurry, he approached them.

Vata was nearly unconscious, still clinging to the rock through sheer mindless determination. She was so numb that she didn't immediately realize she was no longer on the cliff face. When she did, her limbs were so stiff and useless that she couldn't even make a move to stop herself from falling, as she supposed.

Instead of falling though, she was ascending. Reflecting dully that this was impossible and in reality she must be moments away from dashing herself against the desert below, Vata allowed herself to lose consciousness. It was a long time before she woke up.

When she did, Naos was there.

Still too stiff to sit up, Vata reached for his face with numb fingers. Naos had reverted to his male aspect, no longer seeking to look like her twin. “N...Nuh...” Her cracked lips could barely form his name. “Naos,” she rasped. “You’re...” She felt herself starting to gray out again as he leaned forward. With an effort, Vata kept her tenuous hold on consciousness long enough to clutch one of his shoulders.

As she did, Naos’s face slowly wavered and shifted until it warped into the cruel features of a bird of prey. The creature cocked its head and looked at her, its dark eyes reflecting her own stained features. She realized who it must be that was holding her in its arms.

Vata knew that death had come to her now and she numbly rejoiced. She had already missed him twice, now they were finally face to face and nothing could rob her of this opportunity to settle with him. Death’s face grinned down at her much as it had from within the dark cloud of his army at the ford where she had lost her unit. At that time, the Observers had snatched her from his embrace. But the Observers had fallen to him, one and all. Now there was no one to intervene. She was alone with the Butcher Bird.

Vata kept her eyes locked with his and tried to think clearly, conscious of her disadvantage. She was badly wearied from the climb and she had lost the element of surprise. As her senses gradually began to improve, she faintly perceived that there was something under her body. Barely seeming to stir, she felt with her free hand and determined that there were a number of bones sticking into her back. The bones were larger, probably from humans he had taken up here before and eaten. Vata closed her hand around a rib.

She waited for him to strike, mentally evolving ways she would avoid the blow and shift the balance, ways she could swing or thrust her arm, places she could stab. It was for a

confrontation like this that she had endured Gauntlet. But the bird did not strike. He continued to regard her, and finally his features relaxed back into those of a man. He didn't want to eat right now.

Instead, he stood up and moved a little ways off, retracting his bloodied copper wings back into his body. Vata watched uncomprehendingly. She had been completely prepared for a battle to the death. This anticlimax unsettled her.

Finally, he spoke. "You should not have followed me here."

Feeling the anger rising within her, Vata tried to reply. But her voice was full of dust.

He continued. "You cannot continue living very long like this."

Defiantly Vata rolled onto her side, glaring at him and clutching the rib like a dagger.

The blood angel didn't seem to notice or care. "He's busy with the Tower. It may be that He won't notice."

Vata blinked dry eyes and coughed out a word or two. "Notice...what?"

The angel bit off one of his fingers, then tossed it to her. Seeing Vata's horrified expression, he shook his head in a mockery of human reassurance. "I won't make you take much. Just enough to survive, so we can talk."

At first Vata had refused to take any of it. But as dehydration continued to eat worm-holes into her mind, it became harder and harder to resist. Somehow, the animal part of her sensed that taking what he had offered would quench her thirst and restore her strength. But at what cost? Surely consuming the flesh of one such as he would either act as a poison, or

worse, an infection, slowly resulting in her death or worse.

Fearing some sort of transformation or other ill effect, Vata steadfastly refused to give in. The angel waited patiently as the desert sun did its work. When she was on the point of death, Vata slowly tottered to her feet and walked unsteadily to him, her hands reaching out entreatingly. The angel thought she was delirious again, seeing her Naos once more.

“I’m glad that you’ve changed your mind,” he began. But the angel didn’t get to finish his thought. With her last bit of strength, Vata lunged. It was a desperate attack. Her thinking was simple: overbalance him, pin his arms, hurl them both over the cliff. If she could prevent him from forming wings before they hit, perhaps the great height would be enough to do what she could not.

It was deeply disturbing to her when the angel suddenly began to smile.

“What are you--” she started to rasp, and then suddenly she knew what he was doing. With a cry of disgust she thrust him from her. “I told you I don’t want it!!!”

“It’s too late. The moment you grabbed hold of me, it began.”

“Then take it back! I want nothing from you!”

“I can’t take it back. That small bit of me is part of you now.” The angel paused. “Like Naos.”

Hearing him utter Naos’s name blinded Vata with rage. Hoarsely, she cried out and charged him again. It was no more effective than the last attempt, except this time she was disgustingly more aware of the way her flesh absorbed his. She could feel it happening in her hands. With a curse, she let him go and strode to the opposite side of the eyrie.

Vata stared at her hands and tried to understand. They were her hands, as always. But

somehow, they had been like hungry mouths for a moment, trying to drink the angel. It made no sense.

As for the Butcher Bird, he had no mark on him. She looked closely, but he didn't seem to have diminished any, or otherwise look anything like she or her comrades had when his flesh had eaten away at her and her platoon. Perhaps it had been some sort of trick, an illusion. But nothing could change the disturbing fact that Vata felt refreshed now, stronger than she had since she had woken to the silent screaming of the Floating City.

"You feel better now, do you not?" The blood angel took a step forward.

"Come on and see." Vata spread her arms angrily. The angel did not advance another step.

Vata's shoulders sagged. "You can't tell me that you have any fear of *me*. The element of surprise was my only hope, and I've lost it. You could hurl the gray flesh from your body at any moment and I'll be gone. Don't think you can toy with me by trying to hide it."

The angel paced back and forth on his side of the eyrie and then sat down on a rock. "Indeed, the moment that It has noticed you are my company, I have no doubt I will be forced to consume you. It hungers to have you back."

"Back?!"

"You can't have failed to notice--"

"I will hear no more!" Vata was suddenly cold, ice cold, despite the heat and her dark uniform.

The angel moved restlessly. "I thought you were strong! You're too weak to listen to the truth now?"

“No more!”

“You are like me!”

Vata screamed until he stopped speaking. She shook her head, looking around wildly, yet seeing nothing. She was like him? The same as the thing that had eaten Naos, and Father? That made her nothing more than part of the Enemy devouring their planet, the enemy she was sworn to destroy. She had pledged her life against Its life when she had become a soldier of the Army of Heaven.

*Her life.*

Vata slowly turned back to the angel. “So I am part of this Thing.”

He nodded slowly. “I’ve been trying to tell you. You’re one of the five children who--”

But Vata had heard enough. Nodding, she turned suddenly and sprinted for the cliff. She supposed that the angel might be able to fly down and reclaim whatever was left of her body, strengthening the Intruder once again. But it was a chance she had to take. If the only way she could hope to kill part of It was by killing herself, she had already sworn to do that long ago.

*Corm had escaped the fearsome creature in the rocks. As he watched, it had looked at him and then slowly dissolved into sand, blowing away on the desert winds. But that left him alone, stranded on an unforgiving plain with no signs of life as far as the eye could see. There was nothing to walk toward, nothing to make for. He wished for water.*

*At some point, he realized that it was getting harder to walk. The earth beneath him felt different, as if it were trying to hold onto him. He looked down and saw, to his confusion, that the*

*sand was wet. As he stared disbelievingly at his feet, water slowly began to appear around the soles of his shoes. It rose until it began welling up and covering his feet, creeping up his ankles next. He lifted his head to see himself standing in a vast pool. The water reflected the clouds above and it seemed as if he stood alone in the very center of the sky.*

*The water kept rising.*

Vata woke up to feel rain on her face. It was gone as soon as it came, evaporating off her skin and leaving her feeling cool for one sweet, cruel moment before the constant heat returned to settle on her again like an ever-present, unwelcome skin.

The angel was watching her. She reflected that her falling unconscious was a prime opportunity for him to absorb her without any resistance. Instead, he had watched her through her dreaming and the brief rain, and now extended his cupped hands to her. Vata unwillingly came to him, very much longing for the water. From Vata's experiences, the water he had collected should have slowly run out through the minute spaces between his closed fingers. As she drank, she realised with some distaste that he was able to close his flesh, like a bowl, to keep the water from seeping out. When she had done, he separated his hands into fingers again.

For some reason, he refused to kill her.

Vata was bitterly disappointed when he had swiftly flown down and caught her before she had managed to dash herself and the Intruder within her to pieces on the desert floor. But she hadn't been surprised. The Butcher Bird must retrieve all of her body for his master. He couldn't risk letting her die apart from him. But why did he not kill her right away? Why not before, or when she slept, or even when she had come right up to him to drink? He had wasted every opportunity.

Instead he seemed intent on talking, making Vata a captive audience. He spoke of his master, the Lord Ascaris, and how cruelly he had treated some young man whose name meant nothing to her. Evidently, the young man's fate had sparked a very faint rebellious streak in the angel. He had heartlessly consumed countless men, women, and children for his master, but somehow this time a line had been crossed and his blank and arid heart had stirred in protest.

In spite of herself, Vata began to wonder if the angel's new feelings could be turned to her advantage. She began speaking to him more, seeking to learn new details about his existence and that of the Lord Ascaris and the other "children." In her growing quest to find some piece of useful information that could give them hope, Vata's voice became more frequent. Father wouldn't have recognized her. She was very different now from the silent, withdrawn recruit she had been.

Presently the angel told her he wasn't the only one to feel discontent with the Lord's methods. His sister had been there with him when that man or boy was so cruelly destroyed, and she had also been left uneasy over it. He had been speaking of this "sister" for a while before Vata realized with a jolt that he meant the huge white spider she had followed, whose feet shook the earth.

"How is it that she is your sister? Can monsters like you have such a thing as a family?"

"You are my sister also."

"What!"

The angel tried to explain once more and Vata's mind barely absorbed the words, though she would come to remember them later. Finally, she held a hand up. "Enough! I can't believe what you say. I am nothing like you and I am nothing like that she-beast."

“You are exactly like us. You alone escaped at the ford. You climbed the cliff-face. You absorbed those in the Floating City. You absorbed your friend...”

“You are the one who killed Naos, Monster!”

“I didn’t say you killed her. You found her after she was dead, correct? Are you saying you didn’t touch her after that?”

Unwillingly, Vata fell silent. She was remembering those endless dark hours in the heart of the Floating City, clutching Naos to her chest as they fell out of the sky.

“What do you remember?” the angel persisted.

“I didn’t absorb her! I was holding her, then I blacked out...and when I woke up...” Vata trailed off.

“...she was gone?”

“Shut up.”

“She had gone away somehow, and you searched and searched and could never find her,” the angel guessed.

“Enough!” Vata slashed at him suddenly with the rib bone. She had known better than to discard it. It went harmlessly back and forth through his flesh, and this only reminded her of what it had been like to attack Naos when she had woken from a nightmare. Vata sagged back numbly.

“I thought you would be happy.”

“Happy!” Vata said in a voice between a laugh and a snarl.

“Yes, happy,” the angel said, its inhuman face almost frowning. “She is with you always, your dear friend. Even now she gives you her strength, and her ways of shaping. If you would

defeat the Lord, then listen to your flesh. Fight Ascaris with the same weapons!”

“Oh angel, I can’t do that. Don’t you see? If I give up what makes me human, I don’t stand for them anymore.”

“...stand for *them*? You do! You know you are not human!” His voice rose accusingly.

“Maybe!” Vata turned away. “But if I am no longer human, I was once. And that’s all that matters to me.”

The blood angel couldn’t find an answer to that, since it seemed so illogical, and he sat down in the dust to think it over. The sun began to dip below the horizon, painting him in the stunning colors of the dying sky.

Vata sat down some distance away. “...I’m tired of calling you ‘angel.’ You’re not one.”

“I never said I was,” the monster retorted indignantly. “I’ve been called all manner of angel and predatory bird by those below. Their words, not mine.”

“We’ll find you a name. Not a title, a name. What would you think of that?”

“If I have a name, I shall be more like a man. Then maybe I will even die.”

Vata looked at the bone in her hand. It was clean, no blood. “How can a monster like you die? Clearly, stabbing you does nothing. The Observers were powerless against you also, even with their ways of shaping.”

The angel looked off into the distance. “There are ways...if your flesh were strong enough, you could eat me as you did Naos. And there is always the Lord.”

Vata didn’t say anything, considering this new knowledge and if it were true.

The angel interrupted her thoughts, seeming to fear the silence. “Well then, what would you call me?”

“I?” Vata widened her eyes. “Shouldn't you come up with your own name? What do you think of yourself?”

The angel shook his head. “I think nothing, I am nothing. I am a sack of flesh that will one day lose its power and fall to the earth, or be eaten. I will obey until I am useless, and then the Lord will call back my flesh and I will die.”

“Jatayu, then.”

“...what?”

“Your name. It is Jatayu.” Vata looked at him expectantly.

The Butcher Bird blinked and looked at her a moment, then straightened his shoulders and spread his wings before folding them again. “Jatayu. I am Jatayu.”

“Good. Now, Jatayu...I want you to rebel. Help me win against the Lord. See what it is like to live your own life, even if not for long.”

“Do not speak like that again. The Lord may hear.” The creature held out his wrist to her.

Vata shook her head. “I don't need more. I shouldn't have taken the little I did. I wouldn't have, had I known it was happening.”

“Don't you want more strength? Think! Everything you take from me, cannot go to Him. If you will not do this to strengthen yourself, do it to weaken the Lord!!”

Vata was unhappy with the prospect but she couldn't argue with the blood angel's logic. She took his arm.

“Right now He's occupied with my brother, make haste...ah! What are you doing!” The angel had been looking out over the desert, but now he turned back to stare at Vata in something like surprise.

“This is how a human would do it,” Vata grunted against his wrist. She knew she could lay her hands on him and “drink” more of his flesh. But it was too alien an action, too far removed from her humanity. So Vata had bitten him.

The angel straightened his wings. “I see. But you know, don’t you, that I don’t feel pain from your teeth? If it’s revenge you want by doing it this way, your method is useless.”

“Tell me when to stop,” was all Vata replied.

## Chapter 27: The Feast

Lady Longlegs had gone back to her fields and forests after she and her brothers had helped Ascaris with his ritual, but she was not allowed to remain there for long. Not many days had passed before Ascaris sent her to Chorazin. The glorious city had lately declared itself Capital Suprema, seat of the World King. There was a great celebration raging in Chorazin with food and wine and every kind of excess. And now the Intruder wanted to feast as well.

The Harvester had grown weary of her role, much like her brother Jatayu. She was tired of collecting sacrifices. She had never cared for the worship and entreaties of the people who deified her and she had even less patience for it all now. She'd never wondered what she wanted from all this, but she was starting to think that she wanted peace. As a child of Ascaris and a vessel of the Intruder, there was probably only one way to find it.

Longlegs could have simply strode into the city as her most feared form, crushing structures beneath her many feet and stuffing revellers into her gigantic maw. She would have levelled the great city in moments, squatting on top of it triumphantly and feasting, a true goddess of destruction. That was certainly what Ascaris wanted. The Intruder was becoming impatient. The fall of Chorazin would be the last domino that sent Mankind into a final tailspin of despair from which it would never recover.

Instead, the Harvester decided to take her time. She entered Chorazin in the form of a woman, as she had been for the Lord's ritual. She drifted through the crowd, tall and slight. The throngs of people who had gathered for the coronation of the World King barely noticed her. Those who did found themselves rooted to the spot by her grace and the almost unnatural length

of her white limbs. Here was a dancer!

She had a thin cloth wrapped around her face, perhaps for privacy because she walked naked. Longlegs didn't need clothing, for her body lacked almost any distinguishing features that could arouse lust or shame in the onlooker. She was as smooth and featureless as porcelain. This didn't matter much, though. At the height of Chorazin's festivities, many celebrants had dispensed with clothing. She walked serenely among them as the frenzied crowd glugged and gorged itself.

The worst of the worst had survived and risen to the top to occupy the positions of authority in this swiftly dying world. The greedy and the unethical had swindled their way up, while the sadistic had threatened and butchered to be here. The crass and ignorant had intimidated and beaten down their gentler and more empathetic countrymen.

The meek had not inherited the Earth.

The World King was their apex. He crowned their hatred, their greed, and their infamy. He had climbed his way up the mound of bodies he created until its summit was his bloodied throne. The king was currently stinking drunk, tottering on a throne filthy with the excesses of the evening and calling for more wine. Even in this state, however, he was deadly. One of the great talents that had brought him to this place of power was his ability to kill even when reeling from drink. It had served him more than once.

Now of course, he could order the death of anyone here with a mere word. The World King ruled absolute, and his swollen fingers often left off fondling his revolted vassals just long enough to crudely motion to his guards. Such gestures invariably meant a sentence of death or torture for whatever unfortunate person the king ordered seized.

When Longlegs entered the far end of the great hall, the king was speaking to a tall man in a simple black uniform. This man wore the stripe on his cheeks of a soldier in the Army of Heaven, but he was once their supreme commander. It was he who had begun the Army, he who had coined the phrases “The Army is the End! Soldier is God!” It was he who had directed their operations covertly from many different positions and identities within the field until he had shrewdly surmised that all was lost and sought a position of power here at the World Court.

Vata had known him as Sergeant.

Sergeant, whose current name was Uriankhai, was trying to offer the World King his council. He had reasoned that the Intruder’s next target was quite likely to be the Capital Suprema now that the fearsome double tower had appeared. Stranger and stranger sights were being reported from all over the continents. Things were deteriorating rapidly. It would be wise, Uriankhai urged, to spend less time on displays of power that were calculated to impress his fellow men. Instead, let them focus their efforts on espionage, intelligence gathering, and bolstering the city’s defenses against the true enemy.

“Shut your stinking mouth, coward!” the King bellowed, his elbow slipping in a pool of wine. “If you can’t celebrate with us, you’ll entertain us!” Here he kicked the Sergeant savagely, and his men aided him by throwing the old soldier down the steps.

The Sergeant was always calm and composed, and he kept that composure even when another of the courtiers mounted his back before he could stand, laughing drunkenly and pulling at the collar of his uniform, leading them all in a chorus of “DOG! DOG! DOG!”

The old soldier looked around the circle of red faces. Something came to him, a dim memory. Peccary, that was his name. This must be what Peccary had seen after his Gauntlet,

when the brutes in their hunger had closed in around him. But the thought was fleeting. After all, the sergeant had invented Gauntlet just as he had created the other systems of the Army of Heaven. And he had seen many, many boys like Peccary, too many to count.

He had once instructed his men that the bulk of humanity were “Dogs,” in need of the protection and guidance of a superior entity, the Army. He didn’t know if he had ever believed that, but now he had a new name for Mankind.

*Swine.*

After all his efforts, the Sergeant had come to the conclusion that Mankind might not be worth saving. Perhaps they had been, before. But not this lot that surrounded him. Hooting like apes and pawing at his uniform, throwing wine and worse things in his face, these barely seemed human. The cream had not risen to the top. Dogs and good soldiers alike had been devoured by the gray mass, and all that was left of humanity was this grisly and pathetic epilogue.

He could easily kill all of these animals, he reflected, his face impassive. The problem thereafter was the King’s guards, to say nothing of the rest of the courtiers. He couldn’t fight them all off alone, and eventually they would catch him and the indignities he would suffer then would make this pale in comparison. The Sergeant didn’t relish the prospect of a losing battle.

He determined that the most effective course of action would be to slaughter everyone at hand and then beat a path back to the King. He would slit the king’s throat without giving the swine an explanation and then kill himself in the next moment. The things they did to his body after that didn’t matter. Sergeant set his eyes on the gaudy knife in a nearby courtier’s straining belt. It looked like it would still function for him. He was about to make his move when Longlegs walked up.

The Sergeant glanced up at her briefly and then forgot his plan. He sat back on his haunches on the sodden floor and no amount of abuse or insult induced him to get up again. If the Harvester noticed what she had done to him, she did not show it. The Sergeant had recognized who and what she was right away, having more extensive experience of the Enemy than anyone here, and he welcomed her presence. In that last moment, he adored her more fervently than any of her cultists or followers had ever done. For he knew what she brought them, and he blessed her for it.

“More entertainment!” the king shouted thickly. “A friend of yours, Uriankhai? Then we must welcome her properly!”

Accordingly, everyone strained forward to grasp and clutch at her. Yet somehow, none could. She never moved.

“Here! What is this?” The king’s small bloodshot eyes became angry. “Can no one lay a hand on her? Bring the bitch here!”

Again, none could touch her. But it didn’t matter. She was quite willing to come to him. As the Lady strode up the steps to the throne on her long, long legs, the king involuntarily shrank back. He suddenly no longer wanted her to come. In a strangled voice, he tried to order her back, but she advanced.

When she reached the top step she stood there, towering over the king. She reached up into her black hair, carefully gathered on the back of her head in the manner of the women of the East, and let it fall down along with the veil obscuring her features. The king was the only one there who saw full into her face. Those closest to them smelled the acrid stench of fresh urine as his mind snapped from fear.

Then none among them saw, nor smelt nor heard anything more, ever again.

## Chapter 28: The White Temple

Ardh and Corm had started for Chorazin. “Our way seems clear,” Ardh had said. “We’d better not tangle with that spire. Heaven knows our captors were terrified of the thing.”

Corm nodded. “We will go to the great city, and have our little house. And the elephants. Like you said.”

Ardh smiled, but inwardly he was afraid of this course of action also. How much had Chorazin changed? He didn’t like the sound of this “World King.” But, it was probably their best chance. Chorazin would have fortifications, provisions, and many people. If he could convince someone to let them in, they would be safe. Ardh unconsciously stroked the handle of his boarding axe. If he had to, he was confident he could be very convincing.

The road was eerily silent. Though they walked many days, there were no more fellow travellers, not even the wild men of Ascaris’s ranks. No soldiers stalked the perimeters of the townships and fiefs they passed. No wagons creaked through the dusty ruts of the wide road to Chorazin. At night, whether they camped near the woods or near the road, no creatures sang to them or prowled furtively just beyond the reach of their small fire. All was still under the worm moon.

One day as they were walking, Ardh frowned and paused. “What can be the matter with that tree?” he wondered. The tree that had captured his attention should normally have been one of those evergreens, tall and straight and full, that add majesty to forests in the winter months when all else is so bare. But it was twisted, bowed, and the needles on its boughs were a curious color of gray.

“That is a crow tree,” said Corm.

“A crow tree? What do you mean, boy? Speak some sense.”

Corm paused uncertainly. He was still no hand at explaining things. “Sometimes you will see a corbie crow and it acts sick. It flies into things it should see, or walks along the ground in a strange way. And when a crow like this comes upon a tree, sometimes it will go to the tree and not come out. And the tree turns like this.”

Ardh was baffled. A disease that spread from a crow to a tree? A curse? Ultimately he threw his hands up in exasperation. “Let us be off then,” he said, giving up on the matter. They continued on their way.

Corm could not tell him more, because he didn’t know. But the crows he spoke of were birds that had feasted upon the Intruder’s victims. The traces of the enemy they bore in them frequently used such birds to hunt for news, but they had been a disappointment. Corm had been spotted by them more than once. Yet, the Intruder hadn’t been able to pinpoint his location.

The enemy couldn’t make sense of rocks and trees and other landmarks the birds saw without corresponding memories of men to compare them against. Once abandoned by the impatient Intruder the poor creatures stopped moving, corrupting any living thing they happened to be near as their small bodies rotted.

Ardh was growing more and more uneasy. There should be throngs of refugees flowing to Chorazin. There should be soldiers and guards marching importantly, making a show of force and authority. There should be cattle in the fields to feed the great city’s needs. There should be merchants riding forth to enrich the great city even further. There was nothing.

As they approached the first great gate of the city, no one challenged them. There were no watchmen to ask them their business and judge whether these two dusty travellers were worthy of entering Chorazin, Capital Suprema, gem of the world. For that matter, there was not much of a gate left.

The city gate still stood, but much of the surrounding wall was rubble. It was not hard to pick their way past the first wall and move on. Their experience with the subsequent walls was increasingly alarming, for after a while they saw that there were no walls or structures left standing at all.

As Ardh stood in the rubble of the greatest city on Earth and looked around in disbelief, Corm stooped to pick something up. To Ardh's alarm, there were all manner of things strewn on the ground at their feet, remains of a great celebration. There were beads, some gaily painted souvenirs of no worth and some genuine articles of jewelry of great value. All was left indiscriminately lying in the mud. There were fans like the great ladies carried and crushed cups that had once held wine and beer. There were overturned wagons, with no trace of the horses and oxen that had pulled them.

And there were no rats probing the ruins, no lean cats stalking the alleyways, no curs roaming in packs or alone. There was no voice lifted in merriment or in sorrow. No burst and rotting fruits, no cakes or buns teeming with ants. Nothing lived here in this vast shell of a city. Nothing stood.

Corm looked at the gems in his hand. Granny would have loved a crown like this once. It was like something from a queen in a story. But Granny was gone, so Corm let it slip from his

hands and fall back to the earth. Then he looked up. “Do you think they went to hide in the temple, Ardh?”

“What! Temple?” Ardh spun around, then shouted in surprise and some relief. “Why! I did not see it in all this dust. Good on you, boy! Perhaps they are there even now.”

Corm smiled. “Maybe they are waiting to be told the danger is over.”

“We won’t know until we ask them,” Ardh said cheerfully. The utter destruction of Chorazin was too much to dwell on all at once. His mind sought smaller and more immediate things to keep busy with. “Come, let us see.”

They walked through the rubble and destruction carefully, for there was much to hurt themselves on. Jagged pieces of walls and doors, lentils sticking out of the ground that once belonged to a tavern or shop, broken chairs and baskets and beds. The building they were making for seemed to be in the very center of the former city. Ardh thought this strange, since the palace should have stood there and he had never heard of this temple.

The temple itself was a vast, smooth dome that seemed to be made of seamless white stone. They could see no door in it. It was buttressed by eight slim towers radiating from the dome in a roughly circular fashion. Ardh thought they looked too delicate to be supportive. As they neared the temple, Ardh and Corm felt very small. All was yet eerily silent and they still couldn’t discern a door, even as they came right up to the structure.

“Let us walk around,” Ardh decided. “After all, there must be a door somewhere.”

Corm agreed, and they walked all along the base of the great dome. Nothing. The only thing they ever found were the windows, eight of them clustered high on one side of the dome.

“Shall we try to get their attention?” Ardh wondered. “After all, they may have a door so cunningly hidden that they must let it down from within. Some castles do that.”

Corm nodded. “Hello!” he called and waved, his voice sounding rather small and foolish in that vast wasteland. “Hello, hello! Please let us in.” He jumped up and down for good measure, but nothing happened. He turned back to Ardh, troubled.

Ardh did not look at his friend. He was staring at the windows. Eight perfectly round, black windows of different sizes, with no sill or border to mark them. They had seemed to shift for a moment, the curved black glass gleaming wetly. He took a step back, roughly pulling Corm with him as he did. To all sides of him, in the corners of his vision, he could see it: the faint, almost invisible swaying of the eight pillars, like palm trees in a mild breeze.

“Ardh?” Corm asked, alarmed at the big man’s expression. There was some kind of unendurable horror slowly dawning there.

Ardh said nothing, but suddenly gathered Corm in his arms and sprinted off. Almost at the same time, the earth began to shake. Corm, roughly thrown over Ardh’s shoulder, saw what the big man did not. The buttresses flexed and the vast dome of the temple dislodged itself from the earth and slowly rose, dust falling from its underside in vast sheets.

The Harvester had risen from her bed on the ruins of the palace.

Less even than flies in the web of Longlegs, they stumbled and ran. Corm had long since fought his way free of Ardh and was now trying to help him along. The two men tugged at each other, bashing their legs and heads against shattered tables and doorways as they went. The ghosts of the dead city were hellbent on having company. One or both of them screamed from

the utter horror and hopelessness of their situation. They were being hunted by a spider as vast as a city.

Nothing was standing well enough that there was any place to hide. No strategy could be formed in time to outpace those questing white limbs. Hearts pounding in their ears, breath ragged in their chest and legs burning, they were each in turn plucked from the ground and pulled up into the sky, helpless and doomed, to the waiting maw of Lady Longlegs.

## Chapter 29: The Cold King

Vata had spent many days (or weeks? The desert had eaten time for her) being tutored in a strange manner by Jatayu. She had learned that when she was in great distress, her flesh was much more “hungry” and hard to consciously control. But when she was in normal health, she could decide for herself how, or if, she would consume. Jatayu had no idea why Ascaris and the Intruder were unable to control Vata’s flesh in the way that they controlled him and his other siblings.

“Perhaps you are the part of the Intruder that wants to die. Perhaps you are its regret, its guilt,” he said hopefully.

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” Vata growled. “But if it is really so, I’ll be happy to give it the death it secretly longs for.”

“Please,” Jatayu said fearfully, and she held her peace.

When she wasn’t learning more about the strange properties of her flesh, Vata studiously tried to ignore them. She knew by now that she must have absorbed Naos by holding her against her body, and possibly even absorbed the other dead Observers in the Floating City as she lay senseless in the darkness of that immense wreck.

In this manner, Naos and the Observers had probably enabled her to survive an event that no human could have possibly survived. She forced herself to imagine them coming to her willingly, surrendering their bodies to her keeping so that the Lord could never, never have them. And so she managed to live with it.

Vata was likewise becoming more comfortable with the repellant act of taking sustenance from the angel. She had started to favor some spots because they were easier to bite. For his part, Jatayu never expressed pain or alarm. No wounds or marks marred his skin, no blood filled Vata's mouth.

But one morning, she had noticed that he seemed to get sleepy for a moment, and sway on his feet. She caught him, and realized that he felt very light.

“What have you done!” Vata was genuinely angry.

“You are so strange. You wanted so much to kill me, and now when you are on the brink of success, you withdraw? Some soldier you turned out to be.” Even on the point of death, the angel goaded her.

Vata glared at him and stepped back, letting Jatayu collapse in an ungainly heap at her feet. “I certainly wanted to kill you. But after thinking on the matter, I want you to suffer more than that.”

The angel knitted its brow and crawled to the flat stone he used as a seat, looking up at her.

“You must help me against the Lord. That is your punishment, Jatayu!”

“All right,” he said suddenly.

Vata raised her eyebrows, in spite of herself. “Yes? Shall we start by enlisting King Agwerot? He is closest. He was human once, like you.” She did not add, “And me.”

Jatayu frowned. “We would have better success if we destroy him, and eat his power.”

“But why,” Vata began, and then saw that the angel was very near a collapse. “We can speak later,” she amended. “Don’t die before you get me off this rock.”

“You do not need my help,” Jatayu began, but Vata had left him. He lay down to rest and gather strength. It was while he was recovering that he felt something terribly wrong in his bones. The four "loyal" children always had a vague sense of each other: their locations, their movements, sometimes even their thoughts and emotions. It was why Jatayu always had to be so careful about thinking seditious thoughts. But now, suddenly his sister was not there. Search his blood as he might, he could no longer feel the Lady Longlegs. Jatayu rested uneasily, and in his way, he grieved.

Much later, when he felt ready, he told Vata it was time to go. He knew now that his fate would be the same as his older sister's, and he would not likely see his eyrie again. It didn't distress him.

Vata, unaware of these things, questioned the angel about his brother instead. If they were to have any chance of winning against the Intruder at all, they must have more allies.

“Why are you so certain we can't enlist the Cold King?”

Jatayu shook his head. “He isn't on our side. I know his cold and secret heart. He *hates*, Vata.”

They were nearing the ocean where Agwerot dwelt. Jatayu clutched her tightly, parts of him being modified to better serve this purpose. As they spoke, Vata unwillingly reflected that he flew with her differently than Naos had done.

“What do you mean, ‘hates?’ Do you mean he takes pleasure in consuming folk for your master?”

“That, and more. He is full of envy, it is like a poison within his veins. He fondles the jewels of forgotten kings on the ocean bed, exulting that they are dead while he persists. And it is

worse than that.” He leaned closer. “I was set to prowl the skies; my sister was assigned the earth. Our brother’s realm possesses more life than either of these. He plans to use this to his advantage, to be greater than the Lord one day and sit on the throne of this planet alone.” Jatayu paused, and Vata thought she detected something like pity in the metallic voice. “...the Lord knows, of course. My brother will be betrayed long before his moment to mutiny has come.”

“But surely if his position is so fragile, we can convince him! We may change his heart, as your heart and that of your sister were changed.”

Jatayu frowned. “I’m not against trying, but I know him. We would be better served to...Ah.” He began to shake violently, and Vata felt them dip sharply. In real alarm, she twisted her head back to try and look at him.

Jatayu’s inhumanly beautiful face was fast dissolving into corruption and rot. Squinting her eyes against the sun, she could see his wings begin to unravel into dust. His flesh would settle on the waters, she realized, and be eaten by the fish there. As planned by the Intruder, all of Jatayu’s power would make it back to his brother, King Agwerot. The angel’s treachery had been discovered, and he was being discarded.

“Vata...” was all Jatayu managed to say before his jaw unhinged and his tongue slid away. Vata knew his heart, though. She turned in his quickly decaying arms and threw her own arms around his fraying neck.

“You will be part of me forever. And together, we will rebel.”

She thought she saw Jatayu’s eyes relax into a smile, but it was virtually impossible to know this. Vata felt him hug her tightly as they plummeted toward the ocean a thousand feet below. He wanted to be part of her as soon as possible, to give the least amount of himself to the

Lord. Vata closed her eyes and pulled what was left of his face closer. From far away, they looked like two lovers.

When Vata hit the ocean, going in like a knife as she had been trained, she was alone. But not alone. She knew that Naos and Jatayu would be there with her, giving her strength, when she confronted bitter King Agwerot.

Vata plunged into the water with such force that she ended up far below the surface. Suddenly choking on seawater, she thrashed around, convinced she was drowning. Jatayu had been planning to help her adapt at this stage, but he could do nothing for her now. Vata would have eventually floated to the surface senseless if not for the servants of Agwerot.

She was snapped from her panic by a sharp tug on her hand. Whipping her head around, feeling the unwelcome resistance of the water, she dimly saw a lamprey or similar creature with its teeth sunk into her flesh. Other creatures had come to tear her apart as well. They must have been nearby in anticipation of receiving her body and that of Jatayu.

Vata tried to keep an eye out for any approaching sharks, since she knew she would have to punch these on the snout as soon as they came close enough. But she kept being distracted by the lamprey. It was stubborn and very slick, whipping from side to side, making it hard for her to keep her position. She tugged at it desperately as it burrowed ever more insistently into the back of her hand. *Does it think it can swim right into my arm?* Vata thought, teeth gritted.

Suddenly she knew how to deal with them. It was more than a little disgusting, but she managed to use her flesh to engulf the lamprey. Any other other sea creatures that didn't flee

after seeing that were likewise consumed. They gave her some measure of their innate knowledge and abilities, and she became slightly more comfortable with the concept of not breathing as a human would. The main problem now was trying to regulate her buoyancy. She still had a very imperfect grasp of movement.

As she half-swam, half-floated along, Vata was unconscious of the fact that she was entering a kingdom. She didn't know Agwerot expected diplomacy and formality. Her harsh soldier's life wouldn't have prepared her for these fripperies in any case. But because of her lack of ceremony and the way she had devoured his servants, King Agwerot was already angry with Vata when he finally rode out from between two towering rocks and greeted her.

Vata saluted him. Treating him like a captain was the highest honor she could give. She informed him she had come from his brother's house to speak with him, though it took her a long time to communicate this underwater. With ill grace, the king extended her his hospitality. His stained "little sister," in her filthy uniform, was an affront to him. He felt the distaste of a rich and cultured man welcoming a poor and unworldly relative.

Vata could tell that the Cold King was displeased with her sudden intrusion. She was meant to be dead, and Agwerot no doubt felt as if the lamb he were about to enjoy had sat up on its platter and bleated at him. It was clear she wasn't much more than food to him. Jatayu's warnings that she couldn't move Agwerot's heart seemed all but proven.

Nevertheless, Vata was determined to give the king a try for Jatayu's sake. The two were still brothers, and even though she was galled by the treacherous way Jatayu had been killed, she didn't consider the king to be at fault. He and his fish were merely meant to be the vehicle of reabsorption of Jatayu's power. It was the Intruder that had unmade the angel.

As for the king himself, he professed to welcome anyone who had known “his dear departed brother,” but Vata suspected this was an affectation. He went through the motions of showing her his depopulated kingdom, pointing out featureless rocks and lifeless wastes with obvious pride. He dwelt most heavily on his treasures, many of which came from wrecks he had personally caused.

Chief among these was the golden mask the king wore on his face. He had ridden up to her with it on and she was never to see him without it. It was an ancient grave mask of gold leaf, worn down further by the sea until it was quite thin. The people who had crafted this mask came from an island that loved beauty, he explained. He wanted to have beauty around him always.

Perhaps for this reason, he plied jewels upon her until she was festooned in a queen’s ransom of pearls and rotting silks. Vata ached from the weight of all this finery, but it was somewhat helpful as it functioned as ballast to keep her more decently level under the water. With a cold feeling in her stomach, Vata learned that Agwerot had been saving all of these treasures for his bride, but that the wedding would never take place now. As Vata discovered, Agwerot had coveted the powers of the Harvester and had hoped one day to win her to his side.

“These fine things, they were to be worn by my dear sister, my lovely, lost sister,” the king gabbled sadly. “She was taken too soon, too soon. They go, ah! They go to my lost *little* sister now.” And here he patted Vata, as he often did. It never failed to repel her.

Vata began to feel despondent. If Lady Longlegs and Jatayu were dead, Agwerot was her last chance of winning an ally against the Lord and it was a poor one. It didn’t help her mood that there was no sunlight in this cold gray realm, and nothing to see but the hideous servants of Agwerot and the bare rocks and sands of his palace. He had sculpted these sharks and turtles and

other great creatures into shapes more pleasing to him, and his hand was cruel. None of the poor misshapen beasts could have survived without the tiny bit of the Intruder's power Agwerot jealously allowed them.

Worse, while he fussed endlessly over Vata's appearance and his own, Agwerot paid very little attention to what she said. He wasn't forthcoming with any meaningful information, though he was chatty about meaningless things. He reminded her more than anything of a very lonely child. Sometimes the king seemed to be listening for something Vata couldn't hear. Often she suspected he didn't notice or know what he said to her, talking to her glibly while his mind raced ahead on its own secret paths.

Even so Vata did her best to communicate with him, making her case for rebellion and autonomy. But sound didn't work the same here. She was constantly fighting the water's tendency to steal her words or reflect them in unexpected and unhelpful ways, and she had to speak in a higher pitch than she would use on land. Both she and Agwerot often had to repeat phrases over and over again. Her own voice echoed loudly in her ears, trapped by water.

Worst of all, these problems forced her to confront her increasingly inhuman nature. After all, what human could survive down here long enough to learn undersea ways of speaking? She had absorbed Naos and the Observers, the bulk of Jatayu, and several ocean creatures. What kind of creature did that make her? Was she even Vata anymore?

She moved restlessly through the empty courts and lifeless gardens of King Agwerot, sometimes with him and sometimes alone. Her shoulders groaning under the weight of stolen and meaningless finery, Vata tried each day to win her brother to her side. It was the only human

thing she could still do.

### Chapter 30: The Traitor

Travelling in this way was very strange, but at least it was much faster than they could hope to accomplish on foot. Still, Ardh had to restrain himself from being ill every time he looked over the side of the smooth disc of the Harvester's body and saw the pitching lands racing by far below.

Corm had adapted wonderfully well in contrast. He sat quietly in the center of the vast white plane and said nothing, looking resolutely ahead. To him, they were flying. He had never dreamed he could experience such a thing, and he was both stunned and enchanted by the spectacle of the earth spread out below them.

Longlegs was taking them to Ascaris. Ardh knew that well enough. But what of it? They had almost died more times now than he would care to count, and here they were. If he had to bury his axe in the head of this "Lord" in order to finally get a little peace and quiet, he was willing. His patience was spent. It was time for this absurd and senseless struggle to end.

"Strange that she has not devoured us and been done with it," Ardh remarked glumly as he walked back to sit down next to Corm. "If I understood those butchers earlier, her eating us would be the same as her filthy Lord being fed."

Corm put his hand on her carapace absent-mindedly. "That's why she didn't eat us."

"What?"

"I don't think she wants him to have us."

Ardh was lost. “Then...” But the words died on his lips as he beheld a truly revolting sight. Ahead of them lay the black eyes of the Harvester. Up close these were bulging black pools larger than either of them, clustered in two groups of three eyes with two more in the middle of these. One of the nearest eyes to them was distending, the black surface bulging more and more sharply until suddenly, it burst open. The spider’s body did not shudder or slow its pace as black ichor sprayed over its white back. Ardh felt sick.

Slowly, something white emerged from the ruptured eye. It stretched and distended, the black humors from the eye sliding off it and away like water driven off by oil. As Ardh stared in horror, it lunched to its feet and walked toward them, leaving dark footprints on the spider’s back. It was mostly like a woman, but a very thin and featureless one. She had long black hair but no face. In truth she had very few characteristics at all, looking more like someone’s hasty sketch of a person than an actual woman.

It came and sat across from Corm, who in all this time had betrayed no signs of alarm or even surprise. “Brother,” it said.

Corm sat up a little straighter, alert. “Are you saying that to *me*?” he hazarded.

The woman-creature nodded. “Three brothers I have,” she confirmed. “You are the youngest.”

“Now see here!” Ardh sputtered, finally finding his voice again. “This innocent child has nothing to do with the likes of your murdering family!”

“Yes,” she agreed, “And it is well.”

Ardh subsided, uneasy and confused.

“I am tired of eating,” she continued. “One of my brothers is tired also. We eat when the Lord says. Next we are eaten. And it is well,” she said tonelessly, “But I have eaten and fed enough. I think it is time to decline.”

Ardh blinked. “Do you mean...it is time for you to refuse his orders? Or that you are ready to fade away?”

“I mean both of these things.”

“Where should we go?” Corm asked her. “Is there somewhere he can’t find us?”

“No such place exists. He is everywhere now, and soon he will leave nothing on this world, or beneath it, but himself.”

Ardh’s eyes bulged. “But! He can’t be proposing to eat every creature on Earth! Why, the short-sighted fool will starve!”

Longlegs shook her head. “It will move on and that will be that.”

Ardh’s blood froze in his veins and he had no reply.

Corm was very quiet too. Finally, he said, “Can’t it be stopped?”

His sister sat back and seemed to tilt her featureless head thoughtfully. “That is what I’m interested to find out.”

“Where then are we going?” Ardh frowned. “Do you propose to take us to him? Shall we fight the Lord?”

“The tower,” she replied. “That tower you see is shot all the way through the Earth like a spear. My master will use it to infiltrate the planet utterly, consuming and occupying from within even as he does the same thing on the surface. Destroying the tower may slow that plan, or even arrest his progress entirely.”

Ardh widened his eyes. "But what can we do against such a fearsome structure? That thing must extend into the sky for miles!"

"My brother will know what to do," Longlegs said simply. Corm frowned, not understanding.

Then without turning, she suddenly said, "Behold."

The men looked past her. Yonder was the tower, still moving and crawling this way and that on the horizon, tethered to one spot but trying to escape that spot with all its considerable might. A twisting, inconceivably tall pillar writhing against the sky, it was a fearsome sight. The mind grew numb trying to fathom it.

"When we reach it," Longlegs began, but then she abruptly stopped.

Ardh, who had been staring with a very healthy and natural horror at the tower, turned back to her and then gasped in alarm. For Longlegs was dissolving in front of his eyes.

First the form of the woman wasted away into dust. Her carelessly constructed flesh and skeleton all unwound and fell away, sinking into the surface of the immense spider's body beneath her. Then this, too, began to fall apart. Corm was already beginning to sink into her body as if the boy were sitting in quicksand.

"Corm!" Ardh shouted, and tugged him clear. "What is happening? You there! Madam!" he called helplessly to the spider beneath them. But she was well past answering.

"I think the Lord is angry, and he is eating her," Corm said sadly.

"Eating! But we are upon her back, a thousand feet in the air! We'll be dashed to bits!"

"It'll be all right Ardh," Corm said quietly. "Just close your eyes."

Ardh stared at the boy. And then he shut his eyes.

### Chapter 31: Leviathan

King Agwerot was walking at Vata's side again, pointing out his treasures. Vata found his high, singsong voice tiresome and grating, all the more so because he had to repeat his words often when the water took them. Even then, she had to strain constantly to understand the better part of what he said, forcing them to keep their heads together in an intimate way that she found unpleasant.

The king shifted his conversation to the terrible injustices he suffered at the hands of others, a favorite topic. He always had many hateful things to say about Agive and his folk. Through him, Vata had learned much about them even if she had learnt nothing useful about Ascaris or the Intruder. Today the target of the king's honeyed venom was once more his late sister.

“Do you know, my love, that she betrayed the Lord? Yes, yes, my only sister. Ah, well that isn't true, is it?”

The Cold King moved to pat her hand, but Vata hadn't fed recently and she was wary of letting him directly touch her flesh. She still didn't completely trust her eating touch. What if it tried to consume the king next? When she drew her arm back, however, Agwerot misread her intentions. Insulted, he snapped, “Yes, well, you are my sister too, you know. A *little* sister, I suppose. Yes, and not as perfectly created, no. No.”

Vata felt no pride in her inhumanity, and she shook her head obligingly. “No, brother. I can't equal your purity. Your purity.”

Mollified, the king continued. “Well that’s very lovely of you to say, very lovely. Now, my dear, you know that I cannot do anything against the Lord. Oh no. Why, I love him, my dear. He gave me everything, everything, my dear.” He turned to her eagerly, leaning close in an unsettling way that was almost conspiratorial. “He gave me the greatest and the vastest realm. Yes, he gave me the vastest realm. I will be so powerful, so powerful, so much more than my brother or sister could be, powerful.”

Vata was tired of his inane words, made worse by the constant repetition the water forced him to adopt. All the seafolk like Mari, people who felt and thought, were on the side of Agive. King Agwerot, in contrast, only had mute fish to talk to. It had clearly eroded his mind. He was a lonely and isolated creature, even if his realm was such a prize. *All of us were human once*, she reminded herself. *I must make him see.*

“He’s taken everything, you mean!” Impulsively, Vata took his cold hands. They felt wrong somehow, but she didn’t immediately pay attention to this. “You were once a human child, as I was. The Lord tore you from your family. He keeps you down here alone and forgotten until you are needed. You must refuse this wretched exile and reject his rule! Stand with me!” She repeated her words, to be quite sure the water hadn’t stolen them.

“Reject his rule! Stand with me. *Brother.*”

Agwerot shook all over and at first Vata thought she had finally reached his heart, or perhaps frightened him with her talk of rebellion. He jerked his hands back and turned away slightly. Vata moved to follow him, but paused. Her hands felt strange.

She looked down to see that they were shredded, stinging against the salt water surrounding them as slim ribbons of her blood joined the water, barely visible. *I was right not to*

*touch him earlier*, she thought, and then had her second shock. For the king wasn't trembling with hope or fear behind his graceful golden mask. He was laughing.

In the distance, Vata thought she saw something. It was painful to strain her eyes against the salt water, but she did until she could make out the shapes more clearly. Sharks, or things that had once been sharks before the king had pressed them into his service.

"That's enough my dear." King Agwerot was backing away. "I thought I would keep you as entertainment until a more suitable time came to present you to the Lord. But I see that we have already talked too long." Stripped of empty pleasantries, his voice was suddenly quite sane...and brutal.

*They will eat me and then he will eat them*, Vata thought. The sharks were very close now.

"King, I beg you..." Vata injected a plaintive note into her body language, or tried. It probably wouldn't have fooled anyone on the surface, but Agwerot had no one to talk to down here.

Enticed by the prospect of a more picturesque scene, he took a step closer to Vata. "It's no use begging, my dear. No, no. My mind is made up...I must be faithful, you know. Faithful."

She reached pathetically for him, the stumps of her hands slowly knitting themselves back into their proper shapes. "You welcomed me as your little sister! Will you abandon me now, brother?"

Enjoying the drama, feeling like a lead actor in a grand play, the king took her in his arms indulgently. "Oh my dear. You mustn't disgrace yourself by begging so. We will all go back to the Lord, in time. In time. You know that."

“But...” Vata looked down as if in sorrow and defeat and then clumsily ripped off his mask. She didn’t try to look at the face beneath it, for there was not a face there. Like the lamprey he had once sent to welcome her to his kingdom, he was only a mouth. Round and endless and hungry, his throat was studded all the way down with hundreds or perhaps even thousands of teeth. Vata folded the golden mask in two, taking the rough blade thus created and slashing at his ribs with all her might.

Agwerot howled, his blood billowing around him in far thicker ribbons than the wounds on Vata’s hands had birthed. He lunged for her but was immediately set upon by his sharks. As Vata kicked her legs and made for the surface, she shook off all of her jewels and ornaments, letting them fall back into the sea. The king’s screams and curses rang in her ears, or so she thought. Presently she came to realize that she was in terrific pain from ascending so quickly from the depths. It was now that she needed her inhumanity most of all.

Preoccupied with her blinding physical pain, Vata didn’t look down to see King Agwerot angrily consuming his sharks. Their great angular bodies squirmed helplessly in his torso for a moment, distending him gruesomely, and then his flesh was still and unbroken once more. He hissed and looked toward the surface, his cavernous face regarding Vata’s receding form with pure untempered hatred.

Vata never saw the immense dark shape beneath her as it swiftly gained on her position, growing larger and larger in its proximity until it was vast and sinister as a galleon.

Her face broke the surface of the water, gasping, thirsting for oxygen from habit more than from any true urgency. She drank in the air, her head pounding, feeling the blood seeping

from her nose, her ears, willing everything back into place. It was a moment or two before the riot of her vision resolved itself into a hand, reaching out to her, almost touching her.

Vata blinked, dumbfounded. Yes, there was a hand, and beyond it a man. She had not seen a man like him before, although she supposed somewhere in the back of her mind that he must simply be a mix of different races. As it happened, she was not technically wrong. She was staring at Tife, child of spirit and of man.

She took a moment to compose herself and finish repairing her hands. Vata wasn't particularly suspicious of this man or frightened of possible treachery, though of course this was a possibility. Instead, she was again concerned that she would harm him by touching him. The effect of what she thought of as her "eating touch" on a normal human would be disastrous. After she had taken another breath or two she felt confident that she wouldn't harm him.

"What are you doing, woman! Climb into the boat!" He was an impatient one, it seemed.

As she reached to take his hand, the water around Tife's boat bubbled. His eyes widened as he and Vata beheld something like a towering ring of spikes that erupted from the water, encircling them and the boat. Agwerot had changed his form.

Then the jaws of the titanic fish slammed shut, trapping them in darkness.

All was darkness and pain for what seemed like an eternity. All sounds were muffled and it was very cold. The smell was terrible. Vata could barely move. She was being crushed on all sides by something heavy and cold and yielding, and once again there was nothing for her to

breathe. It took some time for her to regain her senses enough to realize that she must be in the belly of the great fish that had swallowed her and the man.

Vata felt sorrow. That poor man! He had only wanted to help her, and now he was no doubt lying somewhere in here with her. But for him it would be his grave. Surely no human could have survived such a thing.

The thought gave her a sense of urgency. She was certainly at risk of being absorbed by Agwerot, but it seemed to her that the risk her would-be savior was facing must be much greater. If he hadn't drowned or been destroyed by the acid in the fish's guts, she must save him if she could. Vata was aware that his chances were nil, but she couldn't bear to plan her own escape without trying to find the stranger first.

She was searching for him, a maddeningly slow questing slither through the corrosive darkness, when she felt something seize her wrist. It was a hand. So, he had made it! She pulled him roughly to her, and his heavy body slid against hers, knocking her back further into the fish. She wanted to exclaim in aggravation, but to do so would be to let her mouth fill with the same stinking acid and mucous that they were wallowing in. She contented herself with squeezing his wrist.

He seemed to be thinking the same as her, for he made no attempt to speak. Instead, she felt him struggling and squirming against the walls of the fish until he was able to press a blade against her. He was proposing that they both hack their way out of the fish. Vata pushed the blade back toward him and pressed close to him so he could feel her slowly shaking her head. Then she took his hand that held the blade and moved it against the fish, encouraging him to

hack at it all he liked. As for her, she needed her hands for other things. But she had no way to tell him this.

Tife didn't understand why the fool woman wouldn't accept his weapon, but they surely had no time to lose so he didn't stop to question it. Instead he set to work, using both of his blades, one in each hand. He still felt her body close to his, so he could only hope that when he had made enough headway she would know to come with him.

But Vata was not idle during all this time. She had placed her palms on the fish's flesh and concentrated on eating. And eating. And eating.

Between the two of them, they managed to carve their way out of the fish's belly. Agwerot twisted and roared in agony as they burst out of his bloated white stomach in a cloud of blood. Tife looked at Vata appraisingly for a moment, realizing for the first time that his new companion might not be altogether human, any more than he was. Then he turned and raised his hand.

Vata heard him give a great cry, and it was melodious even beneath the waves. Somehow, he managed to make a sound that carried. He repeated his magnificent call twice more, and then fell silent. She had the impression it was some kind of signal. But who could this strange man be summoning, if he was not on King Agwerot's side?

They came while Agwerot was still thrashing and trying to mend his ruptured flesh. Graceful, colorful forms swam up to them or rode on equally graceful creatures. There were people and mounts that resembled lionfish, seahorses, cuttlefish, jellyfish. Sometimes it was hard to tell which was a person and which was a mount. A great sea-wolf was among them. As Vata watched it swam up to Tife and nuzzled him, then as one they turned to face Agwerot.

Tife's folk swarmed the monster. They covered King Agwerot in a blanket of color, pressing in and yet further in as the great fish gnashed its teeth and writhed in agony. Momentarily frozen by the spectacle, Vata finally found her legs. She swam in amongst them and every time they succeeded in slashing or pulling part of Agwerot off, she was ready for it with her eating touch. Every chunk of the monster was absorbed. It took a long time, but at the end of the disgusting battle there was only Vata, and Tife's folk.

They regarded her stonily, feeling deeply suspicious toward this woman who had the eating touch and bore the stains of Observers' blood. As Vata watched, they surrounded her, compelled toward hatred by the black stains.

"What is this creature," the sea wolf asked his son. "Is she not a killer too, one of the fearsome children of Ascaris?"

Tife frowned and slowly shook his head. "Mayhap she is, yet she was fleeing from Agwerot when I came upon her. She made no attempt to devour me to increase her strength, even when she lay trapped with me in the belly of the beast."

Mari was unconvinced, but he and his friends withdrew. Vata watched incredulously as they faded into the distance and then vanished from her sight. "Will they not attack?" She turned to Tife.

Tife shrugged. "If you're through playing these foolish games in the water, let us find my boat."

## Chapter 32: The Last Road

“It’s all right to open your eyes,” came Corm’s voice.

After some hesitation, Ardh opened them. He didn’t know what he was afraid of. In fact there was nothing to see. They were on the forest floor, and Lady Longlegs was nowhere to be seen. No, not even a trace of her.

“What a fearsome power! For that so-called Lord to call back every bit of such a vast creature!” Ardh turned back to Corm and then noticed with a start that his young friend looked deeply ashamed.

“What is it, boy?” Ardh asked a moment later, when Corm still said nothing.

“I didn’t let the Lord have her,” was all Corm said. “She didn’t want to go with him. She asked to go with me instead.”

Ardh stared at him. “Did the Ankou want to go with you as well?”

Corm looked up sharply, then looked down again and nodded, still with that sense of shame.

Ardh groaned. “So! You have eaten the dread Ankou, and the Harvester herself, and yet you are still so short! It hardly seems just. I must find you more fruit to eat.”

Corm blinked, shocked at Ardh’s joke, and then smiled hopefully.

Ardh smiled back. Then his face grew serious. “I suppose she really was your sister then.”

Corm frowned. “I didn’t know I had a sister, or brothers. I thought I came from the star, like Granny said. Should I believe Granny, or Longlegs?”

“Boy, today I don’t know what I believe. But I have watched you for many weeks now, and I never observed you to have a hateful look like those wild men, or to act like a puppet like the Harvester or the Ankou. You seem to follow your own ways. And the Lord hasn’t called your flesh back the way he did to Lady Longlegs. Maybe he can’t control you.”

“I have never felt controlled,” Corm agreed. “But would I even know it, if I were?”

“You’re making my head hurt, boy.” Ardh gave Corm a gently admonishing tap on the crown of his head. Then he turned and looked at the horizon, barely visible through the thinning trees. “I suppose we may as well make for that thing of a tower.”

Corm’s eyes widened. “Ardh, are you really sure?”

Ardh spread his arms. “Where else can we go? Chorazin is destroyed, along with every town and settlement we should have seen along the way. The birds no longer sing, the animals and insects no longer bustle in the silent fields. If we don’t confront the Lord we will probably die anyway, of madness or starvation.”

Corm nodded. “I didn’t know why, but I also thought we should go. I just didn’t want to make *you* go.”

Ardh took a deep breath. “Come. We will end our story together, whatever that end is to be.”

Corm took his hand gratefully. The sun was setting, painting the cold sky a milky salmon color. The trees stood black and white against the frosty earth. The air itself seemed gray, the whole of the sky too close, as if they were walking through a painted set in a play. They knew that if they walked all night, or if they laid down in the road to sleep, it would make no difference. They were utterly alone.

Ardh and Corm walked toward the tower in the distance.

### Chapter 33: The Heart of Stone

“The shoreline is strange.” Vata leaned over the side of the boat, her brow furrowing. “It wasn’t like this when Jatayu and I flew over it, before.”

“Many things are changing,” Tife replied glumly. “I think the Earth herself is groaning under the burden of the unnatural Thing that is clawing its way into her every corner.”

“Is that a new river?” Vata asked in some alarm.

Tife squinted. “It may be. The Earth may be splitting.”

“We need to sail faster.”

“Woman, I am going as fast as I can! You are lucky that you sail with Tife, son of the ocean folk. A mere man couldn’t make the voyage at all!” Tife puffed his chest out importantly.

Vata wasn’t impressed. “I’m Vata, not ‘Woman.’”

Tife sat forward in disbelief. “Can it be! Do you mean to say that you are Vata who was lately a soldier in the Army of Heaven?”

She nodded and pointed to the stripe under her eyes. By now it was somewhat harder to make out, lost as it was amidst the irregular black shapes of the black stains she bore.

“But this is amazing! Father thought he saw you die!”

Vata stood up in the boat, almost capsizing it. “Father! He lives?”

“Sit down, crazy wo---Vata!” Tife sputtered. Then his face grew sad. “I’m afraid not. I was with him when he met his end. A shadow, a fearsome creature, killed his little son and then your friend himself.”

“So,” Vata breathed, “He had a child.”

Tife nodded and related Father’s story to her.

“I wondered what was on his mind at Honmion,” Vata mused. “I’m glad they were reunited, if only briefly.”

“You seem rather nonchalant about the death of your friend.”

Vata gave Tife a look that made him instantly regret his words, but she wasn’t angry. She looked away and said, “I’ve always been like that. There have only been a few times when I felt like a real person, with the ability to feel anything deeply. I think, truly, something is left out of me.”

Tife felt terrible, but at the same time he also felt a kind of sympathy. “I have loved deeply and felt sorrow and rage. But I, too, know your struggle. As a child of the sea, I am always separated from mankind, even my beloved wife, by *something*...it is something nameless that keeps me on one side of the gate, staring at them on the other.”

Vata shook her head. “You don’t seem that way to me at all.”

“Do not tell me how I seem, woman,” bristled Tife, forgetting himself. “I will show you.”

As Vata watched incredulously, Tife pulled his shirt to one side and plunged his hand into his chest. He drew out something and handed it to Vata. When she gingerly took it and examined it, she was amazed to see that it was a stone or metal piece.

“But what is this?” Vata asked wonderingly. “I’ve seen the twisted metal that is buried in a man’s flesh when the shot of an arquebusier hits home. But this looks different.”

“That is my heart.”

“Your heart! But you’re still alive.”

Tife shrugged. “My heart is like that of my father before me. My mother threw it back into the sea and summoned him to her side.”

“Did he give it to her, before?” Vata asked, turning it in her hands, fascinated.

“She inherited it from her grandmother. If my father had come across the one who stole it from him, he might have killed that person. But he saw it was my mother, an innocent, who called him. And so he stayed with her, faithfully, until her time was done.”

“I’m sorry they were parted,” said Vata, and handed him back the stone.

Tife refused it. “Keep it,” he said. “I have no use for my heart anymore.”

Vata frowned but carefully put it away in an inside pocket of her uniform. *When he’s feeling less sorry for himself, she thought, I’ll give it back to him.*

Then she cried aloud and leaned forward. For the boat was ascending.

“What!” exclaimed Tife. “The boat should be sinking as it enters the river!”

Vata stared in disbelief. Instead of sinking further into the freshwater, the boat continued to rise. When it finally levelled out, the boat and the river were several yards above the riverbed. The river flowed, suspended in the air, and they flowed with it, inland.

“But this is impossible,” Tife whispered. “Rivers do not float...rivers do not flow from the sea to the land.”

Vata looked around. “Everything is wrong. The sky, the trees, the shadows made by the sun...this is not the world I left.”

“It must really be the end.” Tife slumped down in the prow of their little boat and held his head in his hands.

Vata stared past his shoulder and slowly shook her head. “It won’t be the end until we’ve faced that,” she said, and pointed to an object in the distance. Tife saw a vast black shape too narrow and straight to be a funnel cloud but stretching from the sky to the earth even so.

“Have you completely taken leave of your senses! There is nothing we can do against such a creature as that! Why, it must be the size of many thousands of men! Perhaps it has no end at all!”

“Look around you, Tife!” Vata roughly grasped his shoulders. “The Earth is flying apart! We’ll all be dead soon, flung off into space or absorbed by the Lord or that thing there! Don’t you want to die as a man! Will you just lie down and wait?”

Tife sighed heavily. “You shame me, Vata of heaven’s army.” Then he turned and silently steered the boat towards the tower ahead.

### Chapter 34: Jan

He could see Corm coming a long way off.

Or to be more accurate, he saw a million different Corms, bouncing and bobbing, fragmented and whole, stretched or squatted like something from a hall of mirrors at the gypsy fair. He saw Corm coming, and he wanted to go to him. But he was not “he” anymore. His arms and legs didn’t respond to him these days. He couldn’t make his many thousands of eyes point in one direction. He couldn’t lift his voice in greeting. He could only feel emotions he could no longer put words to, and yearn for something long forgotten.

Jan stared and yearned, with his many eyes. He reached forward with his thousand arms. He leaned, and the Earth buckled under the weight of his struggle. He tried to reach out to Corm. He tried to speak, and the taller man with Corm stopped in alarm and didn’t let Corm advance. This upset Jan more, and the fearful sounds howling and bubbling from his million mouths grew more fearsome still.

“It will collapse! Hear that sound, it is like the winds blowing out of Hell itself! I was wrong boy, we must flee. Anything but to face that horror!”

Corm shook his head at his protective friend. “That is my friend Jan, who I have hunted for all this while.”

“What!” Ardh refused to believe it. “That tower stretches through the Earth entire, and beyond into space! It cannot be your friend. Had your friend so many eyes? Had he so many mouths?” Ardh shuddered. “What a fearsome beast!”

“They have hurt him.”

“Boy, if you’re right, what can we even do for him?” Ardh threw up his hands helplessly.

Corm frowned. “He may tell us how to help. I have to go.”

“I forbid it!” Ardh shouted. But sons the world over have ignored these words, and today was the day Corm disobeyed Ardh. He marched resolutely toward that fearsome pillar that split the sky.

The fields were red now, slick and clotted with gore. The dead brush was trampled and broken where Jan had strained and slithered over it. No living grass remained, no insects or rabbits. No wildflowers would emerge from this soil despite its rich coat of decaying matter. Corm and Ardh couldn’t know, but most of what they were walking on was not the ground at all but a network of blood vessels and protrusions from the tower. What true soil remained was partially detached, hovering in the air like a dust cloud that never settled. The very earth could not bear to touch the thing that had been Corm’s friend.

Ardh was distraught. His pleas and threats were falling on deaf ears. Worse yet, he was unable to pull Corm back or stand in his path in spite of the older man’s superior size and strength. As Ardh continued to try anyway, he looked up through the dust and grit to see a fearsome sight. The tower was leaning toward his friend, and the sky around it was also filled with dim and magnified reflections of eyes like the eyes of the tower. Not just the Earth, but even its atmosphere was falling prey to the influence of the Intruder.

“Listen, boy!” He screamed even as red dust choked him. “The Earth is crumbling. Soon there will be no air! We must go!”

Corm either didn't hear him or didn't agree, for he marched on. Then, suddenly, he paused. Ardh thought for one ecstatic moment that Corm had finally come to his senses and decided to listen to him, and then he saw what had actually arrested his friend's steps.

He saw Vata.

*What is this?* Ardh thought disjointedly. *She is like me.* For the woman was indeed covered in irregular patches of discoloration. Whereas Ardh's variable skin was still always a color of flesh, however, her patches were far too dark to resemble anything natural. They were more like holes in the daylight.

"You were in my dream!" this woman cried, and pointed at Corm in evident wonder. Behind her was a young man who seemed every bit as unhappy to be standing there as Ardh.

Corm raised his chin a little. "A dream...what is that?"

Vata was momentarily cut to the heart. Naos had once asked her this. She shook off her sadness and took a step toward Corm.

"No time for questions." She gestured to the tower. "This creature is devouring the world. We will be next!"

Corm shook his head. "This is my friend Jan." He reached into his threadbare shirt, then withdrew his hand in evident disappointment.

*Surely this child didn't expect Jan's flower to still be there after the Eudaemon,* Ardh thought. But this was exactly what Corm had expected. Undeterred, he stooped and looked for wildflowers.

"What are you doing?" shouted Vata, but Corm had already gotten up again, finding none. He continued to the tower.

The great structure bowed and bent and distorted, parts of it flowing and sliding freely to pool at Corm's feet. As the others watched in horror and disgust, Corm reached up to touch it. Tife lunged to try and stop him, only to be held back by Ardh. As Tife stared at him in utter dismay, he saw that the older man had gone a sickly gray color with fright for his boy.

Nevertheless, Ardh slowly shook his head. "I have seen this," he said. "It is best to let them talk."

"Let them *talk*?!" Tife began, but even he stopped sputtering as all of their eardrums were nearly shattered by the titanic Sound of that vast thing's thousand throats speaking as one.

"Cuh...C...Cormmm...." it rasped, leaning closer still until a great loop of its immense height hung down, close enough to touch. Hundreds of eyes detached and burst in their effort to peer at their friend more closely. Aqueous and vitreous humors fell around them all like colored fountains.

"Jan," Corm said, and for the first time Ardh heard tears in the boy's voice. "They have hurt you. We looked and looked, I feared you were dead. They killed everyone in Charant too. Oh Jan..." he ducked his head and wiped his eyes roughly on one arm.

The tower roared and engulfed him, and his companions screamed. But after a moment they became aware that the creature was wracked by sobs, a hundred million gasps and cries of pain and pity as the two of them clung to each other and cried for the people of their village. Corm was all but buried in the beast's red noisome flesh, but they could see he was embracing the mass and it, him.

"Who is this boy that embraces the Great Worm?" Vata said. "Are you our enemies?"

"That is not the worm," Ardh replied tiredly. "It's another boy from Corm's village."

“Say again?” Tife leaned forward, sure he hadn’t heard right. But then they could hear and see nothing, for Jan had asked Corm to take him home.

All was a shattering and a screeching and a roaring and blood, a world awash in blood. The three strangers had to cling and claw for their very lives or be borne away on that hot scarlet tide. It was easier for Vata and Tife, but Ardh had to struggle with all his might. They did their best to aid him, and somehow the three of them made it alive through the collapse of the tower.

Senseless and covered in gore, it was long before they realized that their eyes were open and they were looking at something. Away in the vast and uneven crater that had once been the field, two small figures were huddled together. Nothing was now recognizable in that lake of shallow blood, but gradually they became aware that they were looking at Corm and the pitiful fragments of a boy like him.

“I’m so happy I found you, Jan.”

“I’m happy too, Corm. I’ve finally seen you smiling...”

Corm didn’t reply to this, for he was also crying.

“I’m tired, Corm.” A mangled arm, useless and lifeless, made futile efforts to touch Corm’s shoulder. “I need to rest. I want to stay with you. Let us no longer be seperated.”

Corm nodded, although he could not in that moment speak, and the others were puzzled to see that he was alone the next time they blinked.

“The eating touch?” Vata said in scarcely more than a whisper.

“Don’t speak of him so,” Ardh growled. “Corm is a good boy.”

“Very well,” Tife snapped, “But now that the tower is gone, is there even anything holding this shambles of a planet together? We are all still doomed, are we not?”

Corm stood up. Vata took a step or two towards him, all doubt banished now. “You are my sister, and he is my brother,” Jatayu had said. “Or maybe it's better to say, *the two of you together* are my sister. For that is how you were born, I think. You were the bigger piece.”

Now that she had found her smaller piece, it was time for them to end this.

“Corm!” She called to him, keeping her voice neutral. “Corm, we are two halves of one person. I dreamed the dreams that should have been yours, so I know you fear me. You never wanted us to meet!”

Ardh was immediately back on his guard. “Is it true boy? If this woman means you harm...”

Corm answered slowly, looking at her. “In the beginning, I was ready to go where Jan had gone. When Ardh came I thought, *it is like I have Jan and Papa back*. And when he told me he wanted me to stay with him forever, I wanted that too.”

Vata frowned. “And now?”

“Ardh is not Papa. He is himself. And I want to stay with him more than ever.” Corm looked down. “But I know that I can’t.”

Ardh took a step forward, his mouth framing angry challenges to his woman who seemed to be threatening his son somehow. Vata started to speak as well, but then both fell silent. Corm had gone rigid and seemed to be listening acutely to something the others could not hear.

“What is it, child?” Ardh did his best to get closer to him, slipping in blood and fat, trying to find even footing.

“The Lord is coming.”

### Chapter 35: The Seed

The rocks and clods of earth hovered higher and through the red mist, a figure approached. The slight form of the young Lord lurched and slid across foaming plains, something of grace and mastery in its poise even in this gory setting. Like the rest of them, he was incarnadined with the remnants of the tower. Yet the filth seemed to stand a cell's width apart from his flesh, not quite touching it. The Intruder absorbed these dregs into itself as they watched and then the Lord was clean once more, the only fully clean looking thing in all that vast plain.

Corm stood motionless and alone, facing him calmly. The others did not know how to take this creature that approached, a golden child so innocent in aspect that it verged upon repellant. Vata had been expecting something fierce, a shapeless hungry mass or perhaps the Great Worm she had heard of. Tife had thought the Lord might be a larger and stronger version of the Shadow that sucked apart men and melted them together. Ardh hadn't thought about it much at all, vaguely picturing something like the Ankou.

Ascaris stopped not more than ten paces away. Even now, thwarted so close to its goal, it was unable to summon anything other than a bland and lifeless expression. Its clouded corpse eyes shifted blindly in Corm's direction.

“You have eaten my dog.”

Corm frowned. “Jan is here with me.”

Ascaris retracted the flesh and muscle from its hands. Carpals and phalanges wriggled and squirmed like insects, detaching themselves from the boys' body. They multiplied their

numbers and fused together loosely, crawling down Ascaris and towards Corm like walking-stick insects. Corm allowed the insects to touch him, standing motionless as the others watched in disbelief. The bone-creatures cautiously crawled up the sides of Corm's legs, probing his palms and fingertips. Then as one they seemed to panic, juddering and retreating. They tunnelled up into Ascaris's feet and hastily made their way back to his hands, visibly crawling beneath the flesh.

Ascaris cracked its knuckles, his hands re-formed. "You have eaten many. You are much larger now than you are on the outside. Perhaps you think I should fear you."

Corm shook his head. "I don't want anyone to be afraid anymore."

"Watch closely then. I will eat this world and all your fear with it."

"You are nothing but a vast hole ringed with a little flesh." Corm reached a hand to Ascaris. "Aren't you lonely?"

Ascaris seemed to decide that further conversation with Corm was fruitless and turned away. A second later the others cried out as a curtain of flesh erupted around Corm. The skin of Ascaris's feet had burrowed through the pockmarked earth and up beneath Corm and was swiftly engulfing him in an avalanche that rivalled the tower itself.

Ardh was running towards Corm before he realized it. Vata and Tife were painfully aware that if the older man touched Ascaris's eating flesh, he would be absorbed instantly. Uttering an oath, Tife charged after him.

Vata stood seemingly frozen, but she was thinking. She was remembering Gauntlet. The others all expected her to bolt forward like the rest, straight ahead down the path marked for her. But what she had done, a lifetime ago, was---

Ascaris looked up. Much of its arm was gone, disappearing into the stained woman's mouth. She had bitten so savagely through muscle and bone that a great chunk was gone from the middle. From within the avalanche of flesh Corm finished what she had started, pulling at the weakened bridge of skin between him and Ascaris's body until the tissue was torn away completely. Moments later he was absorbing it into himself.

Unconcerned, Ascaris stood its ground. The Lord knew they couldn't eat everything. They would burst before they did. It would be the same as it was with the four lesser invaders that had challenged it before.

*Four heralds inside of me, when there are four enemies facing me.* The muscles of Ascaris's face were pulled into a dead smile and he allowed the four messengers, or a parody of them, to erupt from him for one tortured moment of false freedom. Vata, Corm, Ardh and Tife each faced their own death in the form of four yawning dark tunnels, great leeches each wider than a cathedral.

Vata stared unblinking into the vast slick nothingness of her death's jaws and resolved that this should be no different than when she was in Agwerot's belly. But she did not have time to test her strategy. The blackness of the swiftly encroaching void was suddenly awash in searing light, and she was acutely aware of a withering and a melting within her eyes as layers of hidden tissue burned away.

The pain was so intense it was surreal. She did not have time to rebuild her sight before the chargers cloaked within the light were almost gone, blinking out of existence to leave only a green after-image as a sign they had been there at all.

But Vata had seen them. There had been four riders of light to rival the four great throats of darkness called forth by Ascaris. Among these incorporeal knights she thought she had seen Jatayu, or one like him. Of the remaining three riders, one had resembled Agwerot and the other looked very like Ascaris himself. The fourth was a woman she had never seen before, or thought she hadn't.

Vata had never heard Granny's story of the friend who stood godfather, and the knight that had come to his aid. She did not know what she had witnessed. The others, even Corm, had blinked and not seen. It happened that quickly.

The men had blinked, and all they saw that next moment was a shower of sparks. Embers filled the air all around them before settling searing on their flesh and fading from existence. Ascaris once again stood alone and slight in the field. They vaguely heard Vata mumbling what might well be Eastern curses as she painfully reconstructed her smoking eyes.

The tide of battle was shifting.

Corm began to walk towards the boy. Ascaris regarded him stonily, possibly uncertain of his outcome for the first time. Ardh followed Corm warily. He knew better than to try to stop him.

The first sight that greeted Vata's new eyes was Corm putting his hands on the dead child's shoulders. His hands were instantly engulfed, sucked into the spotless flesh of the walking corpse. Corm's face showed no pain, no surprise.

"Fool!" Tife shouted hoarsely. "Do you mean to add to its power?"

Corm shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if I join with him, or he with me. We are both hollow men.”

“You are nothing like that monster!” cried Ardh angrily. “That creature exists merely to swallow all good things!”

Corm looked back at Ardh and smiled. Then he stepped closer to the younger-older boy as his wrists and then his arms began to disappear into Ascaris’s body. Ascaris for its part trembled and rippled, its flesh bubbling with barely restrained triumph. Absorbing Corm would guarantee its victory. Tife couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Did Corm mean to join forces with Ascaris all along?

Ardh’s hand gripped his boarding axe. He still believed in his boy, but was genuinely afraid that he would need to chop Corm’s arms off to pull him away from the monster in time. He hesitated, then raised his weapon.

Vata realized Corm’s intent better than either of them. He had said he couldn’t be with Ardh, so he must plan to end his existence here. Two hollow men....Corm would add his nothingness to that of Ascaris, and together they would close the circle. They would cancel each other out and everyone else could walk away, free. All she had to do was keep the other men from interfering.

Vata seized Ascaris roughly from behind. As Corm looked up at her in surprise, she glared back. “I am the stronger one. You cannot do this without me.”

Corm felt her hand gripping his sleeve and then he was roughly dragged forward. Man and woman, sister and brother, came close enough to kiss, close enough for their chests to touch.

Vata and Corm, separated all of their lives, were rejoined. There was room for nothing else in that embrace. Ascaris's dead eyes opened wide as he was rapidly flattened between them.

The Intruder became an ever-widening hole as the ring of Ascaris's body diminished by the second. When that border was gone there would be nothing to distinguish the vast void of the Intruder from the empty air around it. It began to experience something like panic, and something like ecstasy, as it dissolved into its surroundings.

*A hole strong enough to swallow a star is still nothing. If emptiness covers an infinite space, or no space at all, it is the same emptiness. I am always the same. I am. I am. I am*

*...n o t h i n g*

By now Ascaris was completely hidden from view. Ardh screamed and tried to pull Corm away from Vata. His boy's face was barely visible now, one unblinking blue eye facing the dark ink-rimmed eye next to it. The sides of their mouths became one mouth. The two of them began to form one face and from it they spoke as one.

A voice like Corm's or Vata's told Ardh not to grieve. Their limbs and bodies fused further, erasing the momentary mouth. They became ever smaller and more concentrated, two trees becoming one seed.

"You are taking my boy!!" Ardh sobbed, beating on an unidentifiable spine as the siblings entwined themselves further and further into one mass. Tife watched in horror and revulsion, rooted to the spot. Then it was over. The fifth child of the Intruder was whole.

*Long ago the last child was split in two, flung to opposite parts of the world.* The smaller part landed near Charant; Granny Gold held this half and raised him and told him he was born from a falling star. The larger half landed in the East, and she silently watched the great army march and longed to march with them.

Now they were not Corm and not Vata. They were no longer even human. Ardh sorrowfully fell to his knees beside the inert mass that lay there like a cairn. It was too regular, too symmetrical, to be made of the bodies of two people. Rather than the wet and writhing mass that had been the tower of flesh, this was motionless, calcified. It was like a monstrous veined egg or the summit bones of the human skull. All was silence. Vata and Corm were dead.

Tife turned away from the sight, sick to his heart. But Ardh was overcome, his last mental reserves depleted. He slumped over the smooth mass as if it were his boy's coffin, screaming and sobbing Corm's name. He went on and on until Tife thought he would go mad. The younger man swung around to scream back at Ardh, demanding he pull himself together. But he never got the chance.

Ardh raised his boarding axe once more. His eyes were wild, his teeth gritted with rage. This time, he did not hesitate on the descent. Tife watched in horror as the thwarted father, crazed with grief, brought the axe crashing down upon the boney shell of that strange and unwelcome seed.

The world gave way.

### Chapter 36: The End

Ardh was nearing the clearing. Leaves of brilliant gold waved to him from the hills ahead. The sky burned a deep, cloudless blue, and high up in the thorn, a yellowhammer sang. In the still warm air, he trudged on without hope or purpose. Ardh was expecting to be disappointed.

Every year, he came back to this place around the same time. Long ago now was the day that he had once come to this clearing, intoxicated by the blazing gold of these strange broad leaves, and rolled in them. He had been shocked and more than a little irritated to look up and see a boy beside him....

Ardh hung his head. He knew, really, that he would never see his boy again. He had been there for Corm's death. He didn't know why he came back here each year when the leaves turned yellow. He and Corm had made no plans, had never discussed coming here again someday. There was no reason to think the boy would have remembered or cared about this place at all, if he had lived.

But he had not lived. Only Ardh had opened his eyes after the day the tower fell.

He had screamed, he remembered. His boy was dead, and he had screamed. Someone else was with him, a young man of the islands. He had not seen the man again, although Ardh didn't remember seeing him die, either. Perhaps even now that man (Tife, he remembered now) was walking the earth like him. Did Tife mourn the loss of his companion too?

Ardh had walked far in the days since the Great Worm had been defeated. For the first while, he was a man in a dream-world. The earth was still smoking and bleeding, still in danger

of flying apart. Sometimes Ardh's feet took steps that were far too long for a man to take. Sometimes he seemed to wallow sightlessly through water. He did not know if he ate or not, he slept when he fell down and walked when he awoke. No one was there to comfort him; no one was there at all. Utterly alone and insane with grief, Ardh had blindly stumbled through one long and indeterminate nightmare.

And then, one day, he had come to his senses once more.

He had no idea when the world had changed. It must have happened during his madness. But one day, he became very gradually aware of grass. Ardh had blinked, and *known* that he blinked. He slowly sat up, and realized there was sunlight on the back of his neck, and his clothing was damp from lying against the earth. He sat dumbfounded and motionless for a very long time as he considered the existence of grass, and sun, and soil.

Something stirred at his vision. Automatically Ardh turned to look, mildly startling a rabbit. A rabbit! As his disbelieving eyes adjusted to the sight, his ears pricked up to hear the rustling of leaves, and the call of one bird to another. The animals and insects and birds had returned. Perhaps some of them had been hiding from the Worm and only lately re-emerged, or maybe this was quite simply a miracle. But somehow, the Earth had come back, and Ardh's senses with it.

After that, he had begun to walk once more. But now he was hungry and thirsty, and desired to know where it was he had gotten to. Eventually he came to a stone that was not natural, it had been put there by men. He paused to study the inscription.

**FOI**

**BELOVED FRIEND**

Here, evidently, was a man so loved by his community that they had erected this little marker to remember him. *How sweet it must be to die among friends*, Ardh thought. He continued along his way, eventually coming down to a shore. He inquired among some fisherfolk there and learned he was on the north-most cay of Antilha.

*I must have wandered very far indeed if I have come to the islands*, Ardh thought to himself. But then, for all he knew the islands had come to *him*. If he remembered that terrible time correctly, it was perfectly plausible that parts of the Earth had shifted.

When he tried to ask the fishermen more, they shook their heads. “Aye, bad times. No sense dwelling on it, now we back out.” And that was all he could get out of them, though they were friendly and quite willing to help him otherwise. Ardh did not starve among the island folk.

After making himself useful to them for a few days in return for a comfortable hammock and some fish, Ardh felt strong enough to continue on his way. Now he just had to discover what that way was. His parents were gone, he had learned. Chorazin was gone. He assumed his shipping company was also gone, but perhaps not. These islanders had survived, after all. The thing to do was get to the mainland and find out how folk did there.

Accordingly, Ardh found someone with a skiff who was willing, and set off. It was luckily early summer when he got back to the mainland, so he was able to get himself pretty well re-established before winter set in. He didn’t see any familiar ships, but a spice route of sorts was reviving and he knew the work. People were freer with him now than they had been, having abandoned much of the suspicion and ill-will that marked what had come to be called The Strange Times. That first year back was all about survival. Most days, Ardh didn’t think any further out than tomorrow.

The next time Ardh saw spring, he began to have more leisure to think, and to remember. The old shipping routines re-established, he had more mental freedom as he completed his tasks. He started to purposely look around for old faces, anything recognizable. And he started to try very hard to *remember*. Corm had died. He had screamed. What had happened after that?

Ardh was more even-tempered and patient himself these days after his many ordeals, so he made friends more easily than he had done at any other point in his life. When he got close enough to a person, he would generally try to find out what they had done during The Strange Times. But oftentimes, they had trouble remembering too. All was fear and uncertainty back then. Much of it had been very bad. About the only thing they could all agree on was that they were glad it was over...glad to be "out again."

This was the year Ardh first returned to the clearing of yellow leaves. He had wept bitterly that first time as if he were visiting a grave. After he had recovered somewhat, he thought he had done what he should and that perhaps he would not come by that place again. After all, he had his new life to keep him busy.

He was due at port in another couple of days for his next tour of duty, and he and the captain had been toying with the idea of expanding their cargo. They were thinking of bringing in a new partner, a genial man named Peccary who managed a very successful tea farm with his wife and children. Life was busy and pleasant.

But the next year, Ardh was back at the clearing again. And every year thereafter.

Now, many years later, Ardh's hair was mostly gray. It stood out against his dark skin, making him look distinguished and his dark eyes seem more forceful. His face had remained largely unlined, an irony considering how much he had enjoyed scowling in his younger years.

He had long since given up trying to explain why he always came back, even to himself. His friends (including Peck) affectionately called it Ardh's Pilgrimage.

Ardh crested the hill and entered the clearing.

Someone was sitting there.

For a long while, Ardh stood frozen. It was *her*, the woman Vata! *The one who killed my boy*, he thought in a sudden moment of blind rage, and started towards her. Then he hesitated again. Vata must be dead too, he had seen her die! But here she sat, and not looking a day older than when he had last seen her. Or... He frowned. In fact, this "Vata" looked somehow smaller, younger in the face.

Then he realized what was missing. Her skin lacked Vata's terrible black stains, and the black stripe that should have stretched across her cheeks was absent as well. Was he mistaken? After all, he must surely have the wrong person. Feeling a little more confident and substantially more foolish, Ardh did his best to walk up to the woman in what he hoped was a natural manner.

"Well met, young Miss. A beautiful time of day, is it not?" he asked pleasantly, studying the treeline once more before turning to smile at her.

The woman looked up at him. In a voice heavy with emotion, she said, "It is so good to see you, Ardh."

Ardh stared into her wide gray eyes and then crumpled to his knees. Vaguely aware that he was speaking utter nonsense, he whispered, "Corm?"

### Chapter 37: The Beginning

Ardh and the woman sat, their heads close together, talking. She related Vata's journeys, and Ardh spoke of his late activities, as the dusk approached and blues blazed into purples and reds, and the edges of every leaf and branch were burning gold. The air turned cooler.

The woman looked straight ahead at the blazing sky, the edges of her hair aflame until the light began to fade in intensity. "You must not know what to make of me; I have changed so."

"None of that matters to me, Corm... no, Vata...? How shall I call you?"

She looked up. "When I was born, I was named Caryovata. It is an old name for the trees here. But even though the two halves of me have been brought back together, I am not the same person I was then."

Before Ardh could ask her how she remembered being born, or named, the woman continued, "I think I will shorten it to Cora. That seems easiest."

"Well, Cora. Be you son or daughter, I want you to stay with me. Now and always."

Cora gulped; to Ardh's shock she looked greatly moved. Such an expression had been an impossibility on Corm's face before...or Vata's, for that matter. But she recovered herself, and nodded.

Ardh smiled. "Now, child. You have told me much and more that I didn't know before. But I am still none the wiser about what you have been up to since we all quitted the bloody field!"

“I believe that if I tell you, you will hate me.” Cora was deadly serious, he saw.

But Ardh shook his head firmly. “I shall never hate you. Now you must trust me, and tell me where you have been.”

Cora looked down at her hands, her voice dropping. “I had to give them my gift. One flower for everyone left.” The dusk suddenly seemed to deepen.

Ardh did not understand at first. It was what Corm had told him so long ago. Only...

Cora watched, motionless, as Ardh slowly went pale, then gray as if very ill. In fact, he was feeling very ill indeed. For he knew it now.

*I have never felt controlled, Corm had said. But would I even know it, if I were?*

Corm and Vata had been trying to save Earth. They had stood for Mankind against the Intruder, even though they were no longer human. And they *had* saved the Earth. From the seed of their merged bodies, life had returned to once again to blanket the planet. Animals came back to the fields and forests. Settlements and cities were rebuilding themselves.

And people. The fishermen had spoken to him of life resuming after they "came back out." His friends had said the same. Ardh had not understood, then.

There were no human beings left in the world. Whether they had been devoured by Ascaris or willingly absorbed by Vata or Corm, they had been within the seed. They had crawled forth from the haven of Cora's flesh one by one when all was ready. And now, they were like her and like Ascaris before her.

Humanity had been completely devoured by the Intruder.

Ardh lifted his chin. “Well then, where is my flower?”

Cora did not answer immediately. Finally, she said, “I...I gave it to you long ago.”

Ardh’s eyes widened and then he slowly nodded his head. “The Eudaemon...when you saved my life.”

“That’s right. You must think that the Intruder has won, after all.”

“Well? Has It?” Ardh’s voice was hard.

Cora shook her head. “No. I bound us together so that a new Intruder cannot threaten us. We are so few now, we need a stronger defense. And I swore to myself: I will never take back my flesh from anyone, nor control their thoughts, nor compel them in any way. But if another Intruder comes...”

“...you want all of us to stand as one. Is that it?”

“Yes. We will always be parts of one creature now. A creature greater than any invader.”

“But...*everyone*??? Are you even capable of surviving what you have done?!” To Ardh’s mind, this was several orders of magnitude past Corm burying a village by himself.

Cora frowned. “I am all right, I think. I am more sad over what has been lost.”

“Now don’t start down that road. When the Intruder came, all of us nearly died. Is it not wonderful that we are standing here at all?”

“You’re right.” Cora squeezed something in her pocket.

“What is this you have there? Show me.” Ardh was eager to distract her, not wanting to see his girl sad. He had decided to trust her, as before. And if he was being controlled, he accepted that he would never know it.

Cora opened her hand.

“Huh!” Ardh knitted his brow. “It is a stone. No...! A piece of lead?”

Cora smiled. “It is something I might use one day...when I am ready.”

## EPILOGUE

Tife looked up. “That’s strange. Do you see that Father?”

Mari was puzzled as well, so they swam to the surface. Above, the sky was behaving very strangely. Clouds raced across the firmament much faster than either of them had ever seen a cloud move before. More than once, a cloud would suddenly stop and reverse course, moving more slowly until it stopped altogether and settled in one spot. It was very odd.

“You don’t think They are back already?” Mari asked fearfully.

Tife knitted his brow. “I do not know...hold. I see someone!”

A white shape they had both initially taken for a seabird had evidently spied them and was heading their way. As it approached, they saw it was a person albeit one with wings. She looked rather familiar to Tife, but as she was all one color it took him a while to place her. With a jolt, he realized she reminded him of Vata.

“Hello,” the creature greeted them. The greeting was a little jarring, since it came from within their minds. “We are re-assembling our city. Do you know if your folk have any objections to us settling nearby? We do not wish to trouble you.”

“Well!” Tife said, at a loss for words. “I believe I know you, yet I thought your people were gone.”

“I am an Observer,” the woman confirmed. “My name is Naos. There are less of us left now.”

“I am sure Agive would be happy to aid your people,” Mari piped in. “With your leave, I will go speak to him.”

“Thank you,” Naos replied, understanding Mari easily. She turned to Tife when his father had gone. “How is it with your people after the Great Struggle?”

“It is well. How is it that you survived the fall of the Floating City?”

“I was offered a choice by our mother after the calm.”

“What does that mean?”

Naos’s facial area rippled a moment and then she seemed to find some inspiration.

“Vata.”

“Vata!” Tife shouted. “What of her?!”

“She is not known by that name now.”

“I do not understand. She is alive? She is your mother?”

Naos nodded. “We all went to rest in her flesh when the Intruder destroyed our city. From within, we lended her our strength. Afterwards, she released us.”

Tife could scarcely picture it. “You went bodily into her...and then emerged whole once again?”

“No. We have all given much of ourselves to aid in the fight. Some of us were so much reduced that two or three choose to inhabit one body. And it has diminished our years on this Earth.”

“That must have been terrible.”

Naos shook her head. “We have embraced the change. Instead of living indefinitely, we shall replenish our numbers. We will welcome new Observers, and teach them all that we have learned. In this manner, we feel that we have advanced.”

“You can have children!” Tife exclaimed. Naos nodded. “I am happy for you,” Tife said bitterly. “This ability was all Nadiyo ever wanted.”

Naos was about to reply when she was joined by what Tife first assumed to be another Observer. When it got closer, however, he was surprised to see it was recognizably male, with a more markedly human face. Even the wings were different, somehow more solid and terrestrial. When he spoke, it was with a human voice.

“I see you have made a friend! I am glad.”

Naos agreed. “Isolation led to our destruction. It is unity we should seek now.”

Tife saw a dream stretching before him, a world where those in the air, sea and land were united. Was it possible? Or would they tear each other apart, as the humans always had?

He had no idea yet that there were no more humans.

Mari reappeared and beckoned them down. “Agive bids you welcome.”

Naos turned to her companion. “Do you hear that, Jatayu? Let us go meet him!”

The male nodded and together they joined Mari, retracting their wings and entering the water as easily as one of Agive’s folk. In another moment, Tife could not see them. He smiled and made to follow them, feeling puzzled but hopeful. But then the smile faded from his lips and he lifted his chin to regard the far horizons, his hand straying absently to his chest.

Somewhere, far across the seas, he heard it. His heart was calling him away.