

Old Blood

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Dedicated to the native populations of the world whose land has been stolen, resources plummeted, culture contaminated and ways of life brought to the brink of extinction. Those ways cannot be lost forever, for they are of the roots from which all is grown and revived, and are thereby fated to see the sun again.

Also dedicated to Christina Mary, “thepainupgirl” on *Instagram*, who not only inspired me with her beauty, artistry and love of nature, and encouraged my writing, giving me strength, but who ‘just happened’ to lead me to *Braiding Sweetgrass* at exactly the right time, granting me the power to pair my imagination with the collective wisdom of the natives of this land. Thank you for being my muse during the writing of this book. Inspiration is the force of creation, and nothing inspires like the divine feminine incarnate.

And, finally, to my parents, who’ve long filled the gaps in my wherewithal whilst I searched for, uncovered and remade timeless truths to offer up to the West; to a society whose sickened, hollowed heart circulates little but parasitism through its people; to a ‘free world’ ruled by dominating, disempowering deceptions and Machiavellian manipulations, every bit of it built upon an unsustainable foundation of the advantaged taking as much advantage of the disadvantaged as possible; a world which always smelled funny to me, and upon whose artificial fare I refused to feed, my financial impoverishment inseparable from my spiritual enrichment, my self-emancipation indivisible from my inculcated immunity to the contemporary contagion.

Creation is a Myth

There's no such thing as creation, only reformation.

I owe an additional debt to the writer of *The Truth About Stories* (King), who reminds us that we *become* the stories that we tell ourselves, and *Swann's Way* (Proust), who reminds both readers and writers of the power of observation, description and emotional excavation, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, like his companion Thoreau, has no modern day equal, granting clarifying resonance to the deepest, most obscure expressions of my heart. What doubt I'd entertained as to my faith and purpose in life, Emerson relieved me of. I'd also like to thank the nonfiction writers of *The Once and Future Forest* (the "Save the Redwoods League"), the reading of which inspired the beginning of the outline process for this book, and *Plants of the Pacific Northwest* (Pojar and Mackinnon), which supplied vital information on the botany and ethnobotanical wisdom of the native tribes of the area, as well as Daniel McCoy, Viking scholar and writer of *The Viking Spirit: An Introduction to Norse Mythology and Religion*. I read all of these works whilst writing this book, and all of them, like everything else I've ever read, watched, heard or otherwise experienced, had some impact upon it.

A Posteriori Deus: *We're ALL Creating FROM God*

Physics, artistry, spirituality and philosophy all teach:
Nothing is created or destroyed, but forever remade
through infinite makers inspired by leapfrogging back
and forth across the line between objectivity and
subjectivity; a line so thin, it may not exist at all.

"All art is theft."

Pablo Picasso

*"If you have one person that you're influenced by,
everyone will say that you're the next whoever.
But if you rip off a hundred people, everyone will say:*

You're so original!"

Gary Panter

More Relevant Revelations

“As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power. He has access to the entire mind of the Creator, and is himself the creator in finite.”

“Magic and all that is ascribed to it is a deep presentiment of the powers of science.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

“A very great vision is needed, and the man who has it must follow it as the eagle seeks the deepest blue of the sky.”

“I salute the light within your eyes where the whole universe dwells. For when you are at that center within you and I am at that place within me, we shall be one.”

Crazy Horse

“We must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”

Thomas Berry

Record of Wolf Cub

New World, 333rd Era of Aria

We are the Wolf People. You see, when you consume the heart of an animal, you absorb its life-force. This is how my people became as much wolves as men. And I'm not talking about these scrawny little things the bashful, stealthy natives here call wolves. I'm talking about Arian Grey Wolves; mountain wolves twice the size and ferocity of these New World creatures. And thank the gods that we ate so many real wolf hearts before we left Aria, and took plenty of their hides, and the hides of the stags, with us.

We wouldn't have survived the trip otherwise, for it was so cold that the sea stopped waving. It just stood there, threatening to turn into one huge ice block, encasing us forever. It was the type of cold that burrows all the way down into your bones, making it hard to move. Finding the pass west through the North Gate was hard enough, and that was the easy part. Then the blocks of ice, and the sheets of it lining the desolate coast, stretching on forever, each day more miserable and testing of us than the last.

Finally we found the open ocean again, but only after a third of our crew had perished from horrors which my father spared me, keeping me warm under the extra hides, huddled up with the breeders and the priestesses, free from exertion. We pointed the bows of our longboats south around what Dad called The Point of New Hope, ashamed of our failing strength, seeking warmth at all costs. It took another three months of frosted mountains gradually giving way to rocky outcroppings and scattered forest, and

sightings of massive, magnificent black and white sharks patrolling the waters, and reddish-gold beasts that look like our black bears, but far bigger, walking the coastlines of an endless string of archipelagos. We Arians like to say that we're the spirits made when the wolves came down from the mountain and lapped at the waves of the sea, and I would never doubt this in front of my father, but from what I've seen these natives are as much of the sea as we are.

No sooner had we escaped the endless throngs of ice bobbing in the water and clapped onto the surface of the rocky shores when sightings of slews of small craft became regular. With a speed bettering our own, the natives scatter and hide themselves so easily that it's as though they're riding the waves, and harnessing the wind, even without sails, so swiftly do they pass into the surrounding inlets and conceal themselves behind the countless rock formations set around every island, the stone pillars looking like sentries guarding the islands.

Dad thinks that the natives were trying to catch the whales, and swears that he saw a man riding a shark, but it seems absurd to attempt to kill and haul in a whale with such small crafts, even in such great numbers as they display; and as for riding sharks... it was hard to keep from laughing at him. But as silent as our journey has been, my laughter wouldn't be the only human sound bouncing off of the water. For the closer we skirted the shores of the islands on the way in the more we heard whooping from somewhere hidden on shore, whether calling to us or to one another I can't say, but it didn't sound friendly. But we just kept going, seeking somewhere beyond the chilly fog, finding this place, where the land knows no sun, only rain. At least we've saved ourselves from death by dehydration.

My father, Harold, says that it's beautiful and alive here. Ketchum, his one-armed holy man, his link with the gods

and ancestors, says there's so much life here that it will bring us closer to the gods, once we learn how to absorb it. Dad says that the voyage was far longer than the navigators back home had estimated. He says that if it hadn't been for such a favorable east wind pushing us west almost as soon as we'd left Aria that there's no way we would've survived the passage. He says that he's never seen such favorable winds in all his decades of being at sea; that the gods must have pushed us here, else the land pulled us here, because it wants us here, and honors our destiny. Either way, its auspicious, Ketchum says.

On the way in old Ketchum just sat there, in the middle of the longboat, surrounded by his priestesses, chanting, studying his "Book of Being," his collection of runes etched into wolf vellum that our people have used to communicate with the gods for ages. He made an amulet for me with the rune of protection carved into a piece of sylfr, as all holy men do for their masters and their heirs. He says that proper use of the runic symbols brings the power to cast spells of protection and empowerment, thus teaching us the importance of telling the truth and being accurate with our words, whilst falsely spoken words bring curses. This is why properly reading and writing is called "spelling," and why writing and speaking words falsely is called "cursing."

Ketchum teaches all who will listen that learning the phonetics of the runes instills the importance of being considerate and intentional with our language, for only spoken correctly do the runes confer the power of the gods, opening portals to the everlasting for the speaker, allowing him or her temporary access to divine power; but spoken incorrectly, the speaker instead opens a portal to the underworld, and is cursed by their blackened tongue as a desecrator of divinity. All of our men hold their own identity carved into stones hung from their necks during the ceremony of self-revelation, when they became men, but

only mine is made of the sylfr of the deep mountains. We cannot grant Odin domain over this land without the proper interpretation and pronunciation of the guiding Arian runes.

But, in order to do so, we must first rid the land of these pesky forest people, so that we may reign and freely receive the divine force without their interference; these tree dwellers firing their stone-pointed projectiles from hiding, most of which aren't pointed or strong enough to even puncture our wolf hides, much less imperil the men within them. We just run right at them wearing wolves, with our swords and battle-axes raised straight overhead in falcon position, daring them to attack us. The men think they're afraid of us, but I wonder if they're playing... it's like they're daring one another to get as close as they can before shrieking and scattering into concealing ferns as tall as they are. Dad is disappointed he doesn't get a chance to use his war cry, screaming "cowards!" as they flee.

Grey Wolf, the clan calls my father; half teasing him for aging and having a mane of light blonde hair that's gradually, almost imperceptibly, growing grey, and half out of respect, for the grey wolf is the most prized of all Arian predators. No man may call himself a man until he's killed, skinned, eaten the heart and worn the hide of at least one, the bigger and greyer the better. I'm ashamed to say that if it hadn't been for old Mano, I would've been eaten becoming a man three sun cycles ago. It's our secret. I can't bear the thought of Dad knowing. The shame of it...

They say my father descended from the blood of the first kings, who fed on the hearts of the first wolves, all the way back when they were gigantic beasts that no man today could kill. They had lairs deep within the mountains, lined with the bones of countless animals, including Arian men before they were really men. But the first kings DID kill them, and roast and eat their hearts. And so the power of the wolf passed to them. Then to my father. 'Old Blood,'

Ketchum calls my father. Gourd for the blood of the wolf.

So he decided to follow the legends to this place, a place that I've visited in my dreams. We have forests in Aria, of course, but nothing like this. I think I knew that we'd survive the passage through the northern icescape because I always knew that I was coming here, for I've had a recurring dream for years of walking through a forest where there's no space that isn't sealed by the mist and vines, where every inch drips, where it's like trying to pass through an impenetrable wall of life in which every shade of green imaginable lines the land, and where the only other color that I can see is a crystalline blue shining through the green like the eyes of a strange goddess.

Here, there's such a profusion and variety of living green that nothing is only itself. The plants climb up and grow on top of and between one another, and hang from the trees, and even lay in layers beneath your feet with such abundance that you bounce around as you walk. And when the trees here die and fall countless more plants and trees sprout from their corpses, like some sort of sick death celebration. And all of it absorbs the water. It's like living in one big sponge plant. It makes you realize how nice the high ground is; the drying mountain wind. And you can see it here, when you climb the trees and hills and look east. This one big splendid mountain reaching for the clouds.

But Dad doesn't seem interested in the mountain; in Ketchum's vision of his ruling on high from its peak. He normally agrees with Ketchum, for who is he to question the gods, but it's like Dad is repelled by the thought of the mountain; it's too reminiscent of home; the home that I still don't fully understand why we left. Even though I know that this place holds my destiny, I'm angry that we left Aria, all so that Dad and Ketchum could chase some heroic myth, and maybe to get away from pesky relatives as well. I think

it may have something to do with how Ketchum lost his arm. There's a rumor that he lost control of The Death Grip, a spell banished for its evil, and was then forced to sever his own limb to keep the darkening, deadening flesh from spreading. But there are even more shameful rumors.

Some whisper that there was a feud with cousin Roland, something to do with his beautiful wife, who all the men had fought to claim. This put Dad in a tough place with the other clans. Then there was some sort of communal wager that Dad couldn't find the fabled passage through the mountains that my people call The North Gate, guarding the way to the greenlands. There's this prophecy, written by an ancient seer, that whomever successfully navigated that passage would found the greatest civilization of all time on the other side, spreading their seed in the most fertile soil. So, being in love with himself, he decided it's about him. I think his love of himself has only grown since.

They've developed this new game of heroism, he and the strongest of those who survived the passage. We've come just inland from where the great river here meets the sea, in the valley south of the northern ridges. A few days ago dad and his men were stalking an enormous horned creature, similar to but bigger than our stags back home. It was walking the riverbank when this monstrous creature suddenly sprung from the water and seized it, stealing our dinner. This thing looked like it was what we call The Water Dragon, an ancient beast we'd thought extinct, with a scaly hide and massive clamping jaws. It took hold of our quarry and, violently thrashing about, rolled back into the river.

It's all Dad could talk about that night, raving about it around the fire, waving his arms wildly, pretending to kill it. The clan having already lost a third of its men, he decided that our journey was a cleansing; only the real men worth their mettle, worthy of the Wolf Clan, should build the new

civilization. And the beast, he says, is a part of that. Whomever kills it will become a warlord. So now the men have sporadically returned, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, the last two days, to that same place, that meandering, wide, deep passage in the river near the sea, the vegetation so thick it takes strength just to push through to the water. And there they play "Death or Glory."

I watched for a while. The warrior sits right at the river's edge, wearing no protection, holding only his broadsword. He kneels down, lowers his head and asks the gods to give him glory, demonstrating his courage while paying homage to the great beast that Ketchum has decided is an ancient river god. When it comes for the warrior, he must take up his sword and dispatch it. It isn't manly for me to say what I really think: there must be better things to do.

So I wandered off today, probably farther than I should've, with only Mano keeping watch of me at my father's bidding, but staying back, pretending not to be guarding me, as only a weakling needs guarding, and no man dares to insult the son of Old Blood, even one who carries such an emasculating name as Wolf Cub. I fear that my father is ashamed of me. And I've never really been 'all in' on the Arian manhood thing. I'm not sure if I was running away or searching for something. But I found it; found out what the crystal blue shining through the green in my dreams was.

I'd been moving up this hill. And as dense and overgrown as everything was down by the river, somehow it was even more so there. Plants were hanging so thickly from the trees that it was like the ground of the forest had decided that it had run out of space on the earth, so it had to climb towards the sun. And all of it was dripping. I miss home, but even I must admit that the place felt enchanted, and that it gripped me, like an invisible hand reaching out and touching me, embracing me, letting me know I'm welcome.

And that was even before I saw her, and him. I heard this sound first, like one of our war drums, but softer, slower, steadier... and in this low point in the earth that looked like it had been dug up, and surrounded by large black stones like the ebony that we used for weapons before the age of the fire-breathers brought us the metal weapons that we use today, there was this figure. I thought it might be some sort of earth god, or another creature. It took me quite some time to realize that it was actually a man in disguise. He was covered with all that stuff hanging from the trees, and beating on a drum, with a low fire to one side of him, and a pool of mud on the other. Staying low, easily concealing myself in the plant life that reached out for me, like it wanted to help me hide, I watched the pool move.

Then she came out, all caked in mud. Like the man, I thought for certain that she was a divine being at first. And the man wearing the plants stopped beating his drum and pulled this wet limb from the fire, still green with leaves and all smoky and sweet smelling. I could smell it even from where I hid. As the woman stood in mud, she raised her arms above her sides and looked up into the sky as the forest-covered man spun the smoking limb all around her, making rhythmic, circular patterns while the mud fell gradually from her nude form back into the pool. Her body was perfect; like the pictures of the goddesses from our temples. But she was nothing like the women of Aria.

He wiped the mud from her face with a big handful of the dripping plants that had fallen from the trees. Her skin was a lustrous milky white. Her eyes were like the precious blue sapphires that we use to decorate our temples. And her hair was pitch black... as black as the stones surrounding her. She just stood there while slowly raising and lowering her arms, as if she were a bird, looking like something from a fable. The man picked up his drum and started dancing around her, singing in that strange language of theirs...

these wood people. I was bewitched. I dared not move for fear of scaring them off. I just watched them until they left.

So... now I know. I believe. I didn't come here for my father, for this glorious new civilization, for games of bravery, for honor, to be another king of old. I came here... no... I was BROUGHT here, for her. SHE is the treasure hidden in the green. She is my destiny. I will find her again, and I will make her mine, or I'll die trying, with or without my father. I don't need the old blood anymore. My heart tells me that, together, she and I will make the New Blood.



Zande, son of Makunah, chief of the Mahwah Tribe, the great fishers and hunters born of the spirits of the forest and mountain whom have gifted them this realm, has been in love with Kylene, daughter of medicine man Wahuchu, for as long as he can remember. Where once he wanted only to demonstrate his superiority amongst the youth, his passion for the unparalleled beauty of the Mahwah has consumed him, turning him away from youthful interests.

A natural athlete, tall, strong, leanly muscular and bursting with life, Zande was as active in his adolescence as any of the new generation. Since then he's become Wahuchu's apprentice. And while, normally, his apprentice is chosen based upon certain qualities that only a master medicine man may detect, Zande was essentially forced onto Wahuchu for political reasons. Zande feigned interest in learning the secrets of the forest and mountains, and his princely position is such that his interests must be honored, if not celebrated. And while Wahuchu senses an unsettled spirit dwelling within his new apprentice, and suspects that his interest in the spiritual arts is disingenuous, he's nevertheless been informed by the spirits during his visions that the ambitious boy is central to the future of the people.

So it is that, in theory, Zande is now dedicated to learning the lessons bestowed by the forest spirits; to listening to and translating the wind-borne whispers of the forefathers whom most cannot hear; to gathering, grinding, mixing and administering the medicines the spirits buried in the bark, leaves, flowers, roots and branches; to cultivating awareness of the magic that may be summoned from every river stone. For, even though, as future chief, Zande may take Kylene for his own when he comes of age in a year, he cannot hold her gaze, and has a great need of her approval. That means that she must love him. And that, in turn, means Zande must love what her father loves. For Kylene loves her father above all, and so Zande must

cultivate the magic she and Wahuchu practice together.

Chief Makunah, meanwhile, is preoccupied with two things above all else: the mercurial temperament and obstinate obsessiveness of his only son, and the arrival of the blonde-haired, fair-skinned, long-shipped savages from the north. The Mahwah people have grown strong under his leadership, and it is these two factors, the impulsive son lost in lust, and the brash invaders, whom pose the greatest threat to their happy continuity. Numbers increasing, their people live in a network of villages lining the coastal waterways, densest near to where the northwest corner of the peninsula touches the bay, set just within the protection of the forest; a confluence of woods and waters so rich in food that they know no hunger. While there have been rumors of violence among east bay tribes, Mahwahn discord with neighboring tribes of The Great Bay has been minimal since the Great Counsel a decade ago. Now, the arrival of the unwieldy, hulking fair-skinned tribe threatens to unsettle the people's priceless, fragile peace.

Countless scouts report sightings of the light skins coming in on their longboats, and their encampment near the mouth of the Turquoise River to the south. They've been seen by hundreds, mostly without their knowledge, for the Mahwah blend with the forest as bark blends with trees, such that only one with trained eyes may see them. Word of mouth returns to the chief and elders on a daily basis. It's been said that the aliens wear the hides of wolves, wield impressive weapons and have no fear. So they're being watched, and tested. Play arrows have been fired, and the fleet-footed in the tribe have been tasked with periodically letting-go of the stealth that they're reared to practice and employ, purposefully showing themselves, all in order to measure the reactions of the pretend wolves. Thus far, the 'Wolf Wearers' appear to know nothing but aggression. A band of uncivilized brutes, they seem to be.

But they're *big* brutes. Like one-and-a-half times the size of most Mahwah. And, amusingly, they couldn't be easier to track, lumbering through the evergreen in their white and grey furs as if the land is theirs, like they want to stand out and have no reason to fear anything, and everything and everyone must run from *them*, else or bend to their will. 'Wait until they plod into a brown bear den,' several amongst the people have joked. This arrogant stomping through the forest has, in fact, led several elders to predict that no confrontation will be necessary, for the predators protecting the woods shall surely kill them. In line with this popular assessment, many amongst the people, including two of those same elders, are already pushing for their extermination, claiming that they're like the blight that takes the trees. And yet, Makunah agrees with Wahuchu. Their arrival brings the realization of The Moon Child Prophecy.

For long has it been said that a woman born of the purest spirits will come to the people, known by her great beauty, her crystal-blue eyes and her natural gifts of plant magic. It is said that, together with a man from another world sailing in on massive boats carved with the likeness of strange beasts, she'll give birth to twins, a boy and a girl, who, upon coming of age, will usher them into a future of unparalleled peace and prosperity, carrying them past the great mountain and into the "Inland Treasures." It is said that, through her, the ancient blood of the Mahwah will bind to ancient blood from across the sea to make a new blood of great balancing, symbiotic strength, and which shall seed the continent and bring about an era of great prosperity for the future Mahwah. Yet, this will only come to pass if she survives the assaults of the modern Mahwah, and if *he* summons the strength to pass through the eye of oculus and rise up reborn on the other side. Kylen's conception is now legend, the herald of the age of the moon reflecting off of the water-bearer set in the stars.

Born eighteen years past on the Spring Equinox during a full moon at precisely that time of the year when the Mahwah celebrate the onset of the bounteous, life-giving growing cycle, she was taken from the mountain itself. Found by Wahuchu in a cave halfway up, he was called by the most sonorous of voices, in a dream, to retrieve her there; a voice which Wahuchu himself has been unable to forget, saying that it plants a seed of desire in the heart and loins which no man may overcome. The same voice had whispered to him in his dreams ever since he was a youth, when he himself was an apprentice to the great Xaxu, he who taught him the ways of wise partnership with the Great Mother, and told stories of spirits mingling with men, saying the oldest stories predict the people's fate.

There are three versions of this particular tale. In the oldest, most popular telling, Moon Face has no father, and was, instead, immaculately conceived through a spell cast upon a lost Mahwahn woman by the fairies of the forest, those tiny, flighted beings little bigger than dragonflies whom few claim to have seen. They are said to be the purest of spirits; the most direct manifestations of the Great Mother, revealing themselves only to those with great destinies, called upon for holy missions. Upon her birth, tended to by the fairies, they placed her in a consecrated cave concealed in the mountain for the people to retrieve, demonstrating their love of the people by giving them the gift of the brighter future which her holy birth represents.

The entrance to the cave in which she was found was hidden by the sacred "Fairy Flower," a low-lying plant with sword-shaped leaves, reproducing through a short-lived spring flower that sparkles in the moonlight, offering up perfectly white, tiny, spiked blossoms that only another pure spirit, the White-Dusted Moth, or 'Ice Dancer,' may feed from, and only under the light of the full moon, which makes the Fairy Flowers shine like stars. The Fairy Flower

grows mostly at altitude in the vicinity of ancient spirits whose energy feeds it, else in hidden pockets of the forest under the protection of the fairies themselves, and is said to bestow great power when properly harvested, prepared and consumed. The making of its magic is known only by the master medicine men, for it's said that, were the secret to be known to all, the balance that keeps the world just would be broken. Some say that her mother died during birth due to the stress of making a magical being, others say the fairies took care of her mother, hiding her in the mountain where, feeding upon the Fairy Flower and other magic, and uncovering the protean secrets of the skin walkers, she became the Wild Woman of the Mountain.

The second version of the tale says that Moon Child, called Kylan by her people, is purer even than the fairies, and fell from The Creator in the sky, materialized by Him directly, and was caught by the birds during her fall, and laid upon the mountain to be guarded over by the Wild Woman, whose job it was to watch over her people below, and to find suitable guardians for the rare beings brought to her. These 'purists' contend that the Mahwah are descendants of spirits whom make themselves to resemble men and women so as not to scare the people whom they guide. But Wahuchu himself attests to a different story altogether.

The great medicine man of the Mahwah says that after being called to climb the mountain in a dream, he was told by his then master, Xaxu, that he was being ushered towards a great, albeit painfully-difficult destiny. The spirits had identified him as the protector of the people's future, but required of him a great sacrifice. To keep the people safe he would be made into something unnatural; a creature of darkness shielding the light, made to suffer for the sake of others. The offspring that he and the Wild Woman would bring into the world would equally represent enslavement and salvation, and yet salvation will only be

possible through his own great suffering. For in order to save the light he would have to give himself to the darkness, his form remade to serve goodness through evil.

It was under these foreboding circumstances that Wahuchu reluctantly heeded the call of his dreams. He reports that, upon approaching the mountain eighteen cycles ago, something took hold of him, like he'd been spellbound. He became lightheaded, then euphoric and, as he climbed, his energy expanded such that he was scaling steep cliffs with ease, knowing no weariness while having visions of a beautiful spirit, which he felt to be the very source of his people, binding him in an erotic spell. In ecstatic anticipation, he was engorged throughout his climb. And as his elevation increased, Wahuchu had felt a lust mounting within him that was impossible to ignore.

At the same time his mind seemed to levitate, making it impossible to determine the reality of what he was experiencing. While his memory of the encounter remains hazy, Wahuchu claims that a white light caught his eye about halfway up the mountain, whilst walking the ridge of one of its lesser peaks, calling him towards a pool filled by a tiny waterfall trickling down from the snowmelt above. He says that the stones encasing the pool were covered in a shimmering white moss that he'd never seen before and hasn't seen since, and that, as he approached, the Wild Woman of the Mountain was harvesting it. Nude and with her back to him, she was the most striking woman he'd ever seen. Tingling and trying to avoid the urge to pounce, he barely contained himself whilst, watching, she placed some of the moss atop the coals of a low fire nearby, immediately triggering the release of a loudly hissing steam, which she stood over and began inhaling, most of it spreading over the water and hanging there, as if waiting.

Normally a temperate, level-headed man, even in his youth, Wahuchu was, at that point, already bursting with an

uncontrollable lust that he felt himself losing control to. She turned and smiled at him, her hair blacker than the blackest granite, smooth and shiny, some hovering about her head, some hanging past her waist. Her eyes were the same color as the moss; pure white, and beaming as if from another world, reflecting the radiance of perfect skin that shined like the moonlight. Her breasts were bountiful, and yet looked to float, even as they didn't touch the top of the pool in which she stood. As his caution lost to his lust, he crept to within reach of the perfectly splendid creature when she exhaled a huge cloud of vapor from the Ghost Moss. Upon breathing it in, Wahuchu says that he was overtaken by a type of insanity, and knew only sexuality. He now calls the smoke-strewn spell "the kiss of virility."

They made love all the rest of that day and night. Wahuchu says that he could see and understand the stars and their messages for the first time, many of which shuddered and took flight as they insatiably consumed one another. He says that, though then being a stout young man, she was far stronger, and took command. Any time he attempted to move her into his desired position she struck a corrective blow with a lash made of Red Cedar, and took over again. For hours upon hours this continued, his frenzied sensuality balanced only by her power, and her whipping course corrections. By the next morning, when he awoke somewhere far further down the mountain, in its foothills, in a bed of ferns, he was covered in bruises, gashes and lashes, his body streaked with red. He could see where she'd drug him down from the mountain, over rocks and limbs and pinecones. And yet, despite his pain and bewilderment, he was more satisfied than he'd ever been.

Yet another version of the story is a combination of two others and, in effect, claims that parts of both are true. Its adherents say that Moon Face is actually a descendent of the fabled ancient chief Hechu, savior of the Mahwah

during the Great Floods, whose daughter, after being called to and impregnated through the spell of the fairies, gave birth to the Wild Woman of the Mountain. While this daughter, Primera, would return to her people and lead them as a rare matriarch upon her father's death, she left her child in the care of the fairies as a show of fealty to the Great Mother. It's said that this daughter of Hechu had, herself, been a type of shaman; that she knew of the power of all the plants without being taught, purely by instinct, and that her giving birth to the Wild Woman marks the convergence of human and spirit, whereby the Mahwah were first inspired by the Holy Mother.

Some Mahwah call Primera 'The Mother;' she whose progeny whisper to men in their dreams, pulling them up the mountain so as to spread the holy bloodline. Her offspring come trickling down the mountain, like pure spring water, held in the arms of the few men who've proven themselves worthy of the responsibility of not only procreating and bringing her offspring to the people, but of training them in the ways that proved them worthy of making love to her in the first place. It is this ancient tradition of brewing the blessed that has lifted the people out of their barbarism and placed them on an ascendant path. Wahuchu may have met her, skeptics say, but can't have been the source of the seed of Moon Child, for The Wild Woman surely would've killed any man who tried to pollute her holy womb, she being the bearer of the immaculately conceived through the spirit of The Creator.

She must've, nevertheless, identified Wahuchu as a worthy protector of her holy progeny, and may even have cast the spell resulting in his remembrances, calling him back up the mountain nine months later to retrieve the glorious gift. Whether that gift, and the intruders, are of the prophecy, only The Wild Woman can know, and only time will tell. What *is* known is that, when the wise are called up the

mountain by the great spirits, whether by the Wild Woman or otherwise, the tidings tend to be auspicious. Not long after his retrieval of his daughter, Wahuchu's own mentor, Xaxu, was himself called up the mountain, never to be the same, though not in a way that *everyone* found fortuitous.

Upon returning after being gone a fortnight, he spoke no more words, saying nothing the rest of his many days, just smiling and bowing at everyone and everything, including every form of life which he encountered, animal and plant, child and elder, spending most of his remaining years sitting upon various locations of the shoreline with the sun on his face, paired with a big grin. And even today it's claimed that, upon returning from being on the mountain for half the moon cycle, he never ate another bite of food.

One story says he'd been with the Great Mother herself, for only she could totally free a person from fear and hunger, and make him feel unthreatened by even the brown bear. Many members of the tribe claim to have seen him remain still with his eyes closed as the fierce spirits of protection peacefully passed him on the shoreline, often with cubs in tow. One Mahwahn even claimed that he'd seen a particularly enormous male stick his massive snorting snout right in his face, then lick him and lay down beside him, leisurely stretching out in the sun for a while before then ambling away, and Xaxu didn't move an inch.

And, to the annoyance of some, he no longer saw the need for work of any kind, nor shelter, even, spending many a night starring up into either the stars or the rainclouds, with equal interest. Many made jokes, saying he'd follow a butterfly all day like one of the simplest of children. Yet most begrudged him not his 'detachment,' saying he'd earned his 'ecstatic setting sun years' after decades of honorable healing service and spiritual guiding of the people. Besides, these same commentators would add, some powerful spirit had clearly come over him, or

had entered *into* him, for it was evident that he'd lived that way not by choice, but because he'd been thunderstruck.

When he was found dead it was just that way, sitting with his legs crossed on the bluff looking west towards the setting sun. All in all, the people took both his life upon return and the manner of his death as a good sign; a sign that he'd been shown a future of such unspeakable bliss, with all the mysteries of the universe illuminated for him, such that he had no more fear for his people's prospects, and was troubled by no ignorance, or knowledge of evil outcome, and that his wise pupil's reception of the child could only mean that the Mahwah's own spring lay ahead.

2

Going
Native

The Wolf Clan of Aria always wears wolves. They do this for many reasons. For, even whilst it no longer counts as camouflage outside the native, grey-stone-strewn, snowy steeps of their homeland, the grey wolf hide still preserves warmth and moisture while simultaneously keeping the wearer from being soaked, acts as a natural light armor in skirmishes with enemies or encounters with dangerous animals, presents a fearsome, discouraging appearance to those same threats, giving the clan member a distinct psychological edge, and honors the namesake animal with whom every member of the clan is spiritually coupled.

Twenty two warriors and six breeding women, including two of Ketchum's priestesses, survived the trip through the northern straights, and are now encamped a mile inland from the mouth of a river found five miles down the enormous, mountain-looming, forested peninsula that the Wolf Clan came to a week past. The peninsula itself juts out into the sea at the southernmost edge of what Harold proclaimed The Great Bay of Greenwood, saying "never have I seen such green." Most of the clan is just starting to stir this misty grey morning, the fog bank creeping into camp overnight, beginning to dissipate with the first rays of the warming spring sun. But the gorgeous girl rising from the mud in the dance of drums and smoke is all that Wolf Cub has been able to think about. Those eyes, gleaming with a warmth and passion that made him feel his manhood for the first time, enflaming a consuming desire.

In crafting their tents, small saplings have been cut, and some torn straight from the earth, roots and all, the lower portions enwrapped with hides hauled all the way from Aria. They've been set in a circle around the center of the camp, itself a stone's throw from the river. A massive fire pit set right in the middle of the circle of tents has been formed from the largest stones retrieved by the warriors during their scouting of the riverbank, each hoping to see

the water dragon, slay it, and bring back it's grinning head. Elk venison smokes all day, shot by the crossbow, the elk moving in herds as thick as the brush they bound through whilst fleeing from the men. Around the encampment, the brush has all been sword-hacked and cleared, the useful trees stacked nearby. The Wolf Clan is set to construct a proper wooden hall for everyone, the best of the trees gradually being hacked and hewed for the purpose.

Harold keeps three of the women with him in the largest of the tents. The two priestesses stay with Ketchum, assisting him in his quest to comprehend this foreign land that they've come to conquer, to be the basis for the greatest empire the world will ever know. The three of them walk the woods all day, inspecting the plants, making sense of the geography, interpreting the messages spoken by the spirits through the woods, praying to the gods to share their secrets so that they may best make use of the great green bounty. The sixth Arian woman serves the sanity of the men. Already pregnant by an unknown father, she moves from tent to tent, granting the men their desires, typically settling in the tent of Kraske, Harold's number two.

Of the twenty-eight remaining members of the clan, two have arisen just before first light: Wolf Cub and Mano, his unofficial protector. They've been sneaking off on a daily basis, seeking signs of the sought young woman's egress from where she'd last been seen. And now, finally, after running through the forest in near futility for days, not knowing if the few signs they've seen are from humans or game, indications of pedestrians have become far more pronounced. With unbridled excitement, Cub has drawn near the camp. However, in spite of Mano's protests, and the vow of Wolf Cub that he'll have Mano's balls around his neck if he tells his father of their endeavors, they don't really have a plan. Are they seeking to seize the girl, or loom like cowards from a distance?, Mano wants to know.

Some miles from their own camp, up a series of steep hills separating their river from the lower-lying coastal lands to the north where their tracking has led them, Cub is confident that they've drawn near to his prize. He imagines seizing her and bringing her back to the camp, and consummating his love, making it clear to all that she's *his*, and his alone, else they'll deal with Dad's steel. Even though Harold knows nothing of this obsession, surely he will stand up for his blood upon his son's triumphant return, for he's been waiting for his son to take a worthy mate, even offering him Mercola, the youngest and best looking of the women set to spread the Arian seed in this rich soil.

At the top of the ridge, there's an opening. Here, Cub and Mano can see across the great green expanse. Even obstinately holding onto the idea of Aria's superiority to all other lands, Cub must admit the great beauty of this realm. They gaze out in silent reflection: there's the mouth of the river extending through their encampment into a densely-forested valley to the south, the gently rolling hills and endless coastline extending into The Bay of Greenwood to the north, the great, fog-encased ocean extending toward the infinite horizon to the west and, of course, the great snowy mountain lording above it all to the east, that which Cub was most spell-struck by, *before* seeing his love. The river his people have claimed is fed by the mountain, as if calling them by natural providence to climb towards home.

He'll have it all, he tells himself. He'll take his gorgeous goddess from the squat savages, and parade her amongst the jealous men. Then, when she's with child, he'll take her to the foot of the mountain, and there make his settlement. He won't break ties with his father, but he'll inform him that his heart is set on staking a claim of its own, there, at the base of the mountain stretching into the clouds. For they are mountain men. And though they may feed on the

forest, it is to the *mountains* that they belong. And if he can't claim the mountains of Aria, he'll have *this* mountain.

Mano stands silently beside his young master, worried. He knows he must do the future king's bidding, but to be between the cub and the alpha wolf is *not* the place to be. Scratching at the battle scar he carries across his right breast from defending Harold against the hinterland tribes almost a decade ago now, he's earned Harold's trust. And yet, to possess the trust of both he *and* his son now seems an impossible task. To maintain one is to break the other. And so, as it was for his father, he's likely to be torn in two by the conflicting ambitions of powerful men. Finally, Cub has had his fill of the view, and they drop down the hill, moving quickly and indiscreetly towards the bay below.

Crashing through ferns and leaping over endless rivulets fed by an underground water source, the signs of the natives become clear, obvious to even the untrained. A mile below the ridge they slow to inspect a series of three spigots bursting through a particularly mossy mound of stones, thereafter converging to transform the trickles into streams that plunge over a steep drop in the hillside, creating a miniature set of waterfalls tumbling towards the bay beyond. At this point the signs of the natives become even more pronounced. Thinking he smells smoke, then hears a voice, Cub slows down a bit and, crouching, comes to a halt. But it's too late. *Far* too late. The Mahwah have been tracking them from just outside their own camp, entirely unbeknownst to the heavy-footed foreigners. So when Mano draws his sword to protect Wolf Cub, it seems as if the entire forest comes crashing down upon them.

At first it incites a game amongst the natives; a game reminding Cub of the great black and white sharks he saw in the currents cutting between the endless chains of islands leading here. They looked to be playing with their prey, tossing seals up and out of the water to one another,

teaching their young to kill. The natives, their assaults issuing from perfectly concealed positions like those of the stealthiest predators of the forest, fire out from one side, then another, running by and slapping he and Mano before whooping and disappearing. Cub draws his sword, but soon realizes they're surrounded, so lets it fall down to his side. But Mano knows no such surrender, hacking wildly at every passerby, their numbers climbing into the dozens.

One sword strike comes close to cleaving the head of one of the natives, at which point the game amplifies, becoming more hostile. The natives that follow suit cease their hand-slapping and now strike, but not with lethal intention, using the handles and blunt sides of their weapons; only enough to weaken their targets. Cub plunges his sword into the earth, sending the signal that he's not a threat. But Mano's fury only escalates, his screams as savage as his wayward blows, now losing their accuracy as more runners pass by with blows of their own. Then come the arrows, having the same effect. Painful but not dangerous, unless, perhaps, striking some unprotected spot, like the helmetless head, they shower upon Mano, who stumbles to the ground. Looking at the surrounding forest floor, Cub sees that the arrows are made of blunted stone, not intended to do any serious damage. But rather than the sight comforting him, they have the opposite effect. *They're not even fighting.*

The realization having an immediate, humbling effect, Cub moves towards Mano and tries to curb his anger. Now on one knee, having received countless blows from every angle, Mano looks, at first, to be recoiling, but the pain is nothing to a life of conditioning. *Never surrender. To lose one's sword without forcing one's enemy to remove it from one's death-grip is the same as taking off one's wolf hide, becoming a coward, and outcasting oneself from Aria.* Cub remembers some of his previous contemplations; how this unwavering principle may not always be in the best interest

of a people who burn every bridge before it's built. In this moment, Cub's doubts, borne with shame, seem prudent.

Men clad in tunics indistinguishable from the bark of the trees tumble down those trees from lookout perches set in a loose pattern from the top of the ridge down into the central camp of the people. As dozens descend from the trees, several with obsidian-bladed daggers clenched in their teeth, their faces painted in a brownish-red blending seamlessly with their surroundings, others converge at ground level, wielding various weapons, including bows, daggers, hatchets and spears. They're moving differently now, with composure and clear solemnity of purpose. *The game is over.* All told, there're at least forty of them. They've been stalking them, crouched and creeping, for miles, coordinating their movements with bird sounds that, to foreign ears, were inseparable from those of nature.

While Wolf Cub stays frozen, shocked by the perfect stealth and unified coordination of those whom he thought *he* was tracking, well-knowing he's been bested, Mano refuses to capitulate. Rising back to his feet, he continues to menace them with his sword. Screaming, then howling as the wolf, he's ready to take on the whole lot, refusing to believe that they pose any real threat, to allow his charge to come to harm, or to be dishonored in any other way. So while the natives slowly close the noose, inching in closer and speaking in low voices unintelligible to the Arians, more and more emerging from the forest as if materializing from thin air, Mano loses control and marches straight at one of the men, a warrior wielding a double-sided axe.

The man, with his long black braid hanging over his shoulder, wearing the hide of the coyote over his head, hanging halfway down his back, backs off. Laughing maniacally at the perceived cowardice, Mano moves towards another man, and another. And just as Wolf Cub summons the courage to speak and order his guardian to

stand down, Mano's relative restraint comes to an end, and he charges a cluster of the men. His targets scatter, turn and run, with Mano giving the slowest of them chase. Only when he comes within a body length of his target are the real arrows loosed; true hunting arrows carved from obsidian stone, then sharpened. Five of them strike Mano from all angles, two coming from the trees, three from the back and sides. He's dead before his body hits the ground.

Moments later Wolf Cub is perfectly surrounded, unable to move even a foot in any direction without being stopped by the point of a spear, or an arrow under tension. At this point it seems as if the entire village is surrounding him, the focus of the whole population of natives. As they whisper amongst themselves, Cub assumes with the intent to determine their course of action, they suddenly go silent and, looking to one side, part like the Red Sea. In between approaches the tallest of the natives, a man he hears the others call "Zande." He's near the same age as Cub, and nearly as tall, with a big red streak of paint from the top left of his face down to the lower right, and an eagle's talon hanging from a cord down to the center of his bare chest. Coming in behind him, she suddenly appears: the woman of his visions; his dream girl from the mud-bathing ritual.

By her side stands an older man, slightly hunched, with long grey hair set in two braids hanging down to near his knees. When he looks Cub in the eye, Cub is transfixed, the old man's gaze near as bewitching as the woman's. There's a keenness in the old grey-blue eyes that Cub has never experienced before. It's as if he sees straight through him, and is examining his spirit. Both he and the young woman wear woven backpacks, limbs and leaves protruding from the tops, foliage sticking out the sides here and there. Zande gives Cub a big, confident grin before stepping forward, lodging his double-sided spear in the earth before pulling Cub's broadsword from the ground.

Examining the sword in detail, the others say nothing, waiting with patient respect as their captain, seeming to be in no hurry whatsoever, makes his examinations of the sword, then of Cub himself. He inspects everything, rubbing the talon around his neck the entire time, as if using it to conduct his considerations. He tugs at the large grey wolf pelt wrapped around Cub, laughing lightly, as if unimpressed. Walking over to a large rock, he taps the sword against it, listening intently to the reverberating blade. Then grunting something to one of his companions, in a flash Cub has his wrists bound together behind him.

Moments later he's being pushed downhill through the brush, the natives' footpath blending so well with their surroundings that Cub can barely see it. The natives, meanwhile, keep collecting, as if being naturally exuded by the forest. Glancing back, four of the natives carry Mano's arrow-riddled, blood-dripping corpse. As they move down the hill towards the bay, the activity of the tribe escalates, the visible population increasing every passing second. Some of the natives stand with their backs to trees, looking up to the sky, eyes closed, arms raised, as if communing with gods, or perhaps absorbing something from the trees. A few of these have small fires at their feet and, as he passes by, one man plucks the coarse leaves from the tree under which he stands, drops them in the fire and, as the smoke rises, smelling of the richness of the forest, he passes his hands through it and sweeps it up into his face.

Reaching the edge of the central Mahwah village, the land levels out, and the excitement of the forest inhabitants reaches a fever pitch. Everyone knows he's here, and comes to make their own assessment, as if he's the most fascinating show to be seen. All the people know of the big wolf men who've come and screamed at their people and taken control of the southern river system without the least permission from the Mahwah, and with no homage paid to

the Great Mother. But to hear of such things pales in comparison to witnessing the barbarians for one's self. It's so fascinating that even the children come to study him. As if dared by their companions, some are brazen enough to reach out to touch him, Zande slapping their hands away.

The last of the cool morning mist hangs in the air as they enter the center of the camp, the gently waving water of The Bay of Greenwood just visible through the trees in the distance. Six older natives, four men and two women, sit closest to the fire, set in a pit dug into the earth. All of them are more ornately dressed than the others, displaying various animal remains. Dozens of villagers surround them, some sitting, some standing, all eagerly watching the captured invader, passing their eyes back and forth between him and the elders at the fire's edge, clearly awaiting some sort of ensuing discussion on what to do with the captive. Cub, of course, understands none of it, and is caught somewhere between terror and his fascination with the young woman. As with Zande, most appear to treat her and the older man deferentially, nodding slightly and moving aside to let them pass.

He can't take his eyes off of her. When she glances over, he looks away, then slowly back. Locking eyes with her for the first time, her spell over him solidifies. His knees come near to buckling from the combination of her magic and the fear and adrenaline of being on the brink of certain death. He knows that if these people are anything like the tribes of the Arian hinterlands with whom his own people war, captives aren't kept for long; just long enough to gather any useful intelligence, then turned to toys. He'll be made into practice for the warriors, given an inferior weapon and forced to fight for his life until one of them cuts him down.

The elders nearest to the fire, who seem very much to be in the same position as Arian Councilmen, speak quietly amongst themselves. They pass a pipe between them as

they chat, which emits a peculiar, strong scent that reminds Cub of the skunk. Five of the six seem to accede to the most strikingly-attired of them, the man who must be their leader, Cub decides. He's wrapped in the hide of the great golden-red bear that Cub and the men had seen fishing the shores of the endless chain of islands they'd encountered since not long after turning south towards the sun some months ago, in the dead of winter. The head of the great beast, teeth intact, is set upon the man's head. Around his shoulders is a necklace comprised of a strung collection of feathers of various shape, size and color.

Puffing the pipe and scowling, he holds his gaze on Cub. The way he looks at him puts Cub on edge. Similar to the gaze of the grey-haired man accompanying his love interest, whom he hears a few of the others call "Kylen," the eyes of this man are cutting, as though delivering incisive blows. Assuming he's following the use of designations correctly, Cub learns of the leader to be "Makunah." Whether they consider him a warlord, or a priest, or a king, or some other form of leader, Cub can only imagine. What's clear, however, is that these people do things *much* differently than his people. It all feels far more communal, far less hierarchical, and far more quiet and patient, like comparing the winding river to a waterfall. The villagers move about at ease, and speak their minds to one another and the leadership, the youth jumping in and out and around the center of the village, their play hardly halting, even with proximity to the council. Such informality would be considered dishonorable amongst the Arians.

Glancing about, Cub sees natives everywhere. A series of six canoes pass down below, gracefully skimming the shoreline, three natives piloting each of the long, handsome crafts. Animal skin hangs from an assortment of racks, worked here and there by older women and a few young girls, as if the girls are being trained. Arrows, bows

and crude weapons appear to be the work of one corner of village central, where a couple of older men examine every new arrow for its length, weight and the precision of the cuts into which feathers shall be placed, working with such assiduousness that you'd think they were crafting a temple.

Fish, which look to be salted, hang from lines between trees on the periphery of the village, near to where the forest gives way to the water. Carcasses of assorted other animals, many of them unrecognizable to Cub, are spaced evenly nearby, as are the shells of various sea animals pulled from the bay. As he watches, a man approaches one carcass and, with his obsidian-bladed axe, cuts and removes one of the ribs of the creature before taking a small tool from his leather belt and beginning to whittle at it. From witnessing this Cub quickly makes the connection between the partially-disarticulated remains of myriad creatures and the weapon and tool crafting of the people.

In the shade of a copse of trees nearer to the water, a large earthen container is being filled by a string of natives coming in from all directions, unloading the contents of their backpacks, which look to have been woven together by switches; by withes and full, flexible saplings. The same spectacle takes place all over the village, resources of every conceivable kind being collected in various places according to purpose, including the fish, shellfish, stones for toolmaking, plants deposited into a container set atop a fire, and wood for tools, weapons and construction materials, each resource reflecting a particular specialty, handed over for a particular purpose, often to one or more men or women who look to be experts in a particular craft, children watching, learning. The sheer variety and quantity and continual delivery of the bounty of the forest and sea is almost as surprising to Cub as the fact that every bit of it is being laid right out in the open, rather than housed and protected. Not only is there no sense of scarcity or

security, but there's no sign of individual belonging whatsoever. What is to keep someone from taking things?

In the particular earthen container that first caught his eye the villagers, most of them clad in tunics constructed from the fibrous bark of a certain reddish-colored tree, poor a combination of leaves and young shoots from gathered plants, plus an assortment of bulbs, tubers and roots, as if preparing a massive salad for the community. Women sort through and mix the bowl, one adding what appears to be a sticky reddish residue from a partially buried box, Cub guessing that it's a preserve of berries added to the salad for flavor. The mixer, an older woman with a big beaming smile set into her weathered face, occasionally pulls from a series of smaller containers surrounding her, adding strips of dried seafood, seaweed, venison and other game, as well as some streams of an oil of some kind. A younger woman seated next to her drops a trove of small silvery, steaming fish into a pressing contraption, then presses it from both sides to produce an oil trickling into the pourer. From their easy interaction Cub imagines it to be a grandmother teaching culinary arts to her granddaughter.

A collection of different stacks of types, lengths and widths of wood is central to the entirety of activity. One type of wood in particular appears to be favored, the same that the villagers wear. Its wood is being stripped, some villagers scraping something from the inner bark, some stripping away the outer bark, a separate stack made for each.

Between the salad station and the wood piles a series of firepits are set. But these aren't like the fires that he's now standing beside, set over the ground, used for warmth, but are dug deep into the ground. Into the largest pit a group of men toss a collection of stones of near equal size and shape, about the size of a fist, its flames starting to wane. As the fire fades and its smoke increases, four men place large, straight limbs down into the pit at equal distances

from each other before another set of men comes in behind them holding large woven containers full of food, dumping what appears to be tubers and fish and shellfish, an amalgamation of seafood and vegetables, into the pit, another group coming in directly after they step away and filling the remainder of the pit with multiple layers of fresh grass, ferns and green branches. After a few minutes the four limbs are removed and water is poured into the resultant holes, then the whole thing is covered by one piece of ruddy-colored bark, and then topped with soil.

Next to this firepit another of equal size has been uncovered, the scent of freshly baked food on the air, both men and women reaching into the steaming hole with their bare hands, plucking food and throwing it on mats beside them to cool. And beside this pit is yet another pair of pits, slightly smaller, in which women pull up large steaming bundles. Cub watches as a couple of them unwrap single pieces of wood that had been wrapped in ferns and, with the help of others, all with hides wrapped around their hands, they pull and twist and curl the wood, made flexible from the steam, into the desired shape. Beside them is a demonstration of the fruit of their labors: gorgeous polished boxes gleaming in reddish brown reflection of the morning sun, each looking to have been formed from a single piece of wood, one young woman dipping a limb into a container of pitch before running it down the seams of each box.

Here and there on the periphery of the village, new dwellings are under construction. They appear much as the Arians' current dwellings, set to serve the Wolf Clan until a lodge can be built. Yet the manner in which the native dwellings are being constructed is *far* different, the attention to detail, and especially the interlocked coordination of the natives, transfixing Cub. Everyone involved seems seamlessly tied to one another, as if conducting one of the concerts to the gods the Arians hold

during their ceremonies, their energies as synchronized as the fingers of Arian musicians plucking their instruments.

The natives work in teams, each tied to the other. Large limbs are held in place where they rest against the earth by a pair of builders while another pair gradually bend them, preparing to overlap them with and bind them to the limbs bent by another team. The binds themselves look to be cords composed of three lengths of a tough-looking, flexible root pulled from earthen tubs by other teams. In another stack appear an odd-looking type of grass as tall as the natives themselves, topped with elongated sponges and, in another, portions of the red-colored, fibrous bark.

Using the grass and bark, one team circles the perimeter of every construct, weaving the thick strands of grass between the limbs, binding everything together then coating the outside with pitch for adherence. Visually tracing the trail of delivery of the grass to its source a ways off, Cub sees a group of women slice off their bottoms, squeezing out a slimy-looking substance into pots before setting the construction-ready grass on the pile. A couple of the women spread the slimy substance onto the faces and extremities of gathering natives, mostly younger men, who then set off on one task or another. Finally, another team builds the water-proof exterior of each home from pieces of the red fibrous bark, also coated with pitch, inserting the sections into the weaves from the bottom up, such that each piece of bark partially overlaps the others. All dwelling openings face the east. Cub assumes this is done to prevent the prevalent western wind from entering.

Near one cluster of homes under construction, Cub can clearly see the line from forest to dwelling. The source of the limbs, the trees themselves, have been sled into the village from the forest beyond, and are being carefully examined, hacked and hewed for every conceivable purpose. Various stacks of limbs surround the main stump

of the tree, each stack seen to by at least one native, each of whom is conducting his own examination of every piece with the same steely focus as those concerted in the construction of every dwelling, helping with the sorting, some setting to carving certain pieces for a particular purpose. The stump itself is the focus of a half-dozen of them, half cutting into its center while the others shape the exterior, using finer blades with the precision of sculptors. Closer to the shoreline, a set of their final, polished products are set, awaiting their first forays into the bay.

Imagining the whole scene from a wide view, he conceives of it as being akin to one big concert of industry set between land and sea, people and life, filling every sense of separation between it all. Everything has its place, its particular use and purpose, as if it was made for that purpose, to be worked into the lives of these people. He can't help but admire the sense of community, of an honor unlike that which he's accustomed to, one bound less to glory, one more holistically serving the collective of life. And all of it is being passed to the youth before his eyes. He can almost see into the past through the process, like one endless timeline making the present and future from the past, such that the past isn't really the past, but lives in the accumulated wisdom of the here and now, the youth absorbing the methods and aptitude of every living thing.

Less than the perfect efficiency with which the natives work in interconnected, specializing teams, it's the spirit, *the feeling of it all*, that overcomes him as he watches. He has the distinct impression that the natives know their materials as well as they know one another; as if the trees are as much their kin as their brethren around them, making their homes like living beings themselves, the life of the flora surrounding and protecting the life of every inhabitant. They all belong, all have their place, all knowing nothing of separation. There's no conquering here, only partnership.

Nothing is wasted. After being painstakingly considered, every piece of everything is utilized. Even the scraps that are too small to be worked are placed in tinder piles. And the Mahwah sing as they work, that work being like one big group prayer, evoking the same sentiments Cub has while watching Arians worship. The shrine of these people, it seems, is the same as their workspace, is the same as their natural setting, is the same as their classroom, their youth moving amongst the workers, absorbing not just the mechanics, but the harmony passing between everyone, and every piece of material, preparing to become the next cord interwoven with the life of the tribe. Like their homes, *everything*, every act, every life, is tied together, from forest, to people, to home, to the gleaming bay beyond.

Forcing himself from his spell, Cub looks over at Makunah, now seeing that the leaders' focus has changed. Though he can still see the wheels turning in the wizened man's head, his eyes now wash across the scene with the effortlessness of the tide, from Cub, to Zande, to Kylen, to the long-grey-haired, grey-eyed man, whom continues to bore holes into Cub with his eyes, as if discerning a deep mystery. Makunah's focus on Zande, the seeming captain of the guardians of the village, brings about a different expression altogether; one that reminds Cub of how his own father looks at him, with a mix of worry and confusion. Makunah says something to Zande, who turns and says something to the men carrying Mano's body, who respond by carrying the body over and laying it at their leaders' feet.

Makunah places his hand atop the deceased warriors' head, then closes his eyes. Everyone falls silent. When he opens them, he smiles, very slightly, then says something to Zande, who immediately becomes agitated, throwing his arms about in animated fashion. Makunah just watches him, waiting for him to regain his composure, then makes the briefest of remarks, followed by further show by Zande.

Finally, the head of the tribe mutters but one word, more forcefully this time, silencing Zande, who grunts before pulling a dagger from his waist and approaching Cub, a look of sheer murderous intent plastered to his face.

'This is it,' Cub thinks, 'the end of the line.' He glances over at Kylene, thinking 'it was worth it to see her face again.'

But rather than slicing him from sternum to stem as feared, Zande cuts the cord behind Cub's back, freeing his arms.

'Ah, they're going to make me fight to the death,' he thinks.

Makunah says something to Zande again, who shakes his head in frustration before sulking over to the leader.

'He must be chief, and Zande must be his son. Only the relationship between father and son could look like this.'

Zande bends down and grabs Makunah under his shoulder, helping him to his feet, before, with a nod of his head, giving an order to the men who'd carried Mano's body into camp. The men walk over and pick up the corpse and, as Makunah slowly makes his way around the large fire with the help of his son and captain, the men approach Cub and slowly lower the body to the ground in front of him. As Makunah approaches, drawing to within a few feet of his captor, Cub is shocked when Makunah suddenly genuflects, lowering himself to the ground in front of him.

'Why would the captor kowtow to the captured?,' Cub wonders, his heart racing. 'How am I to respond?'

As his heart regains its natural rhythm, a different feeling enters into it, his shock and fear suddenly supplanted by something much different; something near the opposite, in fact; something akin to love or reverence. Acting without thinking, Cub lowers himself to the ground beside the chief and holds out his hand. Makunah, his eyes locked with Cub the entire time, takes the young man's hand with his

own calloused, leathery palm, and Cub raises him up to his feet. As he does so the natives around him react with what Cub considers to be astonishment. Looking over his shoulder, the chief addresses the long-grey-haired man, who, nodding in assent to some command, leaves the beautiful, smiling young woman's side and approaches.

The man begins to circle Cub, reaching out and touching him softly now and again. He draws near and takes a bit of Cub's long, flowing, golden hair into his hand, examines it, rubs it between his fingers, smells it, then lets it go and keeps circling. He looks to the east, as if peering into the rising sun, then back at Cub, then to the north, making his way around the four primary points on the compass, treating each with the utmost consideration and patience, as if absorbing something irreplaceable from the mere act of honoring each direction. As he does this, Cub performs his own examination, noticing the assortment of trinkets and talismans hung from the man's neck, and sewn into his tunic, likely made from the hide of a stag, or a similar native creature. Stones, roots, bits of wood, all of them carved or otherwise worked into something of meaning, cling to the man one way or another, many tied to his tunic. And he smells odd; a mix of sweet scents, malodor and mystery, as if carrying the olfactory signature of half of the forest on and within his person, seeping through his pores.

As the odd ritual is being performed, Kylan slowly approaches, as if sharing in the divination, attempting the same discernment, with the same genuine, somber earnestness. Her face waves through all of the emotions, without the least bit of understanding from Cub as to *why* the emotions are being felt. What's triggering them? Only when she briefly makes eye contact with him do her eyes emit a sparkle that Cub can understand. To his other side, Zande paces uneasily, a grimace upon his face. Looking back at the long-haired man, who speaks a few words to

him, Zande pulls something from a satchel tied to his waist and hands it to him. Walking over to the fire, the long-haired man lights what looks like a clump of dried roots. As soon as they begin to burn the man blows out the flame, then purposefully begins to waft the smoke around his own face before circling Cub once more, holding the smoldering roots inches from Cub, who is soon immersed in a cloud of its foul-smelling smoke, the scent and taste of it so strong that it makes his eyes water. He tries to hold it back, but is unable, and starts to cough. Most laugh at this. Only Zande remains irritated, making a remark and shaking his head, appearing as though all his energy is being spent on self-restraint, white-knuckle-gripping his two-sided hatchet, looking as though he may spring and strike at any moment.

After one more long look into Cub's eyes by both the chief and this man, who Cub decides must play the same role as Ketchum to his own people, and whom Kylen softly calls "Wahuchu," she, Wahuchu, Makunah and the five other elders who'd been seated next to him all move in a line towards one of the larger tents nearest to the fire. As the flap of the tent is closed, Zande mutters something, and two of his compatriots approach Cub and force him to his knees beside his own dead compatriot. Zande then begins pacing once more, looking like one of the black bears the Arians cage for the purpose of fight betting, just waiting for the cage to open so that he can obliterate his opponent.

Minutes pass. As Zande remains locked in on his prey, his pride and fury palpable, Cub looks around the village. While everyone is aware of him, they show no signs of fear, with most moving about easily, no longer even keeping their kids from darting about, who now move in for a closer look. It's as if the previous inspection, and Cub's reaction to the chief, has proven that he's not a threat; like they were trying to decide if he was a gopher snake or a rattlesnake, and have formally landed on the former.

More canoes pass by in the distance, a little farther out this time, and begin to swarm around a certain point a ways offshore, as though they're zeroing in on something. While the man at the head of each canoe focuses on paddling, the others look to play various other roles, throwing things into the water, staring intently down into the depths. The sense of suspense builds until three of the men, all in different canoes, let out identical yells and strike with spears, two of the three raising them up with huge fish impaled to the ends. These two then ferociously slam the fish down inside the canoes, delivering deathly head blows to their catches. A song is then sung in unison from all of the crafts, and from a few onlookers watching from shore.

When finally the elders, and the dazzling young woman, emerge from the tent of the chief, Zande turns and moves towards them. After a brief discussion, Zande lowers his head. Seconds later he approaches Cub and says something to the others standing by. One of them walks away, towards the other end of the village. As the elders sit back down where they'd previously been, one of them throwing more wood onto the ebbing blaze, silence falls. Within it, Cub feels as though his destiny is descending. His feelings are heightened. He knows, somewhere deep within, that this is the most important moment in his life.

Soon the man who'd left the scene returns with a woven stretcher. Four of Zande's lieutenants then lift Mano's body off the dirt and place it on the stretcher. Zande then moves aggressively towards Cub, and looks like he's about to rip him apart before Makunah utters one word, stopping him in his tracks. Zande lowers his head, takes a deep breath, then looks at Cub. As if utilizing every ounce of strength he has, Zande extends a hand to Cub, who takes it, and is helped off the ground. Zande then grabs him by the arm, surely with far less force than he'd prefer, and begins to

pull him back in the direction from which they'd come when they first entered the village. 'They're letting me go?'

A few seconds later, having made it no more than twenty feet, a powerful impulse comes over the young Arian prince, and he stops. Zande attempts to continue to pull him along, but Cub refuses to budge. He then raises his hand as if to strike Cub, but does nothing. Cub looks over his shoulder, finds Kylan's gorgeous gaze and, pulling himself from Zande's grip, moves back over to where he'd been forced to his knees by the fire, opposite the elders. As Zande angrily approaches, Makunah raises his hand, palm out, again stopping him in his tracks. Lowering himself back to the earth, Cub looks at the elders, sitting there cross-legged, a sense of serenity surrounding them. Looking from face to face, he smiles, then crosses his legs.

3

The Eve
of Eostre

Dusk descends upon what the Arians have come to call 'Camp Water Dragon,' named after the river king the men have become obsessed with killing. By the reading of the stars and sun, Ketchum has proclaimed it to be the Eve of Eostre, the celebration of the fertility goddess of the east whose annual arrival means that the sun shall spend ever longer days granting the people warmth, and bringing bountiful growth, before reaching its height in the sky. Reaching its zenith, it's then forced to recharge for ever longer periods beneath the earth, where the lava that sometimes spews from the Mountain of Fire, usually contained within the Earth excepting those times when the rage of the gods grants it freedom to burn the land, gradually reheats Her until She has the strength to climb once more towards the pinnacle of the sky. And as the last rays of sun fall beneath the horizon, another sign is shown.

The moon is full, and shines red. It is the time of the Blood Moon. It is a sign, says Ketchum, that the God of War has empowered the Wolf Clan to shed the blood of anyone who stands in the way of their destiny here. When the Blood Moon comes, a great battle beckons. That the Blood Moon comes on the Eve of Eostre can only mean that the two events are linked; that the prophesized, bounteous future promised to the Wolf Clan can only come by the sword, cleansing the land by honorable bloodshed. And though Wolf Cub's absence is cause for concern, not even the worry of their chief, Harold, can quiet the men's excitement, nor be permitted to halt the annual festivities. Besides, Mano is with him, and so too are the gods, and it is well known that the cub of Harold is stubborn, curious, and resentful of his father's control, and that his being gone all day must be a demonstration of independence.

The fire set in the center of the camp, normally used for the practicalities of warmth and cooking, has, this eve, been built into a bonfire. Feasting has finished, the stripped

carcasses of a stag and wild boar set aside for tomorrow's luring of the river god out from his hidden kingdom beneath the surface of the river. Kraske strikes the ceremonial drum, six feet across, made of the skin of the wolf wrapped tightly around an inner echo chamber framed by the wolf's bones. The ceremony is underway. All twenty-six remaining members of the Wolf Clan, twenty men and six women, are spaced evenly around the fire. Ketchum circles the blaze, divining the will of the gods in its flames.

He dips his wand, a polished sapling cut from the Heraldng Tree, one of the shrines of divine sight, into the bowl of blood collected from the feasted-upon animals, who were bled dry before being consumed. The bowl itself was cut from the skull of Longstead The Brave, the fallen warlord of the Marish People from Southern Aria, the last man to challenge Harold in open combat. Ketchum cries:

"Come to us, God of War! Take Eostre for your own! Bind Her to your will so that new life may spring from Her blood, spreading across this land, from ocean to mountain, until the river is streaked in scarlet, and Old Blood is renewed!"

With this he lashes with the wand at Harold, splattering him with blood, once, twice, three times, until it drips down his body. At the same time the women approach, led by Ketchum's two priestesses, and begin spreading the blood all over Harold's body. As they do so the men begin a deep, guttural chant, calling to their forefathers in their hearts and minds while passing their blades through the blaze, quickly at first, then slowly, until the steel absorbs the heat, whereupon they remove the blades from the fire and press them to their bare breasts. Only the unworthy make any sound of pain as the heat melds with their heart.

The women, too, must bear their pain without a sound. And tonight, in the great celebration of duality, of the rising of the sun that must surely fall to make the seasons, pain and

pleasure combine. Long have the remaining warriors of the Wolf Clan awaited this night, the welcoming of the rising sun celebrated with blood, sex, and the selection of the next queen. Six women are to belong to twenty men, but only after being tested, and properly assigned by the gods. Knowing what's coming, having bared witness to the ceremony while being raised and taught to serve the men, and thereby serve the gods whom the men fight to honor and receive favor from, the half dozen women act as though willing, and yet can't entirely hide their shameful fear. A few glance furtively at the celebratory bed, knowing that it will be the last thing that one of them will ever see.

Earlier that evening, as the sun fell towards the sea, Ketchum made his divinations that the day had come for Eostre to arise once more, and so had ordered Mercola, his favorite priestess, to prepare the sacramental bed. And so the Sun Stone, a large white stone marbled with streaks of gold, and carved with the image of the sun, one of the seven holy sacrament stones, was placed beside Harold's tent by Ketchum, to serve as the head of the bed. The bed itself was composed of the plants offering the first flowers of Spring, gathered by Mercola and the others from the riverbank and the surrounding hillsides, the flowers heralding Eostre's arrival. Thus is the Bed of Flowers made, where all the clan watches their leader plant the princely seed in its proper womb. Yet this celebration is special, for the consummation is also to be a coronation.

While the decision is made by Ketchum and Harold alone, all the men knew that Harold, Old Blood, must select a queen with whom to rule the new world. None in the clan speak of this, for rumoring is dishonorable, and doubly so for granting any credence to the rumor that Harold and company have come to this land *not* to create the great civilization foretold by legend, the ostensible reason all are speaking of, but to escape a secret shame related to his

failure to claim his cousin Roland's wife, the much sought Katarina of the Western Isles. It is slander to even *think* such a thing. To speak it would cost the speaker his or her tongue, and likely much worse were it one of the women.

While the Eve of Eostre contest is normally led for the top two priestesses of the clan for the privilege of playing the head priestess for the coming year, with only two priestesses able to be pried away from the Arian homeland for this iteration, and with a need for a queen as part of the claiming and seeding of this new world, this time the *loser* of the contest would become the annual head priestess, with the stakes for the winner raised to queen of the New Land, to be bequeathed the stag-horned crown. Harold has sworn that, whomever it is to be between the two of them, her regal ensemble shall soon include a prized symbol of the New World: a necklace made of the teeth of the water dragon, with Harold to make armor from its hide.

Mercola and Shanda, the two priestesses, prepare for the fight. Both are beautiful, as are all six of the women, for only the strongest, bravest and most beautiful were carved off the Wolf Clan of Aria to make this glorious journey. To become a breeder of the royal blood and its fiercest protectors, those closest to and most loyal to Harold and Ketchum, one must, of course, be beautiful. And one must, of course, be tested. So it is that many women of Aria secretly say to their daughters that beauty is as much a curse as it is a blessing. It is the sharpest of all double-edged swords. Yes, it inspires men to fight, and so grants the possessor of beauty certain power, yet, without a rare level of protection, those men fight to have their way with the possessor, if not to claim her for life. And though it is considered the honor and duty of women to serve this purpose in Arian society, the cleverest and bravest of the women whispers of its injustice, saying it makes all Arian Women no better than the women captured from enemy

clans, tossed to the men like the last of the carcass thrown to the dogs at the end of a feast, then turned into slaves.

Walking slowly around the fire to make their selections, Mercola and Shanda select fire sticks from the flames, to serve as their own weapons. With a bit less careful consideration they then each reach into the fire and select another stick, which they proceed to hand to one of the other four women, one priestess claiming one other woman at a time. This is how the teams are selected for the celebratory fight. Separating the contenders into two sides symbolizes the duality central to the celebration, with one side considered to represent the Earth, where the sun is drawn into at night, and whose power is at its height when the sun is at its lowest, and the other to represent the Sky, which Eostre explores to its heights in the Summer, when the fertility goddess is in full bloom. It is all a part of the training of the priestesses, who are taken from their family by the holy man when he recognizes the signs.

Two of the women whisper between themselves that this selection of the priestesses is nothing but the lechery lent to whomever the king makes his holy man, and that much of Ketchum's teachings has nothing to do with the gods, and everything to do with his satisfying his lust. Ceremony, ritual, the teachings of interpreting the signs of the sun, moon and stars, the concoction of medicines and poisons; these are the ways of the teachings. Yet, while the women dare not speak of it, most resent the fact that to become a priestess is to become little but a glorified sex slave, forced to pay the highest of prices for learning the ways of the gods: to become a plaything for the beastly one-armed Ketchum. Tonight, at least, only one, the losing priestess, will be forced to continue that practice. The other, the victor, shall become queen, with her teammates made into her attendants, thereafter considering her second in charge, behind Harold. Those on the side of the losing

priestess, however, possess a very different fate, soon to be determined, with the biggest loser of all set to lose her life when the secret politics of the women are revealed.

Moving from the bonfire to a space cleared for the purpose, nearer to the river's edge, the men form a large circle around the two sides, and begin to slam their shields with their swords. Several of them slobber like ravenous beasts stalking the longest-awaited of meals. Kraske jokes that the pulsating red ends of the combatants' sticks are like the hot, overeager cocks of the men. As is the custom, the two sides scream at one another and make animal sounds, a few hissing, a few slamming their sticks, still holding the heat of the fire, onto the ground, releasing little embers. It's a game of mental intimidation, what the Arians call "calling out the cowards," the wolf hides and horned helmets borne in battle serving as the epitome of the practice. "The enemy is defeated in heart, mind and spirit *before* he's defeated in battle," the age-old maxim goes.

Kraske raises the drumming mallet high overhead, awaiting the nod from Harold, at which point he slams it down, and the women, with one final, piercing scream, launch themselves at one another. And though raised to depend upon one another up until this pivotal moment, the stakes of the battle are such that all sense of the familial is forgotten, and they attack with a viciousness reserved only for one's sworn enemies. Shanda, carrying a constant resentful reminder of Mercola's favoritism from their masters, catching eyes from Harold and always being called upon by Ketchum for the simplest of tasks, strikes with a fury, thrusting her glowing red stick into the face of Malia, whom Mercola pushed forward to face the brunt of the first strike. An accurate thrust, the end of Shanda's stick strikes Malia near to her left eye, and she falls first, writhing in agony. Falling to the ground is how the fighter is

eliminated. This emboldens Shanda's side, who fall upon the remaining two women with confidence, smelling blood.

Heavy limbs slash and crash off of one another, every blocked blow echoing into the night. And while Mercola comports herself well thereafter, dropping two of Shanda's cohorts with well-aimed strikes to the side of the head and the abdomen, respectively, Shanda herself now has the time and space to seal her victory. With Mercola occupied, Shanda hits Aleida, Mercola's remaining fighter, so hard in the side of the leg that it fractures, then, in one fluid motion, turns and slams Mercola on the crown of her head the moment she turns to face her, rendering a concussion that almost knocks the priestess unconscious. Screaming with gleeful bloodlust, Shanda raises her limb high overhead in triumph, its soft glow slowly subsiding along with the fervor of the fight. As Mercola slowly regains her wits, she knows she and her teammates have paid the price for her fear of Shanda. She's always known that Shanda resented her position, and would fight with jealous fury for any possible chance to turn the tide in her favor.

By Arian law, and to Ketchum's secret delight, the queen has been crowned. Shanda now belongs to Harold for life, and Mercola, the prettiest of them, to Ketchum for the year; until the next Eve of Eostre, at least. As the realization washes over her, seeping into her mind through her splitting headache, Mercola glances at the river, thinking of the river god. "Perhaps offering myself as its meal would be a better fate than belonging to that twisted creature," she thinks, glancing at Ketchum only long enough to revile the little grin glued to his face. But the horror isn't over for the women, or is it the honor? For Shanda must now choose an offering to the gods amongst the losers. Both Malia and Aleida can barely stand, both doing their best to hide the agony from almost losing an eye, and perhaps never seeing right again, in Malia's case, and, in Aleida's

case, from a broken leg that she nevertheless must stand upon for the pronouncement of the new queen's decision.

Pacing back and forth in front of them for a few seconds, Shanda attempts to present the appearance of contemplation, for the offering is meant to be made of the one whom the gods will be most pleased to bring into their holy bedchamber upon her "passing over the mountains." But Shanda has already made her decision. She made it while sailing to this place, weeks ago. As all wonder as to what the basis of her decision may actually be, most of the men secretly doubting that it'll have anything to do with her desire to please the gods, and far more likely to do with some sort of spite, or jealousy, or some other petty discord between them, Shanda points her limb at hobbled Aleida. Mercola felt it coming, and almost faints at the decision.

There can now be only the most vile enmity held between she, the head priestess, and Shanda, the new queen, for instead of any sisterhood she has chosen the cruelest revenge for being considered number two. For Shanda has long known that Aleida is Mercola's favorite, the two having grown up together, reared between two long-connected families back in Aria. Now Mercola must end her life on the order of her new queen. Heart sinking, she again looks at the river, wishing for death. Half-blinded Malia, meanwhile, belongs to the men for the night, who eye their prize knowingly, whilst those of the winning party are entirely at the disposal of the new queen, and the men may only touch them when given permission by the king and queen, as is customary in the sealing of loyalty within the clan.

As Ketchum hands her the ceremonial knife, Mercola looks at her dear, hobbled friend, who fights back sobs. She considers using the blade to end her own life with a quick cut of her throat instead, forcing the men to lose two of their prized possessions, and forcing one of the other women to do the ugly deed, but fears what she'll face in

the afterlife for committing such an offense against the gods. And so, concealing her disgust, she leads beautiful, sixteen-year-old Aleida over to the foot of the Bed of Flowers, strips her bare, stands behind her, forces her to her knees, gets down on her own knees behind her, and speaks the words that she's been commanded to say:

"With this willing life, may Eostre linger long upon the sky."

With that she slits Aleida's throat, the blood spurting onto the bed, dying the blossoms in scarlet red, the symbols of life and fertility intermixing the sacred spell of Spring. Mercola holds her departing friend in position, who gurgles her last breaths, until her blood has seeped fully into the bed. Then, as the men grab the body and throw it into the fire, Mercola disrobes, then turns to her new queen, disrobes her as well, and leads her over to the blood-sodden Bed of Flowers. There she lays Shanda on her back, spreads the queen's legs, and looks invitingly to her lord, who approaches, all chanting the coronation song.

All the remaining men and women of the Wolf Clan watch as Harold consummates the marriage. Upon completion, Harold takes his new queen by the hand and leads her towards his tent. Before entering, Shanda looks at one of her two new attendants, then over at Kraske, thinking of the kindness he's shown her over the years. She whispers to the attendant, who obediently walks over to Kraske and begins to circle and touch him, making the movements of offering herself to him. He'll have her to himself tonight.

Upon entering their tent, the king and queen now out of sight, Ketchum takes Mercola by the hand and pulls her back to his tent. The moment the priestess disappears with the holy seer, her annual mate, the men fall upon Malia, savagely tearing away her wolf pelt and britches whilst fighting amongst one another as to whom shall have her first while. Only Kiska, the remaining victor, stands

untouched, just outside of the royal tent. Knowing that not even the lust of the men shall prevail over the law, and that they shall not seize her, she begins contemplating all that she's done in the past that the new queen may have found issue with, knowing that any displeasure shall result in her death, or being tossed to the warriors as a pacifying prize.



All Mahwah know where the brown bears dwell. Not only is this knowledge essential for survival, as the brown bear is the most ferocious of all the Great Mother's offspring, so that the people possess a map of their territories in their heads, but one must also know where spirits dwell if one is to effectively summon and employ them. And only the fury of the brown bear can match Zande's own fury. Climbing through the steep, thickly-wooded hill separating the southern river valley from the rivers feeding the bay, his four compatriots carrying Mano on the stretcher close behind him, Zande dwells on the spirit of the brown bear.

His blood boils, as he finds himself unable to release the infuriating sense of his father embarrassing and disrespecting him in front of everyone an hour before. The elders, his teacher, Moon Face and even his own men were shown just how little he looms in the heart of his father, who allowed that despicable outsider to remain in the camp after first ordering that he be returned along with the body of his foolish compatriot, he who charged like the brown bear, but with the reckless lack of awareness that could only belong to the moronic, to the wholly ignorant, or to the rabid, sick or blind looking for a way to end its life.

And now he, the head of the people's protection, has been ordered to promote that protection through the return of the body of the slain, in the hopes that permitting his body to be honored and returned to the earth by his people might appease those people, the overgrown invaders. He's even to return the weapons, and that absurd horned helmet they wear on their heads, itself weighing more than everything the Mahwah warrior wears combined. The Mahwah aren't thieves, after all. And, as his father says, "peace is worth a forest of spears, and an entire obsidian quarry's worth of battle-axes;" and "in avoidable violence lies the greatest shame." All glory to Chief Makunah, the peacemaker

extraordinaire, the breaker of old boundaries, the builder of many bridges, all being built upon his own father's legacy.

Zande has stood by as a sometimes proud, sometimes spurned and emasculated witness to his father's ascension ever since the Great Council Fire that he remembers from his youth, when his father, having recently taken over from his own heralded father, Shaktah, found his way into the center of the circle of all the people of the bay, summoning the spirits and their words to bring the people together, ending hostilities that had raged for countless generations. In a spirit of generosity and communal support, peace pervaded the whole of The Great Bay, growing out from his father to embrace all of the tribes, tied together as one.

Chief Makunah was the one with the wisdom to identify the opportunity of turning what had been a sometimes cutthroat form of competition between the tribes of the bay, and often between members of the same tribe, into a competition of *generosity*, with gatherings based upon determining the prestige of its patrons relative *not* to what they could destroy, or take from others, but to the value of the gifts that they bestowed. Listening to the lessons imparted by Wahuchu on the interconnectedness of the forest, the Mahwah medicine man having uncovered the fact that the roots of many plants and trees, and especially the mushrooms, are interwoven in a manner benefitting them all, and that those areas of the greatest interweave appear to be the strongest and the best able to withstand disruptions by animals, storms and other inclemency, Makunah is credited with the neologism and conceptual invention of *moai*, or 'strength through solidarity,' as much a social strategy as a spiritual truth, spread throughout the bay through the expression: "One being, many bodies."

And through the intertribal discourse held in this competitive spirit of generosity arose the connected coinage of the concept of *ikigai*, or 'natural purpose,' with

every individual encouraged to listen to the Great Mother's discourse with the Creator resounding within every heart related to how they may best serve the whole, giving rise to the popular expression: "The whole serves the individual, the individual serves and is made whole by the whole, revealing the illusion of individuality." To this day it is said that the 'eternal seeds of peace' were broadcast across the bay by all the tribes following the Great Council Fire, in a series of celebrations held at various points along the coast and heads of the rivers of the bay, during which, amongst other legends, it is said that a ritualistic drumbeat arose from the spirit of unification that was so sublime that it immediately struck any enmity or jealousy or sense of separation from anyone who heard it, the drum beaters themselves thereafter forever repeating that rhythm in their hearts. Now, it's all legacy. And Zande's sick of it, for his father has gone too far this time, letting the invaders stay.

The ways of his father and the elders are certainly wise when employed for the benefit of the people of the wood and waters, but not for these... *people*. These pretend wolves. These lumbering brutes who make more noise than a wailing newborn when moving through the forest, such that even a two-year-old Mahwahn could outwit them in the woods. The Great Councilman, the head of the tribal confederacy, his beloved father has forgotten who he serves. Not the lily-white encroachers; not this blight.

Reaching the crest of the hill, Zande white-knuckles his axe, the memory of the morning lingering like a sickness. In his mind's eye he sees that pretend warrior, that ugly interloper, and the way he peered disrespectfully at his woman across the fire. And when she looked back there was something in her eyes that he's never seen when she looks at him. *It's too much to bear*. It's too much to ask him to help make peace with these people who enter their sacred domain without permission, and set themselves

upon it like a plague. He's never known such a shameful sense of entitlement. *Her eyes. The flash in her eyes.*

As his men reach the crest and stand beside him, they take heavy breaths, but recover quickly. They're Mahwah, after all. Assuming they're to continue towards the camp of the invaders, as all of them know where it is, the one loud, continually smoking spot in the whole forest, they begin to drop down the other side of the crest when Zande stops them, raising his hand as his father had half an hour before, the mental image of it still stinging his heart.

"No. We will not do what my father orders us to do. You four know me, and you shall be my elders when the time comes. I know you all love my father, but soon you will pledge yourselves to me, and I won't stand by and pretend to make peace with a people incapable of it just on his say so. We cannot make peace with *everyone*. One cannot invite the rattlesnake into the nest. We must be hawks."

The men say nothing, as they know better. In the past, as they grew up together, they would sometimes challenge him. But his reputation as the best cannot be contested, else *he* becomes like the rattlesnake, and one who has lost the end of his tail, liable to strike without warning. No, they are resigned to his service, hoping to avoid doom.

Zande thinks of the stories, and how he might enlist them to embolden the men to carry out his aims. For to be able to cite the right stories is the best way to enlist the support of the people. All the people know this; that one's actions must be traceable to the Original Instructions; to the tales that've survived since the fires first chased the eagle across the sky, charring everything but his white head. The fire still chases the eagle across the sky, who now knows not to fly so high, else be consumed by the sun instead.

Holding the talon hanging from his neck, he finds his story:

“You all know about the hawk, the eel and the rattlesnake. We say that the hawk was once like most any other bird, and that the snakes found them easy prey, and ate their eggs and hatchlings with such relish that all the birds were facing extinction. That’s when the Mother Spirit bequeathed some of the birds with talons and tearing beaks, so that they could defend themselves, and would survive the gluttony of the first snakes. And so the first hawks were born, and they did, indeed, fight back, so much so that the slaughtered snakes became terrified of every shadow, fearing death from above, and fled into the waters of the river and the Great Bay, becoming eels.”

“But after many generations of this some of the eels began to miss their home, the holes of the earth, the rich green grass to slither through and sleep in, and the plump rodents and bird eggs to eat, and decided to strike a deal with the hawk. In exchange for passage back onto the land, they had to give warning whenever they came near a winged creature, so that they wouldn’t be able to attack without others knowing that they were there, to at least give them a chance to defend themselves. So those that agreed and returned grew rattles on their tails, as a peace treaty with the birds. But after them came the eagles...”

“Now, we’re of course made to believe that this story is about balance; about equal and opposite effects, and how this reflects the demand of Mother Spirit that all her offspring find an accord with one another. But that has never been the lesson that I learned from it. You know what I think? I think it’s about finishing the job. I think the Original Instructions suggest that when something’s time has come, its time has come, and it takes strength to finish what was started. I think that if the hawks had finished the job, none of us would have to fear the rattlesnake, and none of the hawks’ relatives would have to fear them, and

that everything the rattlesnake eats would be eaten by things that don't attack us, so there'd still be a balance."

"Sometimes we can't wait for Mother Spirit. That's what I think. Sometimes we must enlist the support of the stronger spirit. Sometimes the warrior must take the place of peacekeeper, else the defenseless shall be destroyed."

With this, instead of moving downhill towards the outsider camp, Zande turns and follows the ridgeline east, further inland. Within ten minutes his four companions know his direction: *towards the closest brown bear den*, the exact area that all the people are told to stay away from, it featuring first in many cautionary tales told to the children. Yes, there are quests that incorporate sightings of the bears and translations of the meaning of such encounters, and any naturally fallen brown bear leaves the greatest prize of all to the people, its parts made into riches. But to enter this area without honorable intent isn't just stupid and dangerous, it's disgraceful, inviting severe punishment.

"Take him off the stretcher, remove his clothes and weapons, slit him from stem to sternum, and wait for me."

So it is that Zande leaves his four companions, deciding that it's time to make good use of a couple of his teacher Wahuchu's stories; about how the bravest seers must embrace the sleeping bear in order to best know its spirit, and how the female brown bear became the teacher of all animal mothers on the art of defending ones loved ones. All know never to come anywhere near a brown bear cub. But if he can pull this off, he'll demonstrate his courage to himself and his men while also scaring away the invaders or, better yet, while watching them be torn limb from limb.

From a pouch bound to his belt, Zande pulls an assortment of items, including a strip of venison jerky, a large wad of dried, sticky sweetberry, and the root of the Resting Plant, recently gathered with Wahuchu and Moon Face. It has

just recently begun to flower in sweetly fragrant bouquets of pink and white little flowers in special places in the forest familiar to all medicine men. Just before it flowered, they pulled from the margins of those flowers found only in great groups, so as to protect the plant. All parts of the plant are used medicinally, in order to compel a sick or injured person to rest and regain their strength. But the root is particularly potent, reserved for urgent situations.

In a move that Wahuchu and Moon Face would gasp at, he wraps the wad of venison and the gummy berry around his entire supply of the root, an amount about the size of his fist. With this in one hand and his double-sided axe in the other, he creeps through the underbrush like only the Mahwah know how, at one with the ferns, inseparable from the breeze gently brushing them aside in order to pass through. Down into the ravine he drops, a small stream exuded from somewhere deep in the earth, spilling through the steep sides into a small pool below, a miniature pond surrounded by all the marsh plants he shames himself at not being able to recite, thinking of his teachers' ongoing admonishment that, if his desire to be a medicine man be true, he must open himself up to the full forest, and let go of his need for credit. At the far end of the pool sits the cave, the scent of the bear and her cubs strong enough to put his hairs on end, even from an arrow-shot away.

Clambering down into the bottom of the declination, he creeps near to the end of the pool opposite the cave and chucks the wad at the entrance before fleetly-yet-silently retreating, moving back up the ravine to observe from a safe distance. Waiting patiently, his heart racing, beating so hard he's becoming lightheaded, he removes a length of cord from his pouch and readies himself to pounce.

First, she must take the bait, then he'll turn her into a weapon, forcing the aliens to kill their sacred-most spirit, thereby turning the whole tribe against them. They'll kill the

bear, or the bear will kill them. Either way works for him. Either way, the people will be forced to see the invaders for what they are. His anger at the council fire will have been vindicated. And it will be just, for the foreigners have provoked the furious defense mechanisms in him that his people call ‘the spirit of the brown bear,’ and so it should be a brown bear mother who shows them that they’ve entered a protected place, and they’re not welcome here.

It takes a while, but finally, she appears, lumbering out of the cave just in front of her single cub, making sure it’s safe for the cub to exit. Awesome to behold, Zande can hear her breath even from a good distance, her exhales as powerful as the wind that sweeps in with the thunder, bottled up in this massive spirit of savage, loving defense. Moving circuitously at first, her enormous snout detecting every inch of her surroundings, scouring the air for signs of how and why to move, it doesn’t take her long to zero in on Zande’s deceitful offering. After a brief sniff, she swallows it whole. She’s taken the bait. It *should* be enough.

It takes about twenty minutes of the burly beast walking the edge of her pool with her cub in tow, making her daily rounds, before the effect is evident. She sways from side to side, almost imperceptibly at first, then overtly. Making her way to the mouth of the cave, she lays down, and within minutes is fast asleep. Her cub circles her, crying out in concern. For, even at such an early, emergent stage in its development, it knows that it’s not time for sleep. Zande watches with a laser focus. Creeping out from behind his covering boulder up the ravine, he moves low to the ground, uncertain if the great spirit is unconscious.

As he exits the dense mat of ferns surrounding the pool and reaches the water’s edge, the cub becomes agitated. Crying out, its mother remains asleep. As he draws closer, the cub begins to panic, but refuses to leave its mother behind, nudging her, intent on rousing her to resume her

natural protective position. Zande's creep turning into a low-lying sprint, he comes upon the cub in a matter of seconds. Tackling it, he turns it over and ties its legs together before picking it up and climbing quickly out.

Ten minutes later he's reached his companions, waiting patiently at the edge of the domain that all the Mahwah respect. Well, *almost* all. Dismayed at seeing the baby of their great spirit of protection in such a state, they almost flee, but their resignation to their subservience is just enough to stay their retreat, for they know that disobeying Zande is the same as making themselves his targets.

Dropping the cub momentarily, who screams in fear, he quickly assesses Mano's corpse for the suitability of the coming task, determining that yet another move must be made. Already slit from bottom to top through his midsection, as he'd bit his men to do, Zande reaches into the body cavity of the proud fallen warrior with one hand, takin up his sharpest blade with the other. Making a series of cuts, he removes his liver and hurls it back in the direction in which he came, towards the den. He then pulls Mano's large intestine out of his body cavity before cutting a seam down the center of the stretcher, then flipping his body back over onto it. Lifting the wailing cub up by the cord binding its four legs, to the distress of his companions, he addresses Mantu, the fleetest of them:

"Run back to the village. Recruit some of the watchers as you go. And get Wahuchu to come with you, assuming he's in camp. He should be. He's secretly as concerned with these invaders as I am. Tell them that we were attacked when we dropped off the body. And tell them that we heard the brown bear roar in outrage. Bring them back to the ridge overlooking the aliens as quickly as you can."

Mantu sprints northwest, towards their central village. Holding the cub, still hanging from the cord, with one hand,

Zande grabs one end of the two poles over which the woven stretcher has been laid with other and, as they lift up the Arian corpse, a severed length of intestine is forced through the seam cut down its center, dangling like a putrid length of rope. Addressing the remaining men, he says:

“Onward. Let this foul trespasser spill onto the earth.”

As they fly downhill in a southwesterly direction, Mano does just as Zande bids, his blood and intestines dropping through the seam in the stretcher as they bounce their way through the forest, making a trail of blood, guts, excrement and other bodily fluids leading to the camp. It takes almost an hour to reach it, all of them waning from the dread and exertion. But the idea of being chased by the great bear gives the men the fear they need to overcome their tiring muscles, and they persevere. On the outskirts they freeze, seeing one of the wolf-wearers standing just above the camp, digging a hole so deep they can just see the top of his head. His three compatriots locked in place, looking to him for leadership, he drops the cub, who cries out in irritation. The digger hears this and, without hesitation, drops his implement, unsheathes his sword, climbs out of the hole and heads straight for them, ready for a fight.

The Arian just notices three of the natives, the cub and his slain brother lying face-down on the stretcher before the battle is upon him. Zande comes from the side, his knife in one hand, his double-sided axe in the other, their black blades, sharpened daily, glinting in the afternoon sun. Moving low, he runs right at him, thinking “this is my forest.” He’s upon the hulk of a man before he even knows he’s there, to whom it seems he sprung from the earth. Lodging his knife through his hide, between his ribs, the Arian barely winces, swinging wildly in response to his attacker, who briefly backs off, staying low to the ground, his weapons flared out on both sides, circling and readying for the right moment to end it. One side of the wolf hide

becoming crimson, the wounded Arian lets out a battle cry so loud and animalistic that it would level most men, and yet he underestimates the fortitude of his native foe.

Mid-cry, the proud warrior of the white mountains closes the distance and swings again, this time with more determined precision. Dodging, the five-foot blade glances off of Zande's left hand, that which holds his knife, before lodging into the earth. Though losing one of his weapons, the lodged blade of his enemy is all the room that Zande needs. A second later his battle-axe is buried direct center in the front of his victims' skull, who falls to the floor dead. His three compatriots coming to his attention, one of whom means to treat his wound directly, Zande shoves him away and moves towards the hole the man had been digging, his men following behind him, more on edge than ever.

Below they can see the camp. Their enemies know that they're there. A bustle of activity, the Arians start coming in from every direction, from both up and downriver. Trained in war from the time they can walk, they habitually form around their leader, whose fierce gaze is like a weapon in and of itself, made to weaken enemy knees. Zande locks eyes with Harold, still a hundred yards away, beneath their position. His face filled with fury, the Arians' displeasure pleases the native prince, who smiles and raises his arms up to his sides while spinning around in circles, crying out:

"I am Zande, and this is my forest! You don't belong here, and Great Mother won't let you stay! Flee back into the sea, else find yourself in the stomach of the brown bear!"

The words of the leanly muscular native man unintelligible, the leader of the Arians cries out much as his fallen man had moments before, yet with more force. Summoning the Grey Wolf, Old Blood removes his sword and bursts up the hill, his men flanking him and mirroring his movement, their phalanx climbing quickly. And as confident as Zande is, he

thinks of his people, and how they must share in this expelling of the foreign contagion so that he may have their blessing in things to come. Now is not the time for the battle. Besides, an outraged mother should soon arrive, and, with Great Mother's blessing, will do the work herself.

Grabbing the dead Arian by the arms, Zande quickly drags the man into the pit before dropping the wailing cub on top of him, the bear cub wailing with more agitation than ever.

"Back off, and to the trees. Hide yourselves and watch."

With that the four Mahwah disappear into the forest, scattering in all directions before finding the proper trees to climb. Making use of the trees, including knowing how to climb and hide within them to the point of invisibility, is a Mahwah specialty. The Mahwah say that the trees are of their family, the gift-makers, the watchers of the forest, the bodies of their vessels. They become familiar with those gifts early on. For the Mahwah, knowing which trees to climb is like knowing what constitutes a warriors' honor for their foes, who now disperse around the pitfall their fallen comrade had been digging, swords drawn, praying to the gods for a chance to strike down one of the forest-dwelling savages. Only Harold stands over the hole, wondering at the meaning of the bound baby bear whining loudly within.

And while the sword-wielding outsiders are committed to their search, and even stand beside the very trees their targets hide amongst, hanging hidden far above them, they see nothing, seldom even looking up. Zande himself chose a tree closest to the pitfall over which the enemy leader looms, calling out commands in that dreadful foreign tongue. Their words are as ugly, as loud and obnoxious, as they are. They think they're tough, yet what is a warrior who hasn't the eyes to see, and who strikes in blindness?

"I should just put him out of his misery here and now," Zande thinks, the wind rustling through the branches

around him, the sound as comforting as it is concealing, telling him in his prideful heart that only he and his men belong here, for only they actually know where they are.

“I could throw words at him right now, and he wouldn’t hear me, the oaf. These wolf-wearers. Cut out the eyes, and cut off the snout of the wolf, and this is what would remain.”

As he ponders the absurdity of his foes, he strokes the talon hanging from his neck with one hand, and with the index finger of his other hand taps the point of one of his arrows, imagining it penetrating the heart of the blind wolf. That’s when he hears it. Distant at first, then louder. There’s crashing coming. *Finally*. He smiles and looks towards the sound. Right on line with their previous track the forest throws itself violently apart, giving way to her.

“Yes. Here she comes. These poor, pathetic fools...”

As if knowing that its mother has arrived to save it, the cub increases the urgency and vociferousness of its cry. Harold turns towards and peers down at the cub, tempted to drop down into the partly-dug pit and silence it, for it interferes with the search of these craven native creatures who flee at the first sign of trouble, having no sense of their dishonor in doing so. But then he, too, hears her coming. Turning around as the mother bear passes directly below Zande’s hidden perch, she charges Old Blood, who impresses Zande with his courage, standing his ground.

“Good Mother, what a stoutly foolish creature this is...”

With his sword raised high overhead, Old Blood strikes down with all his might as the infuriated beast overcomes him. The blow just misses her head, its blade lodging into her shoulder as she bulldozes him, bucking the two-hundred-plus-pound man to the side like a man swatting away a fly. Harold’s sword now burrowed into the beast, yet not in a vital-enough position to even slow her, she

swipes viciously at his face then bites at his throat, going for the kill. He raises his arm just in time to make it what she clamps down on instead of his throat, saving his own life. Seconds later his men converge on his position, their fight with the blood-curdling beast a demonstration of their years of training; training that's as much about facing and denying mortal fear as it is about the physical art of war.

Four men bearing spears come from all corners, striking in near perfect unison, each practiced thrust finding its mark. Bleeding badly but still on its feet, the great spirit of the forest lunges at one of the men, forcing him backwards and, with a swipe of his paw, putting him on his backside as he uses the spear to keep the beast from finishing him off, inserting it into her bite. Flying in from behind her, Kraske, a bit bigger and more decoratively dressed than the others, hacks down and to the side with his sword, finding the back of the beasts' neck. She moans in agony, the force of her bite upon the spear so great that it snaps in half just as the man hacks again, hitting the exact same spot, then she's quiet. One, two more times come the savage blows from Harold's captain, decapitating her.

Working with an efficiency that can only come with practice, Harold's men quickly bind his savagely broken arm, which he may lose. The razor-sharp claws of the bear have cleaved flesh from one side of his face to the other, top to bottom. His left eye is torn, and is unlikely to ever see again. Zande can't help but have more respect for these men after having witnessed such bravery and loyalty, and for the briefest of moments he wonders if he's made a mistake. *Maybe, just maybe*, they deserve to be here. But when the man who'd severed the great spirits' head hauls it up and lodges it on the end of his spear, he decides otherwise. He knows that to make a trophy of the Great Mother's sacred sister can only invite their doom.

Ten minutes later the Arians have gathered themselves, and their badly wounded leader, and have moved back down the hill into the camp. There, Ketchum is busy preparing a natural coagulant and painkiller, knowing full well what's called for by the sounds of the ordeal, before even being given an order by Kraske, who must speak on behalf of his lord, who drifts in and out of consciousness. The cub still wails from the pit, though with less urgency, as if it knows that it's doomed, for its protector has fallen.

As the Arians recenter themselves around their concern for the vessel of their sacred bloodline, and forget about the previous mission of searching the woods, the woods upon the crest of the overlooking hill come alive. Zande and his men climb down from their aerial hideouts as many of their people emerge from the brush to join them, including Wahuchu, whose eyes fall directly upon his half-hearted apprentice, and likely future mate of his beloved daughter.

"Did you see?," Zande offers to the man who never speaks unless he knows it's something worth saying. "Did you see what they did to her, to the sister of our Great Mother? They attacked us for peacefully returning their man, and this provoked the bear's protective spirit, and they killed her, and they put her head upon their spear, and took it."

"Why is there a cub trapped in that pit?"

Zande hesitates for a moment, his teacher reading his face. Those who live to listen, to absorb, part the fog obscuring the truth with the patience of their unhurried observations; the more that it tries to hide, the more it makes itself known through the effort to remain hidden.

"It was with the mother. It stumbled in when she attacked."

"Let us leave these people, my pupil. They've had enough for today. We have much to discuss with the others."

Wahuchu commands respect without the slightest attempt to do so. Even without traditional rankings placing the medicine man on high, his mere presence provokes everyone, including Zande, to demonstrate deference. So all oblige, the three men closest to Zande receiving the same wordless, penetrating inspection by Wahuchu as had Mantu when he unconvincingly told the precipitating tale, he who bore Zande's message to an incredulous council.

As the people of the forest move back towards the bay beyond, the spirits tell Wahuchu to give the upset ground one last look, even as he fears what he may find. Scanning with the patience of the few who've taught themselves to see, his eyes fall upon a spot where something lies gleaming in the dirt. Approaching, he kneels down. It's a knife. *Zande's knife. Covered in blood.* And no Mahwah, for whom retreat is wise and attack is a last resort, draws blood except when it's deemed absolutely necessary.

The discovery confirms Wahuchu's instinct. His people gone, he seeks one last confirmation of his fears. Creeping low to the ground so to avoid being seen by those below, he peers into the half-dug pit holding the cub. Seeing it struggle below, he leans into the pit and plucks it out, examining its entanglement. He recognizes the cord immediately. Zande, his daughter and he had made one for each of them just one week past, as part of the celebration of Spring, from the stems of the first cattails bordering the wetlands in the northeast part of the bay.

Cutting the cord, he lets the cub go, who examines what's left of its mother. Wahuchu dwells in a deep disturbance, the imagery of the decapitated mother brown bear, the heartbroken, abandoned cub, the cut cord and the bloody blade left in the earth. The signs couldn't be more ominous, and reflect his recent dreams. In them, a deep sickness inflicts the people not from without, from these invaders, but from some dark place within. And he thinks

he knows the source: the pride and lack of respect for life, and the judgment of the elders, embodied by his pupil, and something even closer to himself than he can't quite see.

Unbeknownst to him, that pupil only pretended to retreat back to the village, and has been watching him from the brush. With a confusing mix of emotions he witnesses his teachers' actions, feeling his fury rise with his fissuring heart, his pride at pulling off his feat effortlessly quashed by a wisdom that he'll never fully understand or be able to emulate. Clenching the eagle talon tied to his neck so tightly that he pierces his own palm, it being something he discovered with Wahuchu on a spirit journey and claimed as his own emblem, imagining himself soaring above his people, attacking all enemies from on high, he watches as his mentor approaches the brown bear, her now defenseless cub circling the scene, too crestfallen to flee.

Zande understands why his teacher still lingers: the Mahwah place more value on the discovery of a brown bear corpse than on most anything else they might uncover, else create or otherwise harvest from the Great Mother. Yet the body is far too heavy to lift, and her position is too close to the wolf-wearers to fully harvest from. So Wahuchu must be satisfied with removing her heart, which he does with precision, wrapping it in a large swath of deerskin. He'll bring it back to the people so that they may ingest it and draw nearer to its protective spirit.

Finally moving back towards the village, Zande, staying low and surreptitious so as to avoid further suspicion from the annoyingly observant Wahuchu, beats his own hasty retreat. At the same time the bear cub, now without the protection of his mother and sensing that new protection is needed, walks a few circles around his fallen mother, whining heartbrokenly before wavering in ambivalence. Hesitating for a few minutes, he soon follows his savior.



While out on his ostensible peacekeeping mission, Zande returns ahead of Wahuchu to find his father, Makunah, true to form. The great leader of the council fires plays the part of pacifist, speaking of the need to take advantage of this opportunity presented by the spirits and its connection to the prophecy, that this outsider, demonstrating his desire to be amongst the Mahwah and learn their ways, and to be close to their holy offspring carried down the mountain, *must* represent the bridge between two worlds; a bridge by which their two peoples may make a bright future for all.

Zande, of course, expected this, and makes his own play. *There cannot be peace. He cannot have her. They cannot stay. And I'm keeping his weapon, regardless of what my father says.* And so he makes his presentation, showing all the people his wounded hand, hacked at by the mindless savages when he attempted to return the body of their slain warrior so that burial rites may be honored, assuming they're developed enough to even honor their dead. He tells of how the unprovoked attack of the belligerent brutes brought the brown bear mother from her den, the spirit of protection having been so brutally provoked. Those who'd accompanied him nod in acquiescence to the tale, though not convincingly; not enough to persuade Makunah, nor the other elders, especially upon the return, minutes into an agitated discussion ringing through the camp, of their medicine man, Wahuchu, bid to witness the aftermath, now with his own dependent in tow, the motherless bear cub.

It's the talk of the village for almost an hour, the baby brown bear. What does it mean, arriving here? Is it a sign that the spirit of the brown bear is with Wahuchu, and the rest of the Mahwah? Some suggest that it's a sign of protection; that it's here to guard against the evil spirits causing the present unrest. Others say that the cub is simply confused and vulnerable, and that his rescue by Wahuchu is the trading of one mother for another. Several

attempt to approach it, but it gives out little screams in agitation, moving away before scuttling between Wahuchu and Kylen, the only two to whom he permits proximity.

Arian Cub, still seated by the fire, is awash with emotion. Having spent most of the day listening to the elders talk, teaching him some of the basics of their language through gesticulation, and being so near to his beloved, he'd felt as though he was being adopted, filling him with love. Now, however, that feeling is under assault. Though he can make little of the particulars of what's transpired, he's picked up enough to know that there's been more violence, and that this Zande person is most definitely *not* on his side. The way the muscular native warrior looks at him reminds him of the way that the other young warriors-in-training used to eye him back in Aria, the privileged prince who'd have access to all the best provisions and best-looking, most fruitful women simply as a birthright. He remembers wondering at this, and half-promising himself that when he rises to king, he'll remake the whole system.

Wahuchu doesn't let on to the hardening of his heart, bound to dark suspicions that his pupil is purposefully promoting violence for his own selfish gain. He doesn't say that his long-brewing fears about the nature of the only son of the great chief have now been confirmed to run counter to the peace and prosperity of the people. For he knows that, to do so, could very well lead to something horrible, tearing apart whatever temperance his pupil still clings to, especially considering ongoing observations that Zande has fomented insurrectionist feelings amongst the more gullible and fearful of the Mahwahn warriors. And so, gently, he reinforces his chief's attempt to pacify his son, wondering what he can do if and when that strategy fails.

And the more that conversation passes back and forth between the warriors, and the elders, and occasional input from others standing respectfully on the periphery, the

clearer it becomes that Zande's self-control is faltering, more evidence that this boy cannot become chief. For a few minutes the medicine man even contemplates the potential need to end the life of his shadowy student through the 'accidental' dosing of the wrong medicine, a practice that's considered disgraceful, and which he's refused to share with Zande himself, thinking of all the tales told amongst the people about what happens when power is placed in the wrong hands. By his fears, and the cautionary call they echo within him, Wahuchu ultimately convinces Makunah and the other elders to hold off on making any pronouncement of a definite path forward. The decision is made that everyone shall sleep on it, calling upon the spirits to guide their dreams towards a solution.

But before retiring for the night, the recently full moon just beginning to wane, two more blows are delivered to the precarious chief-to-be: Cub is issued his own wigwam, for one, and two, he shall be taught the ways of the people by the most capable of teachers: Wahuchu and his daughter. *Not killed. Not expelled. Not even bound. And given the sacred shelter of the people, and promised to be taught, so as to become the bridge.* Wahuchu can see that the space between Zande's mind and the enactment of bodily rage is now separated by the thinnest veil of self-restraint. So, as the people disperse towards their own immediate family dwellings within the immense extended family that is the Mahwah, Wahuchu watches as Zande makes his final rounds, visiting the young warriors bound to his will. What he says to them can only be imagined, but it can't be good.

For the Mahwah people, it's a night of restlessness and dark dreams all around. How to reconcile the inclinations of the elders and their top warrior, he who was meant to be a cross between his medicine man mentor and the proud protector of the people, the bearer of the eagle talon? Thought to be the perfect union of wisdom and strength in

his youth, for he was full of energy and enthusiasm and so doted upon his heralded father, to now see him at odds with Chief Makunah is distressing to his people, standing starkly at odds with other premonitions that the dawning of the Moon Face prophecy has come with the wolf-wearers.

In every wigwam across the village, and spreading to the settlements lining the shore throughout the bay, rumor and speculation spreads, the people guessing at the meaning of the sudden divergence from the signs of good fortune, wondering if something sinister approaches, and if the prophecy may only be known on the other side of it. Others speak of the meaning of the bear cub, and entertain conjectures on the point of its sudden presence, contemplating and searching the teachings as to why it has set itself between Wahuchu and his daughter. Very few give much credence to Zande's interpretation: that it's a spirit messenger here to demand revenge for its mother.

As Zande's adrenaline subsides, his rage refuses to abate. How has it come to this? How has he lost the respect of both his father and his teacher so quickly, and all hope that Kylan shall someday stand beside him? *It's those damn fake wolves, and that entitled boy that now lays in his own wigwam no more than twenty paces from him. He should sneak into his wigwam and slit his throat right now!* But he doesn't, because the blade would be laid at his feet. It would be unavoidable. No, he'll have to find another way. Something that won't be laid at his feet. Poison, perhaps; what his teacher calls the dark forces that rob one of spirit. Even then he may have to take the tribe by force, and that may mean the formerly unthinkable... the sacrifice of his father. Steeping in unplacatable spite, he slips into slumber with a dark prayer pounding in his head: *give me power.*

In his dream he hears a bone-chilling shriek on the air, followed by many more, until the sky is filled with the horrible sound, soon accompanied by the flapping of

wings. Black-winged birds of the night shoot across the bay from somewhere beyond, descending upon his village, then circling above his wigwam. A pleasant night, the opening in the top has been left opened, and they suddenly gather like a great storm cloud and pour through the opening, slamming into and piling upon the floor, shrieking horribly, the heap of the disgusting, squirming, flapping creatures growing until they stack to the size of a human figure. As he looks at the lot of these creatures stacked one atop the other, they begin to coalesce, more and more, until their human-sized stack becomes exactly that, *a human*: a gorgeous Mahwah woman with eyes black as a moonless night quenched of its stars, and a cloak to match, looking as though stitched from the leather wings of the creatures from which she's materialized. He's immediately mesmerized. And, as he stares, he realizes that he knows her. It's... *Kylen*. But not. Except for the color and look of her eyes, she appears exactly the same.

"Who are you?," he asks.

"I'm the daughter of the mountain, banished from the people by my cruel mother who rules from on high."

"You look like..."

"She's my sister. My mother chose her to live among you, for she is sweet and innocent, whereas I'm more like you."

"What do you mean, like me?"

"You are strong. Only you may rule the people best as chief. For only you have the strength to protect them, and only you know that wisdom is useless without power."

"Why were you banished?"

"Because I believe in you. But my mother believes only in *her*, she that, with this pretender from another land, seek to take your power from you, and make of you a tiny version

of yourself, helpless, taking orders from the pretender, because she thinks only when water falls softly may we be quenched, whereas I think we're made by the storms."

"What do you want?"

"To help you, of course," she whispers, drawing close, running her fingers along his broad shoulders. Her black leather robe, appearing sewn together from numerous black leather wings, is loose-fitting, and falls open as she moves, her milky white skin and partly-revealed breasts holding his attention when her eyes and words do not.

"How can you help me?"

"I can give you what your teacher cannot: power over your father; power over my sister; power over the entire land."

"How?"

"You must come to me, across the bay, where the fog is heaviest, and never leaves the land. Go as though you seek the ocean, then head north, and listen for my winged servants, they shall usher you to me. You must come here and take me, for by your blood shall my own blood be forever bound to your people, and may I come to your aid."

With these words she removes her cloak, revealing unparalleled beauty. And they make love. And not like the love he's had with a few of the village girls when he'd found them alone in the woods. But real satisfaction; the satisfaction he's always known he'll have when he's finally able to have Kylen, her wanting him just as badly, and giving herself fully to him, as future chief of the Mahwah.

Awakening just before dawn, he swears some of the strange winged creatures fly from his tent in his first conscious moment. So excited was he that he awakes fully erect, his fluid dripping down his inner thighs. *This is what he's been waiting for. A sign from the spirits.* And this

particular spirit he's never known. He can only guess that Wahuchu and his father failed to mention her because they want to retain the positions and power that she threatens.

Only a few of his brethren are about when he secures the best canoe and makes for the bay. He spends less time in the bay than many others, and he's quickly gripped by fear. Memories pour into his mind as he enters the bay, the morning fog blanketing its calmly-waving waters. He suddenly remembers a story that his father once told around the fire, about the medicine men that become corrupted by greed and desire, and how some of them turn to the dark arts, twisting the gifts of the Great Mother to slate a relentless sense of desire, and how this constant thirst converts them into the walking dead through some concealed force; how they're given exactly what they want, *hunger*, and one that continues to grow as they feed it.

He remembers Wahuchu telling him of a gifted medicine woman like his own daughter, a pure spirit who, upon displeasing the Wild Woman of the Mountain, was chased from the land, forced to live alone at the edge of existence. This confused him. How could a pure spirit be so twisted as to anger the Wild Woman? Would not the spirits protect her? And he remembers having fallen asleep last night with dark thoughts of patricide on his mind, reminding him how, in the past, he'd once asked Wahuchu how to make poison, and the look on his teacher's face when he asked this, a look of pure disappointment, accompanied by an admonishment that one cannot delve into the dark arts of poison-making without poisoning one's own spirit in the process. But most especially, he remembers what the elders teach the youth about the dangers of the outer bay.

Whereas the bay is mostly calm and welcoming of the Mahwah, and bounteously bestowing of its offerings, where it meets the sea it's anything but; it's a destructive force that swallows the unwise, a great multitude lost and

assumed dead. There, the waves and tides are fierce and, should anything go awry, none will be there to save you.

More than a few curious Mahwah, overconfident in their navigational skills and their ability to paddle their crafts, thought that they could counter the energy of the restless ocean spirit, only to be swept out to sea, sent to where the great black and white sharks roam, being many times larger than the sharks the Mahwah sometimes catch in the bay, feeding upon those lesser predators, upon seals, and upon any other creatures unfortunate enough to be placed in their path. Never go out past the point alone, say the elders, especially without escorts, and without being highly knowledgeable of the tidal forces. You'll end up dying of thirst, lost at sea, or pulled into the rocks of the outer isles, and break your back and drown, or be made into bite-sized snacks by the burly black-and-white killers. Between the increased fog and rain and violent winds and unpredictable waves and powerful currents and poor visibility, those who value their lives don't venture to the outer isles alone.

More than a few stories of ill fates have been told on the subject. It is, in fact, a common basis for teaching the children about preparedness and respect for the power of the Great Mother, whereby the lesson bears repeating: *Take what she offers, for only fools go where She isn't welcoming.* Kids swimming out too far, swept into the bellies of great beasts, made into chum. Fishermen who become overly desiring of a 'big catch' going out a bit too far, hooking the wrong thing and ending up pulled out of their boats, last seen as a swirling cloud of crimson. Canoes confused for prey and tossed into the air, some of the rowers making it back to the boat, some not. The great warrior, Pentahast, who, after defeating a dozen men in battle, sought to prove his strength by paddling against the tide, only to have the people picking up pieces of him

washed ashore for months, a combined warning against both the might of Mother and the imprudence of pride.

Yes, these are mostly cautionary tales told to give the children pause, but right now they make Zande feel a bit childish, for they wash over him like a winter rain. *Am I a fool?* No, he tells himself, this is simply a test. If he wants to become chief badly enough, the spirits will see the proof in his actions. And he will pass the test and find this spirit of the mountain, she who found him worthy of visitation.

And tested he is. For, as he sets upon the threshold between bay and sea, the forces take over, his paddling an exercise in futility, and before long he's being propelled north, in the general direction he'd been given the night before, as if the spirit herself commands the currents, and is pulling him to her. Sometime later, he's not sure how long, for he's freezing and panicked, he's engulfed by the fog, and begins to fear that the tales were right. *Only an idiot would do this.* Perhaps she was some sort of demon, drawing him not towards his desires, but to his death.

Paddling with all his fury, blind as a bat, he thinks he sees black fins protrude from the surface of the sea several times. If he's not imagining them, it's clear from the size of the protrusions alone that they could gobble him whole at any time, canoe and all. Terror tingling up his spine, he paddles harder than ever before, knowing no direction, wanting only the hopeful sense that he has some control over his craft, until, minutes later, his muscles and breath fail, and he collapses backwards into his canoe. *This is the end.* And yet, this thought has a curious effect, for letting go, giving up, combined with his physical exhaustion and inability to think, suddenly fills him with peace. He accepts his fate, and closes his eyes. That's when he hears them.

The same dreadful sound that invaded his dreams hours before cries out again, coming from all directions. Soon,

like little proofs of existence penetrating the nonbeing borne by the perfectly enshrouding fog, the black winged creatures surround him. From the little that he can see they swirl above him, much as they had in his dream, then begin swooping in from behind, then up, then back behind and out in front again in a cycle matching his forward momentum, as if encouraging his trajectory. Then, suddenly, the fog lifts, and his heart almost seizes as he finds himself being propelled headlong towards a great black block of obsidian rising out of the water, the top punctuated by a series of jagged spires, as if carved into a fortification by the storms sent by Great Mother. Scattered along its equally inhospitable shoreline are the vestiges of crafts that must've been similarly caught in the currents before being blasted apart by this grand monument carved of the same stone from which the Mahwah make weapons.

The current is carrying him straight towards it, this strange, gleaming, fearsome rock that so well reflects the light of the rising sun, now bearing down with all its brilliance through a clear blue sky. He barrels towards it with such speed that he momentarily fears his craft is to be added to the shattered wreckage wrought by fools such as he, and so takes up his paddle once more, until he notices a small opening in the base of the cliff, the current pulling him helplessly along with the strange shrieking creatures, who also dive into the black-toothed roof through openings invisible from his current viewpoint, plunging into the passageway. Dipping his head, he's fast sucked inside.

Awestruck, the vision is as bizarre as the feeling. Within the grand grotto the air immediately changes, becoming so thick he gasps from the sudden onset of humidity, the black rock absorbing the heat of the sun and conducting it throughout the cavern, catching and refusing to relinquish the ocean waters that, instead, slowly evaporate and hang, suspended, like a wispy blanket laid across the ovate

space. The ceiling soaring high overhead is adorned with black spikes pointing towards the pool below, like the spearheads of ancient warrior spirits, each one dripping from the moisture condensing upon their cutting forms, as if the spikes are slicing through the precipitation, with the black creatures crawling between the base of every point, each adding their white excrement to the pool below. But the shrieking creatures coming in from behind him and spilling through the roof aren't the only things moving here.

In the crystalline water of the pool, something glows, adding a soft red light to the scene. Peering into the pool to investigate, strange creatures that he's never before seen float about, their bulbous heads and multitude of hanging legs pulsating red as they gracefully and unhurriedly flutter themselves through the water. And every time one of the flying creatures excretes its white droppings into the pool, the aquatic creatures move towards it, as if feeding upon the dripping droppings, the effect being a series of swirling, blinking red lights wrapping around sinking, expanding streaks of white cloud. But something, or *someone*, moves along the floor of the cave as well, the walkable space an outer ring encircling the pool below. They're... *children*.

Zande notes that, yes, *they're Mahwah children*. He even recognizes one of them, he thinks, for they're largely unrecognizable, their faces painted black, their bodies dripping with a mix of white and red streaks. There are nine of them that he can see, of varying ages and heights, mostly boys, with a couple girls, each holding an obsidian-pointed spear. His craft drifting lazily into the far side of the cavernous space, it thuds with a soft echo against the rock. Climbing out, he moves towards the closest child, one of the youngest, whose demeanor disturbs him. For, in addition to his weapon, and the black, white and red caked across his face and body, his eyes are strange... *lifeless*. Approaching cautiously, he peers into the boy's eyes...

nothing. He waves his hand in front of the child's face, with no apparent effect. Not only does the boy not acknowledge his presence, his pupils don't move at all, tracking nothing.

"My adopted children," comes a richly-sonorous voice.

Zande is so startled that he slips, almost falling into the pool. Turning around, the woman from his dream emerges from a space near the back of the cavern, hidden from view by the low, glowing light of the space, a combination of the glowing pool and the little indirect sunlight reflecting off its innumerable angled surfaces, drawing one's vision in all directions at once, like a hypnotic show of diffusion.

"My salvages from the sea," she continues, approaching slowly. She wears the same cloak from his dream, woven of the black wings of the flying creatures, opened alluringly at the center, enticing him with the sultry show of her milky white skin. The only other thing on her is a black triangular pendant, point facing down, strung with black cord, waving entrancingly between the visible inner half of her ample breasts. Looking at the pendant, a chill comes over him, and he feels a pull, a gravitational force paired with a blackness beyond black, blacker even than her hair and the surrounding stones, as if it's the birth stone of darkness. And the more he looks into it, the more he swears he hears a whispering, indecipherable, as if made from a thousand hushed voices. Only when she wraps her hand around it, temporarily obscuring it from his sight, is the spell broken, and he suddenly remembers the children around them, and their disturbing evocation of detachment.

"What's... *wrong* with them?," he's almost afraid to ask.

"Don't worry, my chief, they're just... praying. Oh so fresh, oh so suggestible, oh so acquiescent, oh so... *sweet*."

As she speaks, she runs the tips of her nails around the boy's throat before leaning in and kissing him on the neck.

Then taking Zande by the hand, she leads him to where she'd entered from, through a small passage cut into the back of the cavern. Standing next to her is intoxicating, as not only is she as beautiful as Kylen, whom he's so long obsessed over, but she smells like the fields of flowers that grow on the dry rises between the sea and the mountain, a scent that he's always found bewitching, as if it were made for him. Over this there's another scent, something almost rotten and yet pleasant, the seeming conflict of the two odors confusing his senses, smelling of both sex and peril.

The inner sanctum is much like a miniaturized replica of the central space, replete with its own saltwater pool fed from somewhere beneath the black surface. Here, however, they're alone; no strange creatures above or below, no dead-eyed Mahwah youth standing idle on the periphery. Instead, vessels of various size and shape line a naturally-formed shelf system ringing the outer wall, some carved from wave-polished driftwood etched with what appears to be an upside-down triangle, some made from fragments of the obsidian encasing the cave. Dried plants of various kinds, including roots, branches, leaves and berries, are strewn about, some wedged into natural niches in the walls, some lying on the shelves, some stacked near the largest vessel, an obsidian boulder with a concave opening. And, in a corner, a shrine of some sort.

An upside down triangle is carved into the stone wall, in the center of which something is roughly etched in an alien language. Beneath it is a fire pit formed from the skeletal remains of various animals, the smoke from its low flames rising to ring the ceiling, mixing with the moisture wafting in from the outer sanctum. Here, the air is even thicker, and far more pungent, a mix of the smoke and whatever was being burned therein and the drying plants and everything else hidden within the stuffy space, with none of it easily able to escape, as, here, no holes penetrate the ceiling.

And something else... a smoking pipe set on a ledge in the opposite corner, emitting a strange, sickly-sweet scent.

“What do I call you, anyway?,” he timidly asks.

“Call me... Kezlan... or ‘My Queen.’”

“What’s a... *queen*?”

Leading him towards the ledge where the carved cedar pipe emits its strange scent, she pauses at the question before laughing condescendingly, as if it’s unworthy of her. Picking up on the tone of her laugh, and thinking of how he’d already felt childish taking the risk to come here, he has a momentary reflex to remove himself from the place.

“It’s okay, my dear. I understand that it’s a term that you haven’t heard before. But you’ll soon know it better than you know any word in Mahwahn. For many more shall come like the invaders, and the only thing stopping them is my matriarchy, and your duty. ‘Queen’ is what the invaders call the woman paired with the chief, their union granting them greater power, each feeding the other; a sacred partnership that neither may break without destroying the other; a partnership that we must form for the people.”

“I see...”

“Here, love, smoke this. It’ll help you relax, and open you up, so that we can speak more honestly with one another, especially about the future that we’ll forge together.”

Not bothering to ask her what the term ‘forge’ means, he complies. The Mahwah are fond of the pipe, it being integral to communal proceedings and, depending upon *what’s* being smoked, being a means to deliver certain medicines, and sometimes, amongst those who demonstrate a strong enough constitution, and who wish to experience the spirit of the strongest plants and their

interdependence with the forest, allowing them to alter their mind so they may see things from the plant's perspective.

"Take a strong toke, my love, so that it fills your breath."

A question forms in his mind as he starts to smoke, pushing his first inhale all the way down into his lungs at her bidding, burning them as they've never been burned before, causing him to hunch over in a sudden coughing fit. And when he raises himself back up, the question is gone, along with everything else that had been weighing upon his heavy head. In its place... a weightless bliss, all sense of consideration and responsibility eradicated. Looking at her again, she's even more beautiful than before, and he's suddenly overwhelmed by the feeling that he's exactly where he should be, with his... *queen*.

Smiling, she takes the pipe from his hand and whispers:

"Touch me."

While he was already spellbound by her, the intoxicating smoke makes him only too eager to comply with her command, and he spreads open her leathery robe. She kisses him, softly at first, then passionately, helping him move his hands over the whole of her soft, voluptuous form, his sweeping touch soon removing her robe. As it falls to the floor, she puts her hands on him, saying:

"I will help you become chief. And, in return, you will promise to be loyal to me. Swear that we'll rule together."

"I... swear it," he emits with effort, finding speech difficult.

"And one more thing: you must promise me that you'll give the man child to me, the one in your camp, from the foreigners, and that you'll give me my sister as well."

Barely able to think, totally relaxed, nerves overeager to be gratified, he can barely concentrate on what's being asked.

“But... I want her. What... what do you want with... them?”

“They are in our way, my love. And we can’t allow that. We must take their hearts, so that I may have the mountain, and watch over, protect and guide you, so you may have the forest, and every patch of earth that touches the bay. Don’t worry, you won’t miss... *her*. Not with me around. But you may have her before I take from her what’s mine. And I know you want the alien dead, and he shall die. But you must let me do it. For only I know how to extract their strength, so that you and I may absorb it, and wield it.”

“But...”

“You must trust me, my love. Only you have the strength to be what the people need, to expel the evil from the land and become chief. But you need my help first. That’s why your spirit called to me, and why I heard you so clearly.”

“Okay... okay... you can have them.”

She strides over to the black boulder with a concave opening and, stooping over, picks something up from beneath it. Unwrapping it, he gets only the briefest glimpse of it as she’s dropping it into the cauldron with a splash. It looks like a... *hand*. But he guesses that this must be his imagination, and that it’s likely a rhizome or a plant bulb with fingerlike roots growing out of it, as he’s seen such things before whilst gathering medicine with Wahuchu. Briefly stirring the brew with a large limb, she then grabs a wooden goblet with the upside down triangle carved into it, sitting on the rim of the cauldron, scoops a liquid out and returns, whereupon he’s unable to resist reaching out for her again. Removing one of his hands from her body, she raises it up, kisses him lightly on the wrist, then bites down.

He reacts, but slowly, not as he normally would. And though he tries to pull away, she’s far stronger than she appears; inhumanly so. And he soon finds that what was

painful transforms into pleasure. First, she sucks some blood directly from the wound, simultaneously making a sound similar to that of a purring cat. When she finally releases her bite, he notices that her incisors appear more prominent than most, as if especially suited to the task. Blood trickles down his arm, some of which she catches in the goblet, which hisses in response, though he scarcely notices, as her scent, form and the intoxicant that he's smoked have merged to make him perfectly accepting.

Then pressing the goblet to the upside-down triangular pendant dangling between her breasts, she chants:

*“By the power and glory of Ven-Dahl-Dooh
To make of your hunger everything true
Sated by feeding upon the flesh of your kind
Of the oldest of blood be your unrelenting bind
So as to bestow everything coveted, ever unearned
Feed upon desire, and by satisfaction be spurned.”*

When she says this, a chill overtakes him, as if his heart shall stop beating. But he fights it off. Resisting her is futile.

“Swear that you're dedicated to bringing the wolf-wearer prince and Kylen to me,” she adds, “then drink this.”

A sense of panic surges up within him, from someplace unknown, deep down. But he wants her too much.

“I swear it, my queen.”

Gulping down the mystery solution, the chill in his heart violently flips upside down, and it's as if everything turns to

fire. It's so intense at first that it almost overpowers the bliss pervading him, like every inch of him is invaded by a blistering heat pumping through him by his overpowered core. But the overboiling inferno fast fades into a simmer. Leading him to her bed, a large platform of driftwood covered in the skins of various sea animals, she takes him.

Forcing him on his back, she presses his arms open and jumps atop him. Dropping her face into the crook of his neck, she takes a big whiff of him, as if deducing his nature by her olfactory prowess. She then nibbles at his earlobe, then down his neck, then on his mouth, all while gyrating at the hips. As soon as he enters her he's near to blinded by a sudden burst of ecstasy, and she responds by exchanging her nibbles for biting suckles. Letting go of his wrists, she draws her nails down his arms and, out of the corner of his eye, he swears they're no longer human hands, but more akin to claws. But when he turns to look she reaches up and turns his face forward, and raises her own upper body up, and moves up and down faster and more forcefully at her hips, the pendant hanging inches from his face, swinging side to side, and into it he peers.

He swears that it's whispering to him, as if thousands of voices are crying out in both misery and bliss, and he loses himself in it, transported to some otherworldly headspace, to a realm of pure sexual pleasure and emotional chaos. And the further he sinks into it, the more that she claws at him, and the less noticeable the pain. The whispers rising in volume, he's overcome by the urge to grasp the pendant, but when he reaches out for it she presses his hands back into the bed and sinks her face and teeth into his neck, and then rises up with a massive bloody grin.

The rest of the day is a blur of smoke and sex, his mind as numb and reeling as his body is alive and feeling. In his spellbound lust, all he can think about is sex, as if it's invaded and occupied the entirety of his mind. Kezlan

occasionally rises to refill the pipe, passing him straight back into ecstasy when she can feel him slipping from her grasp, right at the moment where he's just able to think about something other than her, and the way she feels both inside and out. And the bizarrely transformed Mahwah youth sometimes make an appearance, lingering upon the blurred periphery of his perception, bringing her provisions and, Zande thinks he sometimes sees, offering their arms or necks for suckling, the blood remaining after her bites tricking down their bodies, mixing with the remnants of the white excrement continually seeping from the ceiling of the central chamber to repaint their ungodly guise. This goes on for hours, time suspended, subsumed by desire.

As night falls, her multitude of winged minions suddenly come alive, as if released from a spell of torpor. Their sound is not unlike that of the coyotes when they fall upon a carcass, screeching and clawing at one another in the fight to take as much as possible before a larger predator arrives and spoils the feeding frenzy. Even under the blissfully-languid, sex-craved influence of the mysterious herb that Kezlan packs into her pipe, and his body feeling both light as a feather and fully weighted with satisfaction at the same time, the sound and swarming movements of the endless multitude of darkness dwellers is unsettling, like rodents scurrying across his spine. Minutes later, the last multicolored light of the day replaced by the soft blue light of the rising, waning moon, the creatures take flight, bursting through every crevice of the cavern at the same time, like a pressurized container suddenly releasing its contents from every angle, letting loose the bowels of hell.

At some point in the night she stops bringing him the pipe, and, as the sensual high gradually fades, it's replaced by a commanding hunger. She brings him something to eat in a wooden bowl. In the near darkness he can feel etchings on the bowl, and briefly wonders what they mean, and yet his

curiosity is insufficient to take command of his hunger, one form of insatiability traded for the other. He's not sure *what* he's eating, as the texture is quite strange, but there's a satisfaction to the meal that can almost compete with the sexual quenching in which he'd previously been caught, and he gets over the alien texture quickly, continuing his carnality. Once more she leaves the inner chamber to fetch him some food, this time it mostly being some warm, thick liquid, which he again gulps with gusto, as if his hunger has increased rather than diminished from the first feeding.

Demanding more, she refuses him, triggering the first negative emotion he's felt in hours: *pure contempt*. Trying to fight past her, she's stronger, which enrages him further, for how can this little female stand up to the mighty Zande? And just as his attempts to escape the inner cloister and find something else to eat, preferably something fresh, raw, uncooked, come to a head, her blocks more and more acts of violent rebuttal, she jumps atop him and forces him back down onto the bed before biting deep into his neck, drinking from him until his strength fails and he passes out.

Dreaming, the experience is so vivid as to be confused with reality. He's one of the horrible winged creatures, and yet, this time he finds them *not* to be repulsive, but much the opposite. He's *comfortable* in his furry, black-winged body. He *understands* their shrieks as if they're the words of his own people. He *wants* to be with them, to share their warmth, to know oneness in the swirling swarm. And as dusk finally descends, he can *feel* the rising moon, and sense the full meaning of its form, the fact that it's waning conducting an empowering current of electricity through him, reigniting his reborn body with a now familiar intoxication and insatiability. All of his brethren feel the same, their energies commingling. And Great Mother, the *hunger*. Finally, the glaring, oppressive light of day gone, an uncontrollable urge seizes them all: *it's time to feed*.



No one says it, but they're all thinking it: This is *not* the prophecy. Two dead warriors, including the bodyguard of the prince and future king, himself presumed captured or dead. The current king badly wounded, having lost one eye and, most likely, the use of one arm. With the natives far craftier and treacherous than it'd been assumed, the Arian superiority is fast revealing itself to be but dangerous delusion. And the land, once thought providential, is so overgrown that it won't succumb to their domineering tactics. And the beasts of the land seem as determined to expel them as the natives. No, this is more like a tragedy. The rune stone carved to convey them safely here, and guide them home as conquering heroes, set in Arian Bay, must've been demolished and swallowed up by the sea.

As most of the men prepare defenses, digging pitfalls along the ridgelines above, and downing trees to lodge into the earth as spiked fortifications and death-dealing drops, Harold has taken his six best warriors, including his best tracker and his second in command, Kraske, off to find his son, swearing to bleed every native in the land dry if they've killed him. Unfortunately this land is so overlaid with lines of foot traffic, it being the domain of a people so plugged into the Earth that the end of the one is the beginning of the other, that it's easy to head the wrong way, especially considering the fact that Cub, and his now mincemeated protector, Mano, sworn to secrecy by the lost prince, never bothered to share their own pursuits before disappearing. Harold doesn't even know *why* they'd taken on their own mission, the chasing of the exotic, heavenly beauty who'd so spellbound his wayward successor, Cub knowing it would've been considered a distraction from their preordained mission at best. And so, even with a practiced tracker, the Arian warriors are soon lost in the tracks subtly snaking through almost every verdant acre.

Signs of the native inhabitants are everywhere in these woods, winding in every direction, the people forever tracing the embodiment of their Great Mother. Paths shared by all the native beings naturally trodden over eons of everyday, overlapping movement are as the endless networks of capillaries collapsing into and out of the rivered veins and vast arterial stretches of bay, all playing the circulatory system continually cleansing and delivering life-giving nutrients to the forested tissue of follicles, the snow-capped mountain standing tall as the stoic, centered head and navigator, a reference point guiding thousands of travelers relative to its position, every incarnation bound to Great Mother, the beating, rhythmic heart of shared life.

So it is that, lacking sufficient knowledge of this ancient webwork, pushing forward in furious desperation to recover their kin and turn the tide of conflict back in their favor, the seven Arians, led by their scarred king, are soon following a path leading east, towards the mountain, away from the village holding their strong-willed prince by his own will. Meanwhile, those remaining in Camp Water Dragon are a bustle of activity, the fury born by recent troubles removing all temperance, the smell of defeat hanging over everyone's soured temperament like an unavoidable sickness. Despite the admonitions of his new queen, Shanda, Harold permitted himself but one night's rest before deciding his rage could no longer be contained. He now wanders, half-blind, only his strong arm usable, in the wrong direction, in search of his lost successor. His holy man, meanwhile, has a very different approach in mind.

From the smoldering ashes of the morning funeral fire that burned the bodies of what remained of their two fallen brothers, Ketchum crouches and scoops up the blackened remnants in the overturned skull of his predecessor. Upon reentering his tent, Mercola, his sworn priestess, prepares for the disembodiment ritual. The Book of Being open upon

its pedestal beside her, she tosses the carved rune stones upon the earth and deciphers their meaning, reading those facing up, comparing them to the great book, its wisdom revealed to Odin in his nine days of self-impalement upon the World Tree. A ceramic bowl painted in the blood of the Arian Grey Wolf is held above a low fire by a black-iron-barred holder. Using a pestle and mortar, she then grinds down the dried Seer Shroom that all Arian holy men and their priestesses learn to grow early in their training. Adding the powdered mushroom to the bowl, Ketchum then adds the ashes of their brethren, representing the death of the wolf, before Mercola adds the final ingredient.

Making a small incision of her wrist with her black wolf claw, worn around her neck to facilitate communion with the clan's namesake, she lets the blood drip into the bowl, representing the life of the wolf, which she then mixes together with the ash, representing the battle between life and death, and thereby brewing the concoction that places those trained in the ways of the wolf in a trancelike state somewhere between life and death. From here, those of sufficient training and disposition may rise from their bodies for a short time, and are even able to call upon and gain the abilities of the gods; that is, if they're willing to make greater blood sacrifice, and take on the risk that their actions may so displease the gods that they shan't survive the re-embodiment, their spirits thence caught in limbo.

Ketchum and Mercola are well trained, and know that they must first concentrate the entirety of their beings upon the desired transformation if the ritual is to be successful. Sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, Ketchum's mind falls upon the sight-seers, Huginn and Muninn, the raven scouts of Odin himself. As Mercola pours the concoction into his mouth, he conceives of sprouting a new arm in the place of the one lost to his work long ago, and of those arms becoming black-feathered wings, his mouth

becoming the curved, carrion-tearing beak. Mercola quickly takes a long sip of the earthy brew before returning the bowl to the black-iron holder, hanging the black wolf claw pendant next to it, and, eyes closed and beginning to concentrate, she instantly sees what Ketchum sees, for she has given over to him already, and he leads the spell.

Feeling themselves transform, they ride the smoke up through the hole in the top of their tent, briefly peering down at their reposed human forms before becoming the great black-winged seers. Circling up into the sky, they ride the currents up and up until they can see the entirety of their foreign domain, mountain to sea, great bay to the rivers running down the mountainside, cutting through countless valleys along the southern part of the peninsula. But this expansive view fast loses interest, and they turn their sight north, knowing that that's the direction where the natives most likely reside, having passed manifold signs of life whilst sailing through a seemingly endless archipelago.

Flying that direction, they hover near the bay before noticing brown-skinned children playing near the edge of a cliff, right where the bay overlooks the northwest corner of the peninsula, circling around what appears to be a gravestone, and they dive down to inspect. The children notice them, and call out to one another in fright before fleeing into the forest. Diving in close behind them, they're about to overtake them when the children cross the tree line, immediately turning into little blue butterflies. And where there'd only been three children, whom had been easy to follow or to now snatch out of the air and consume, the butterflies are now everywhere, impossible to track to any one spot. Irritated at this assemblage and its apparently random dispersal, Ketchum and Mercola begin snatching them out of the sky, one by one. Yet, each butterfly they consume only brings more streaming in from somewhere deeper in the forest. But Ketchum won't be

outdone, and flies in faster and faster circles, eating as many of them as he can until he can feel his stomach expand, the discomfort of it coming near to forcing him back into his own body. So he pukes them up undigested, and they fly away from the two ravens still alive, unharmed.

Ketchum now suspects that he's doing battle with some shrewd trickster. The natives must have holy men as well, for a shaman seems intent on fooling him. Feeling anger welling up within, he decides to fly after the butterflies again, who now fly higher into the sky, but this time, instead of swallowing them, he and Mercola begin swatting them out of the air with violent thrashes of their wings. Yet, as the butterflies flutter to the forest floor, they begin to transform, becoming mice just before reaching the ground, scurrying into holes scattered in all directions. *They're inflicting no damage.* Worse, he hears the piercing cry of the hawk overhead, and instantly becomes aware of it as a protector of the native people. After some indecision, knowing not whether to battle the hawk or chase the mice, Ketchum dives down at the scurrying rodents, imagining himself as the adder, the snake that kills countless Arians every year. They become adders just before hitting the ground, each pursuing a particular mouse towards a hole.

Now underground, Ketchum follows his target through its rooted labyrinth, determined to consume it, and as many others as possible, and deliver a psychic blow to these pesky forest people. Their tunnels, however, are so numerous, branching in every direction, that he finds it almost impossible to follow just one of them. Frustration rising, he darts down one passageway and hones back in on a single mouse, Mercola doing the same. Both zeroing in on their targets, refusing to be pulled off track by the dozens more darting about, they steadily gain upon them before making their strikes. Only millimeters away from penetrating the rodent with his poison-injecting fangs,

Ketchum is suddenly halted by a piercing feeling in his tail, followed by a different mouse running quickly over his body from behind, and down the tunnel to join his furry brethren.

Turning around, Mercola has accidentally bitten his tail instead of the mouse that she was, herself, chasing. The pain of her bite, and the sense of tiredness from all this futile tracking and attacking, and the loss of focus and self-control accompanying his rising anger, weakens him, and he can feel the force of the spell lifting. And so, with half his mind remaining in place, he reaches out and seizes the wolf claw with the other half of his awareness, cutting Mercola, who yelps in pain, having not expected the strike. Her own focus fading, she obediently adds more blood to the concoction, and feeds the brew to Ketchum, then herself, so that they can remain where they are, in psychic battle. His pride rises with his fury. He won't be outdone.

Deepening his focus, he wraps his tail around Mercola's, thinking of the great two-headed serpent who rules the passageways to the underworld. Their tails fusing, their bodies begin to grow, and grow, until they're so large that, still underground, their expansion explodes the tunnels surrounding them, and they're lifted up and out of the suddenly overturned earth, the mice running from their demolished chambers in every direction as Ketchum and his priestess become the great serpent, sharing the same tail, the upper half of its body split into two terrible heads.

Being the stronger practitioner, Ketchum forces Mercola to bear down on one of the mice, but as he closes the distance between himself and his target he notices that it, too, has begun a transformation, its ears and hind legs growing faster than its body and, again on the verge of killing his prey, the mouse becomes a hare, and hops safely away. Furious, with Mercola fused to him emotionally as well as psychically, they both strike at their target, who bounces with alacrity up and down and all

around them and, within seconds, the upper half of the predator has tied itself in a knot, and they fall to the ground, their upper halves coiled around one another. The hare sits a short distance away, watching the predator struggle to free itself from itself, and from its own fury. But, rather than calming himself and untangling himself from his priestess, he instead reaches out and slices at her with the claw now clasped tightly in his one hand, deeper this time, the previously tiny trickle now a stream of crimson coursing down her trembling arm. He thinks of Fenrir, the great wolf, calling upon the gods to release him from his chains.

Ketchum thereby becomes the great black wolf once bound by the gods for his insatiable bloodlust, Mercola transformed into a partially-hobbled mirror image, though white, one leg stained red. She's losing her strength and focus, Ketchum can feel it, yet capitulation is not an option. Lowering himself into pouncing position, he launches himself at the hare, who flees through the forest, Mercola running off in a flanking position. Snarling, swiping and biting, he just misses his target once, twice, three times, coming closer each time, his powerful claws and gnashing teeth producing nothing but slashes upon tree bark, and mouthfuls of dirt, and yet he carries on, the hare darting over a hilltop, he right on his heels, Mercola coming in from the side, and then... *it's gone*, disappeared into a sea of cedar. Where, Odin, did the insufferable creature go?

That's when they notice that the bark of one of the cedars appears to be moving. So they attack the tree, both being twice the size and strength of the brown bear that marred their leader, Fenrir and his mate far larger than even the greatest Arian Grey Wolf. Thus, with focused fury, they gash great pieces out of the side of the tree they'd seen move when, out the backside of the cedar, two human forms with skin indistinguishable from cedar bark emerge, and dash towards and disappear into two other trees.

Soon they're hacking at every tree they come across, their rage rising as they gradually turn the grove into a wasteland of toppled trees and saw-dusted earth. Only when but two cedars yet stand in the copse do they stop to catch their breath, when out from those trees step the two human forms, perfectly camouflaged. Untying something bound about their necks, they drop the bark, revealing themselves as two natives, one man and one woman.

These are the tricksters, finally revealed! Running right at them, they flee over a ridge and down towards the bay, finally revealing the village that Ketchum has been seeking. *Here he can inflict a debilitating blow, striking at the heart of the enemy!* Alas, though campfires burn, and dwellings abound, and sleek craft float near the waterline, carried by the currents, and stacks of tools and weapons are set near to lines hung with the pelts of various animals, and many other signs of inhabitation surround, none but these two look to dwell here. Everyone else has fled, or hidden themselves, demonstrating the weaklings they are.

Cowards. Killing their spiritual leaders will have to suffice. So, again, they charge their enemies, but this time, instead of running somewhere out into the forest, their two targets dart directly at the line of hanging animal skins, each removing a different skin and, in the same motion, adorning it, immediately transforming into that animal.

A pair foxes shoot between their legs as, swiping, they again come up with nothing but troughs torn into the earth. Squirrels circle up trees, leaping from one to another, incised trunks and severed tree limbs in their wake. Round and round they go, the massive wolves chasing a series of forest creatures in circles around the village, both of whom transform into one after another of those animals whose remnants remain upon the tanning racks, disrobing and readorning with ease. Bobcats bound over their shoulders, nipping at their ears as they pass. Coyotes swipe at their

heels from behind, turning them in circles. Mountain lions exchange slashes before, slightly wounded, backing off, each animal tiring Fenrir and his mate, weakening them both with every subsequent, rapid chase and exchange.

Only when their targets, too, appear to tire, and settle into great, winded brown bears ready to hold their ground, do the four of them slow and begin to size one another up. Cutting at Mercola again in order to gain strength, reaching for and taking a big swig of the spellcasting concoction that she's no longer pouring into his mouth for him, hearing her whimper with pain, the white wolf backs off whilst Fenrir charges and buries his massive muzzle into the broad neck of the great beast of this land, tearing at its flesh and producing a spout of blood. Falling to its back and groaning in agony, Ketchum is about to deliver the killer blow when the bear rolls out of the way and, disrobed, its wearer runs east towards the great mountain beyond.

They chase the badly wounded holy man, encouraged by the trail of blood he leaves behind him, his own mate having become the hawk, shrieking and dive-bombing both wolves in the attempt to harry, distract and discourage them. But, even with Mercola partly hobbled, her concentration waning, and having taken several strikes from the strange bout and bleeding himself, Ketchum's determination doubles, and he gradually gains on the wounded, shape-shifting sorcerer as they ascend the foothills of the mountain, where, with the first hints of snow carpeting the ground, and in sight of a series of stacked obsidian stones, all set in a circle on a level part of the ascending earth, he hears a harrowing voice on the wind:

"This is where we bury our unnaturalities... turn back!"

The voice seems to be coming from the peaks above. And, though it chills Ketchum to the bone, and slows his stride, the fire in his belly is enough to keep him going, and, still

gaining on his prey, he crosses into the large, oval-shaped level space, stacks of different heights and shapes of brilliant black stone encircling him, all reflecting the glare from the sun and snow, when beneath him the earth vibrates, the stacked stones reverberating with the voice:

“This is where those who gave into the madness of hunger during the times of trouble came to feed... away with you!”

Finally catching up to him, Mercola approaches from the side and crosses the outermost stack of stones, upon which the hawk that'd been harassing her rises up and begins circling high above, as if refusing to enter the area. Ketchum and his priestess converge on the wounded trickster, leaping at his legs and tearing at his flesh, and he falls to his knees as they clamp down on his neck, and he drops face first in front of the tallest stack of stones in the back center of the obsidian circle, dead. Then all is silent, and a sense of success finally comes to the holy man and his priestess. But only for a moment. For Ketchum notices that the dead seer's blood is now seeping into the earth in front of the pillared stone stack, and that the quake of the earth seems paired to its absorption of the blood, until, finally, the ground cracks and gives way, sinking beneath the fallen medicine man and swallowing him into a hole.

“You cannot know satisfaction here, only an endlessness of hunger and self-destruction... flee while you still can!”

From the hole a sound is emitted that's unlike anything they've heard before, even more distressing than the vile voice on the wind. Then out comes an emaciated hand with long, cracked fingernails and outsized vessels visible through ghastly, taut skin, a creature pushing itself up and out of the hole, which Ketchum now thinks a grave. In its other hand the creature holds what's left of the chewed up leg of the fallen seer, tearing off a bite like it's a turkey leg.

Though tall and fearsome at first sight, especially with that sound emitting from it, the creature is skin and bones, with sunken blue eyes the color of ice, shock-white hair and yellow fangs streaked with red, its cheeks hollowed out where it appears to have gnawed them off. It's the walking dead, looking as though one swipe by Fenrir would turn it into a pile of bones. Yet, from its smell and his instinctive sense of this creature, something tells him not to strike, for its malodorous scent is that of rotting flesh, giving Ketchum pause. He thinks of the stories of his own people during times of great hunger, when diseases and horrors fell upon them in heaps, and infants fallen to starvation were turned into stew, the Arians no longer asking what was in the pot.

"Eating the flesh of fallen family, evil was made... retreat!"

But Mercola, wounded and waning, and wanting it to end, experiences no such restraint, and launches herself at the hideous creature. The creature, however, doesn't even defend itself, and Mercola has soon torn away one of its arms. Showing no pain, or feeling of any kind, the creature watches as she bites into and tears its limb to pieces. Then, suddenly, she freezes. Her eyes grow immense in her head as she backs suddenly and awkwardly off, backpedaling all the way past the outer stack of stones, feeling her heart turn to ice like the now freezing blood sluggishly fighting its way through her frigid veins. Then she's gone, retreating from the tent where the ritual is taking place, tumbling towards the last heat of the smoking fire, only the intervention of one of the warriors, who'd crept close to hear the strange sounds coming from within their tent, keeps her from desperately falling into the fire.

"Know now the curse of corruptive hunger, harnessed by the bloodsuckers to enslave an insatiable humanity!"

In her head Mercola can hear a maniacal laugh, sounding like a cross between the cackle of some horrible, ungodly

being and the strange metallic crescendo of a calving glacier. Still engaged, Fenrir faces the odd, deathly demigod of decay, and begins backing off as it stumbles awkwardly towards him, one bloodless arm torn from the socket, left in the snow, dragging one of its legs behind it. And they continue that way, slowly creeping back down the mountain, the great Fenrir going in reverse, until prideful anger rises back up and overtakes fear, and he grips down as hard as he can on the wolf claw pointing into his hand, penetrating deep into his palm, dripping his own blood into the bowl while calling upon Odin to carry him up to where the ocean's fury brings storms setting fire to the world, imagining a massive lightning storm invading from the sea.

Odin does his bidding, bound by his own pride, and, transferring his power to Ketchum, the clouds blacken in the west and soon burst forth with great shows of shooting, crackling light, as the wolf is transformed into the lightning-bearer, a great hammer in hand. And as the storm sweeps in from the violently-rollicking sea, the hawk that'd been circling above rises higher, opposite two big black clouds that part to reveal the Valkyrie, the goddess who crosses between the land of the living and the honored inhabitants of Valhalla. The Valkyrie sweeps down and picks up the hammer-bearer, carrying him high into the sky, into the heart of the storm. *This is it. Time to turn the land to ash!*

The power of the lightning mounting, as if feeding off of his infuriated determination, three immense strikes converge to produce an enormous blue bolt that he slams with his hammer as it passes by, setting fire to the sky, spilling onto the forest below, the drier pockets bursting into flames as the fiery firmament expands, threatening to overtake the hawk, and everything else. Yet, rather than fleeing toward the mountain or deeper into the bay as expected, the hawk suddenly turns towards the fire and, with a slap of its wings, the slight sound of thunder is heard as the hawk

doubles in size, the force of the thunderclap slowing the spread of the airborne blaze. Once, twice, three times the hawk does this, doubling in size each time, and each time the thunderous sound of its thunderclap multiplies, until, with the fourth and final clap, the sound is deafening, and almost knocks Ketchum off of the winged steed, had he not the goddess to cling to, the resulting force of wind not only putting out the fires below, but reversing the flames in the air above, until they're bearing down on Ketchum and the Valkyrie, threatening to engulf them in the inferno.

Turning and fleeing in embarrassment, feeling the shame-soaked gaze of the gods dropping down upon him from Valhalla above, Ketchum tries to release himself from the spell, but finds that he can't, perhaps because he's in too deep, or because the gods, mortified of him, won't allow it. Now feeling helpless, he kicks at the winged beast and shakes its spear-holding rider as they flee towards the ocean horizon, the storm clouds being swallowed up by the fiery sky. Running above the depths of the ocean below, the fire is about to overtake them, Ketchum feeling it singe his backside, when he suddenly lets himself go and falls from the sky, burning and plummeting towards the ocean. As he plunges in, the salty sea both excruciating and relieving of his singed flesh, he feels the humiliation of his defeat and cowardly retreat like a poisonous weight in his fissuring heart, as though he's swallowed molten iron.

Sinking, sinking, the light from above fast fading, he finds himself wishing for death, for he'll never recover from this. Down, down into the deep he drops, accepting that here he shall drown, his body suffocating in the tent... until, approaching the ocean floor, he falls into a crevice, feeling some warmth beneath him, the core of the earth rising up to meet the ocean and rekindle his fury, now so great that it overcomes everything else, including his concern of the opinions of the gods, and a vitriol like he's never known

courses through him as, swallowing the remainder of the disembodiment potion, he becomes the beast of obliteration, bursting forth from the crevice as the Kraken.

This shall be the death of me, but I'm taking you with me!

Now a multiheaded, multiarmed beast with claws the size of the tallest trees, and a body several miles long, Ketchum the Kraken explodes up through the surface of the sea with absolute annihilation pouring from his heart and mind, this act itself sending massive waves that slam into the land, tossing the native watercraft like pinecones kicked by kids. Seeing this, he knows his manner of destruction and, diving back down into the deepest depths, he swims in a circle on the ocean floor, dredging up silt and picking up speed while picturing the greatest tidal wave ever made in his mind, thinking of the tsunami that once wiped out half of Aria. But, as he does this in the marine depths, the swirling motion making a great whirlpool in the sea, he can't see that a mirroring storm is being made over the great mountain, and issuing forth from its heights is the voice he'd heard before, this time echoing so loudly as it falls from heights as tall as the Kraken that Ketchum can hear it resounding even from the depths of the ocean:

"Your anger has seized your will. Release it, or perish!"

But Ketchum is too far gone for restraint, prideful vengeance his only purpose, and rises up as fast as he can, exploding from the sea and launching his mammoth body high into the air, as if the mountain itself is suddenly shot from the sea, then slamming all his arms down simultaneously as his mountainous form finds water once more, creating an omnidirectional wave a mile high, one side barreling down upon the imperiled land. At the same time, and by the same furious force, from the winter storm whirling around the peak of the great mountain a terrible shriek is sounded, the White Owl Woman rising up from its

center and smashing her wings together, issuing a snowstorm of hurricane proportions that explodes down the mountain and meets the tidal wave right as it reaches land, equalizing the forces and sending its spray so high and wide that seawater rains across the entire peninsula.

Now, not only has Ketchum failed to destroy the land, but he finds himself caught in the whirlpool of his own making, having been built from his cyclonic churning of the depths of the sea with such force as to make a maelstrom of unearthly proportion. Becoming dizzy, he swims with all his might against one side of the seaborne tornado, almost passing through it. Then, in his dizziness, he notices that the great white owl is now hovering over him, staring down at him as if eyeing a meal sneaking through the brush.

“How can one that knows no balance be a spiritual keeper of his people?,” she scorns. “You know but one direction, when there are four, the Four Winds that bring change to the world. Let this be your final lesson. Take it with you.”

Facing the western horizon, the owl raises up her wings, summoning the west wind that sweeps in violently from the seas beyond. Slamming into Ketchum, his progress towards the outside of the whirlpool is thrown off, and he’s sucked back towards the center as the great white owl repeats the act three more times, turning north, then east, then south, the Four Winds bursting onto the scene and catching and comingling with the air rising up from maelstrom that’s seized the great beast of the Arian seas.

As the forces of the whirlpool and the converging winds combine, a hurricane is formed over Ketchum’s head, matching the force of the maelstrom, increasing the rate of its spin. Puking in his tent, he begins to scream for help as, trying to stand, he falls into the side of the tent several times before one of the men has the courage to break

protocol and enter, for one never interrupts such things, else endure the wrath of the gods *and* their holy man.

Pulling him out, Ketchum remains mired in his vertigo, and cannot walk without falling over. As with his priestess, still shivering beside the fire, which one man brings back to life, the men have to restrain him. And so, awaiting the return of Harold, their king, they do their best to corral their holy man and his number two, and to hold their hopelessness at bay, for this is surely an omen of their approaching doom. Even Shanda, despite holding no love for Mercola, has to fight to hold back a scowl and the onset of dread.

As the day moves on and ushers in the night, Ketchum and Mercola show no signs of improvement and, in fact, appear to get worse, as no mortal may withstand the sense of freezing to death or being mercilessly spun like a top without gradually weakening and losing control of their mental faculties, especially having just been so badly defeated, their pride as broken as their bodies and minds. While Ketchum eventually allows himself to be escorted back into his tent at the behest of his new queen, two men keeping him from toppling before setting themselves just outside his tent so as to intervene again if necessary, Mercola, her bloodied arm bandaged, feels progressively worse, the sense of fridity paired with a sense of internal rot, as though she's disintegrating from the inside out.

As the rest of the wolf-wearing tribe gives in to worrisome slumber, Mercola can't take it anymore. The horrible screams that accompany her leap into the flames, and the smell of burning flesh, awaken Ketchum from his nightmare, wherein he remained caught by the cyclone, soon to be sucked back down into the depths, never to return. Stumbling out of his now unguarded tent, everyone else futilely attempting to pull Mercola's burning body from the fire, Ketchum staggers to the river and sits on the shore. Within seconds, Mercola's screams finally fading as

she succumbs to an agonizing death behind him, he faces the spinning river as, from the center of the spin, coming from somewhere near the calm center, something emerges from the water, protruding ever so slightly from the surface.

Watching it, though unable to focus, it looks like the knotted side of a log inching its way towards him. Only when it's within a body length of him does the glow of the fire behind him illuminate it well enough for him to recognize it. He's seen it once before, their first day here. None other bear witness to the water dragon as it rises from the river to snatch its prey, dragging him back out into the calm center before continuing the spin beneath the surface, finally granting the holy man clarity with his death.



As the first rays of dawn eek their way into the innermost sanctum of the granite island cavern, Zande awakens to a mouthful of blood. At first he thinks that he *hasn't* been dreaming; that consuming the blood of the fallen brown bear mother along with the rest of his frenzied brethren wasn't a dream, and that he actually fed as one of the bats. But he soon finds that it's his own blood; that he's bitten into his mouth in several places, his inner cheeks and lips raw with blood and tortured flesh. Rising upon an empty bed, frigid except for the heat pouring off his sweaty body riddled with bites and claw marks, most of them with little black hairs clinging to them, he feels different; colder and withdrawn from himself, as if he's looking out upon the world through a tunnel, his true self sunken deep within.

Standing is difficult, and brings to mind a different change. Normally his movements come with the comforting feeling of his eagle talon necklace bounding off of his breast bone, but it's gone. He panics, for the talon is his amulet, the physical representation of his self-conceived spiritual essence and identity, and he feels naked without it. Trying in vain to recall the previous night, a vague vision of the necklace being torn from his neck by Kezlan comes to him, and of her flinging it across the room. Scanning the space in the low light, he traces the shelves and creviced storage spaces lining the walls, eventually finding a piece of cord hanging from a fissure at eye level, seeming to have been sucked into one of her black winged creatures stuffed into the same crevice. Tugging at it, it gives way, dropping to the black stone floor along with the body, lying face down.

Turning the creature over, it's been carved from its neck down to its lower extremities, as if by an autopsy, the cord of his necklace inserted within, intertwined with its entrails, wrapped around its organs. Its eerie face exhibits reddish-grey eyes, as if once bright red, now fading upon its death, its oversized mouth agape, its lips pulled back, prominently

displaying its four fangs. Pulling on the cord, cut in one place where she'd severed it the night before, out pops the eagle talon, covered in coagulated blood, having been stuffed inside the dead critter. Even more unsettling, the talon is warm to his touch, and not because of the blood, for the dead animal has long been dead, the little blood remaining in its body cavity having gone lifelessly cold.

Discarding the creature, he quickly ties the cord together and puts it back on his bare chest, finding the same slightly uncomfortable warmth where it touches his torso. He then ambles out to the central chamber, seeking his queen. She's nowhere to be seen, the only sound being the consistent pounding of waves partly bursting through the small western-facing façade of the sea cave, echoing at different frequencies depending upon their propelled force and depth of penetration into the passage. He panics for a minute, for it's as though she's taken his canoe and left the island without word. But no, the commandeered vessel is still there. And so, too, are the zombied-out Mahwahn kids.

Five of them, equally spaced as if points on a pentagram, surround the pool, staring into its depths. They make no noise other than their breathing, which Zande only now notices is far faster than normal, ejecting steamy breaths like rapid beats of a drum. Though standing in this chilly cavern corralled by the cold sea, the sun yet to warm the obsidian into a natural oven, they're entirely nude, and yet the heat pours off of them, condensing with their breaths and intermixing with the fog fighting its way inside. Soon, bubbles begin to surface below them, their rate steadily rising until, in a big foamy cloud, Kezlan emerges. Her gorgeous body is covered in strange, swollen marks, these being nothing like those inflicted upon his own skin, but like bright orange starburst welts, each with a set of red dots in the center. He barely gets a look at them before one of the brain-dead boys hands her her black leather robe, and she

covers them up. Minutes later, she's led Zande back into the inner chamber, and when she removes her robe once more, the marks have almost completely disappeared.

"Why do you insist upon wearing that... thing?, she asks, looking at the talon hanging from his neck, burning his skin.

"It's important to me. Please, just let me wear it."

"It's the past, Chief. And it reminds me of my mother, she whom believes she rules the mountain, sky and land."

"It is of the people, my queen. My people, your people."

"No. It is of the daylight harbingers of death, of she whom rules from on high. You are of the night now. But wear it, if you must. Soon you shall see that it can only restrain you."

They make love one more time, this time without the pipe, as Kezlan knows that he has a mission today. He needs mental clarity and support, and she mirrors that need in her lovemaking, exchanging the passionate, transformative purpose of the previous commingling with a reinforcing show of love and consideration, hammering home his need for her, and her pledge of reciprocity should he succeed in his mission and usher his co-conqueror ashore. Then, with a few more words reminding him of his superiority amongst his people, and his new purpose as the paragon of power, she wraps a large supply of the previous days' medicine in a deerskin, along with a series of carved containers filled with 'elixirs of life,' and a small stash of a specialty smoke concoction prepared specifically for his father and the other elders, along with a retraining on its use, and sees him off.

Unlike the onslaught of the sea inhibiting his ingress the day before, the egress is much the opposite, the tide and currents combining to compel him across the bay without effort, as if saying: *you've passed the test, we're on your side now*. Coming ashore, the first stirrings of life bring a

strong sense of contrast to what he's felt since the night before, the movements of his people reminding him of love, and he's momentarily confused by the emotions rising from his heart, seeming to scream: *turn back, it's not too late!* But he thinks of his queen, of his need for her, of the fact that she's the only one who's seen what he's always believed of himself, and he recommits himself.

Meeting with his most trusted cadre of warriors as soon as they emerge from their tents, he makes plans for the pivotal day, making promises all around, lending encouragement and mollifying their own emotional uncertainty. Kylene emerges with the bear cub by her side, growing by the day, followed closely by Cub, who steps out of his own wigwam with a confused look on his face, as if attempting to recall where he is and how he arrived. Zande does his best not to look at them, knowing how clever and discerning she is, and not wanting to betray his intent. This, alone, makes her suspicious, as it does her father.

Wahuchu sits near Makunah, sensing impending doom, but feeling powerless to intercede, long having known by mystical communion that the fate of his people shall be immersed in pain, suffering being the only path of transformation, and, ultimately, ascension into rebirth. Only after the chief and the other elders have begun smoking the pipe presented to them by their likely future chief does Wahuchu notice its strange smell, just evident beneath the familiar scent of the dried seeing herb they always smoke.

He instantly realizes that the smell represents malice, and yet his proud pupil and his men stand around the fire, presenting an edgy outer ring of muscle and brandished weaponry to the inner ring of aging wisdom. The few looks the warriors give him telegraph ambition, telling him that, if he now acts against them, there shall be bloodshed. Looking across the village, Wahuchu sees the canoe filled with wooden containers and a big bundle of dried purple

flowers wrapped in deerskin set atop one of the many platforms of communal offerings maintained by the people for the sharing of the endless gifts gathered from Great Mother. The sight of the containers chills and occludes his bright heart, sending a shiver up his spine. They're all carved with a triangle facing down, pointing towards the ground, away from lids being pried open, each being filled with wooden jugs, a few of which are being uncorked and sipped upon by some of the more curious Mahwah, for all are well-versed in morning thanksgivings often being accompanied by gift-giving, and none know any need to be cautious of the given gifts. And while the behavior of the imbibers is unsettling in itself, he's particularly concerned with that downwards-pointing triangle carved into the containers. He's seen it before, but can't remember where.

After all the elders have smoked to their content, Wahuchu taking a small puff, half to make a diagnosis, half to present the appearance of the status quo so as not to alarm everyone to the roaring bear that he hears in his own head, the great chief of peace, Makunah, announces that he's made a decision regarding their honored guest: he must be returned to his people, by force if necessary, so as to resuscitate the peace. If he and his people decide that it's okay for him to return here, to the Mahwahn village, he shall be welcomed, and his teachings may commence. That shall be left to the spirits. And Wahuchu shall go with those returning him to his people, as wisdom invites peace.

So, following assurances to his father that he and his men have sufficiently thanked the spirits this morning for the daily bounty bestowed upon them, blown in from all four directions of the seed-spreading wind of renewal, Cub is dragged, reluctantly, up the creek towards his camp. As they disappear from sight, Wahuchu turns around and looks at his daughter, his eyes laden with the weight of sorrow. Kylen's heart sinks, as so much is conveyed in her

father's gaze that she now knows for certain that her instincts are correct: *something is very, very wrong*.

That's when she notices the laughter. Not the joyful, loving laughter commonly spreading through the village, as it's actually far quieter than it typically is this time of day. This is something... *different*. Something she's seldom heard before, associated with secret suffering, sporadically piercing the ominous silence; something careless and deranged, reminding her of how some laugh after surviving a threat to their lives; something linked to trauma, announcing the spirit on the verge of vacating a host body.

Looking towards the sound, two men near the shore each hold one of the carved jugs that had been set inside the several boxes laid upon the offering platform, and one has stumbled and fallen into the gentle surf, the other laughing at him in a cruel, careless manner. Then giggling, coming from a different direction, two older women passing one of the wooden jugs back and forth between them, one of their many children tugging at the cedar bark tunic of one of them. The child seems as dismayed as Kylen at their non-response. A few others pack their pipes with the strange purple flower, sending its sickly-sweet-smelling plumes of smoke into the air. Then the great chief hunches forward and begins coughing, soon joined by the rest of the elders.

An hour later, miles away, having consumed much of his failing strength just to pass over the ridge and descend into the Turquoise River Valley, Wahuchu, too, is afflicted, the irritation in his lungs rising like a steadily-fed fire, the desire to cough overwhelming. While they'd left the village a peace party of six, including Cub, many more have entered the party from the sides, sneaking in post-departure, making a war party of twenty fully-equipped Mahwah. Falling behind, Wahuchu issues little spittle-spewing, gasping coughs, despite his resistance and masterfully-honed self-control. He tries to hide it, as Zande, clutching

Cub around the back of his neck and violently forcing him forward, keeps looking back, shooting him telling glances, further cementing his treachery in the now addled mind of his astute teacher. Feeling he'll soon give in and fall over, Wahuchu searches his mind for a course of saving action.

Stomach wrenching, vision beginning to blur, the terrible sense that he'll never see his daughter again, the purest human embodiment of the spirits, Wahuchu remembers a mistake that he made as a youth. As a boy of twelve he accidentally ate a plant that protects its offspring seeds with a starvation-inducing poison, and yet looks identical to the food-giving wild pea plant that his then mentor, Xaxu, told him disguised itself as the former so as to avoid being eaten by the birds. The blunder precipitated a week of compulsive vomiting in which he lost half his body weight.

Afterwards, he'd resolved to never let ignorance poison him again. And he hasn't, his mind a veritable cornucopia of plant medicine, currently bound to his steadily blurring vision as he scans his surroundings for an antidote. There's the Prickly Club Shrub, the inner stem usable to resolve the stomach pains, but that's the least of his worries right now; the widespread Red Cedar, of course, its uses manifold amongst his people, including for reducing the symptoms of inflammatory conditions and speeding recovery, should he somehow survive this; the blackberry, its leaves known to prevent vomiting, which he learned after that youthful ordeal... but no, he needs the opposite, if anything; he needs to purge, and kill the evil.

There it is! The Crimson Clover. While its red-tinged foliage is pounded into a poultice and used to relieve the peripheral symptoms of everything from rashes to snake bites, its root is particularly destructive to pathogens that make their way past the outer defenses of the body, into the guts and bloodstream. The tradeoff is that this antipathogenic effect is so potent that it can kill the

consumer, as the root counters the internal violence done to the afflicted with a violence of its own, and is thus used in only the most dire of circumstances, when it's life or death. A healthy sample spotted out ahead of their path, waving at him not by the action of the wind, but by the hallucination of his corrupted sight thanks to his poisonous pupil, he puts all of his mental focus and failing bodily power into his forward momentum, so as not to halt proceedings and bring the focus crashing down upon him.

Waiting for Zande to look back in his direction, no doubt expecting him to keel over and die at any moment, as soon as he does so Wahuchu slows and spins furtively away, off to the side. Knowing he has little time in which to act, he momentarily apologizes to his red-fringed brother for the uncharacteristically destructive dig, yanking the plant out by its root and immediately biting off and swallowing a big piece of the vile-tasting root. Moments later he's pulled to his feet by two of Zande's most obedient followers, who carry him forward against his will, with most of the Mahwah around him too afraid to treat him in such a rough manner, out of respect for him and fear of reprisal from the spirits.

Pausing briefly to note the plant plucked from the earth, Zande removes a cord from his belt and addresses him:

"Don't worry, venerable teacher. I will carry your wisdom forward, and pair it with my strength, and with the lessons of my new teacher. Your sacrifice shall not be in vain."

"And as for you, little wolf cub," he adds, turning his attention towards his Arian captive, whose wrists he begins to bind, "I'll spare you the suffering of seeing your father made into target practice." As he speaks he ties Cub to a tree. And while Cub doesn't understand the words, the look in Zande's eyes, and the tone of his expression, tell him all he needs to know: *he'll never see his father again.*

Twenty minutes later, Wahuchu's strength has failed, and not only can he no longer carry his own weight, but he's no longer able to restrain the now violent coughing fits. Clearly being an impediment to their stealthy approach, he's dropped in the dirt not far from the now partially-fortified outer ring of the Arian camp, near to where he witnessed the calamity two days before. There he lays, writhing in agony, feeling the curtains fall over his consciousness. In the distance, the Mahwah warriors circle the camp, each holding a bow drill and a handful of cattail soaked in pitch.

Half an hour later, drifting in and out of consciousness on the forest floor, Wahuchu can feel the heat from numerous fires set in a large circle around the river basin. To a backdrop of whooping Mahwah, screaming Arians and smoking brush bursting forth into billowing blazes climbing the towering trees, their upper limbs smoldering from the spring moisture suddenly forced from their assaulted flesh, the Arian threat comes to an end. As the conflagrations converge and plunge down the hill toward the river, some of the wolf-wearers make a break for the fast-closing ring of fire, others seek the seeming safety of the river, and a few stand their ground, as if waiting for the minions of the underworld to come crashing down upon them. Every last one of them, including the women, is made into a pincushion by the surrounding assassins. Everyone who was actually *there*, of course, Zande assuming the occupants included the head of the clan, now far away.

Half an hour later, most of the Mahwah making their way back towards their own camp, Zande, his skin covered in ash, pulls Wahuchu from the ground and carries him towards the blaze. Barely breathing, just enough of his mind endures for him to thank the Great Mother for bequeathing him the opportunity to serve Her people, for showing him the ways of the forest, and for giving him the perfect daughter. Carrying his dying teacher toward the

pitfall that had been shoulder-high the last he'd seen it, when he'd chucked the bear-cub-bait into it, it's now complete, rung with piercing limbs, deep enough for the fall alone to kill. Forcing Wahuchu to his knees in front of it, Zande takes a moment to peer into it, unable to see the bottom through the smoke stinging his eyes. That's when he sees, and remembers, the knife given to his teacher by his father, tied to Wahuchu's hip, conferred in the greatest of honors when he was granted the title of Medicine Man.

Bending down, he removes the blade, the sight of it cutting deep into his heart. For long has he known that his father felt far more kinship with this man, now at his end, than he ever did for him. The very sight of it seems there to torture him for his treachery against those he was meant to love and protect. Made of one of the four primary incisors of a brown bear corpse discovered decades before, one kept by Makunah, one granted to Wahuchu, the other two bequeathed to other chiefs of the bay, to Zande the blade represents *not* the conferral of this great honor, but a jealousy running so bitterly deep that it sours him even now, on the verge of his chiefdom. It's a poisonous feeling that he's carried with him for as long as he can remember. Apropos, then, that the same blade be used to sever Wahuchu's bind to the people on the day its giver passed.

Wahuchu, kept from falling forward by Zande's arm around the back of his neck, hovers in the space between this world and the spirit world. So, when his corrupted student shows it to him, mocking him with "you won't be needing this, will you?," the same feelings that first fell upon him during that ceremony several decades ago revisit him now, when he felt the spirit of the bear enter into his young body. In his bewildered state, the bear enters him once more, granting that body, now failing, one last burst of energy. *He is the bear*, and bites down on Zande's hand.

Screaming in surprise as much as pain, Zande reflexively releases the blade whilst pulling back, withdrawing his hold on the back of Wahuchu's neck, who falls face first into the pit, disappearing into the depths, the blade of the bear tumbling into the pit with him, swallowed by the smoke.

Many miles away, Kylene dwells in abject terror and disbelief amidst the aftermath of the cowardly, senseless slaughter of those whom she'd been raised to revere. She's heard more stories from them than she can remember, and she'll never hear them speak again. She's shared more love with them than she could ever express, they who now lay in their own puke and excrement, never to teach, or love, or be the connective tissue of the Mahwah again; a tissue torn by the vicissitude of betrayal.

By the time she'd realized what was happening, it was too late. She attempted to administer her supply of the root of the Crimson Clover to Makunah, but to no avail; she barely got him to swallow it before his head fell lifelessly forward into hers. Adding to the dismay, few of her brethren even responded to the sudden horror, distracted by the gifts coming to them from some dark corner of the bay. Tears welling, fury in her heart, Makunah's final words repeat themselves over and over, tied to her sickened thoughts:

"You must... flee. My son has turned to... darkness. You cannot be here for him to claim when he returns. He probably thinks... that you'll... stay, out of concern for your father. Or for that... young man who is your future. But your father is dead, my girl. If you stay, so shall you be. But you... must live. The two of you are the future of this land."

This last line unearthed a memory of a recurring dream from her childhood, when she walked side-by-side amongst her people holding the hand of a light-skinned foreigner. She knows, in this moment, that Cub *must* be that man. In truth, she knew as much in her heart when her

eyes first met his across the council fire, now dying beside her. Now on her feet, she makes haste towards the Arian camp, the bear cub hurrying along behind her. She knows that the salvation of her father and the young man whom she secretly felt she already knew the moment she saw him hang in the balance, between life and death, as if both are true at the same time, awaiting her observation to force that fluid truth to take one solid form or the other. And, as she flies through the forest as fast as her feet can carry her, her fear and fury manifest around her, the forest swaying violently in strangely unseasonable, raging winds.

A couple of miles from the camp, she sees him. Cub is bound to a Red Cedar, struggling to set himself free. Heartened by the sight of the handsome young man from her girlhood dreams, she removes her knife and begins to cut him loose. As she does so, she smells the smoke. In the distance the semblance of a forest fire can just be seen between the trees parting in the wind. Cub freed, her first impulse is to burst forward and fight; to appeal to the wisdom buried in the Mahwahn warriors whom have helped the traitor perform these heinous acts, and to call upon the spirits to empower her to tear him to pieces. But, as she moves to do so, Cub grabs her wrist. Stopping, she looks deep into his eyes, and only there does she see that her path isn't to embody rage and fly at the traitor, but to fortify herself and prepare for the future fight, for *this* fight is over. As the distant sound of approaching footsteps find her honed hearing, she grabs Cub by the hand and runs east, toward her sanctuary, the bear cub on their heels.



Harold and his six accompanying Arian warriors have been tracking their lost prince for hours, the sun arcing into its overhead, noonday position, the six soldiers sensing the rising frustration and loss of confidence of their emotionally and physically ravaged chief more and more with every step he takes, his fortitude failing, descending into desperation. As they move through the timberland, uphill, heading east, they realize, yet again, that these people of the greenwood are nothing like them. They're more like animals. One of the men even speculates that they may be shapeshifters, so consistently do their footfalls overlap with the prints of countless other creatures of the fertile forest.

Where those prints were once clear imprints pressed into the lush humus of the forest floor, they're becoming ever more difficult to distinguish as the luxuriant greenery gives way to rockier terrain and steeper travails. The ridge they'd been skirting along all morning has fractured into countless more, each delivering them further and further up the base of the mountain. Tiring and thirsty, they see a lake set in the relative lowland between two ridges, and decide to drop down between them. At the lakeshore the men fill their canteens and momentarily cool themselves in the crystalline waters, so cold and clean coming off the ice melt above. Walking a length of the shoreline, Harold notices that the signs of foot traffic are more prevalent here, and that a low fire still burns just off the waterline. Someone was here recently. They may still be here.

Peering into the trees and brush, and across a meadow of innumerable blooming wildflowers carpeting the ground in seemingly endless bouquets of blues, yellows and purples, sweating in his wolf hide, Harold thinks he sees someone squatting behind a fallen tree, but when he investigates there's no one to be found. He feels foolish wearing this animal skin, and has the urge to remove it, but removing one's hide is akin to forsaking the gods in his clan, and he

might as well call out to Odin, and ask for his own death. Even ailing, exhausted from recent trials, his face burning where half his sight was stolen by that great beast, his arm aching so badly he wants to lay down right here, he dare not admit such thoughts to his men, who might kill him for it, as those wolves hungry for the alpha position sometimes do when the alpha is sick, injured or otherwise weakened. A leader unable to head the pack doesn't last long in Aria. All his mental strength is being consumed, his courage and resolve waning. He senses his demise, and though he fortifies himself as best he can, his missing son and draining faith suddenly deliver an unfamiliar feeling: *regret*.

But it is not for a wolf-wearer to dwell in the realm of feeling. That is how one releases the wolf, and returns to the weakness into which they're born. That is how one retracts one's claws, and defangs oneself, and regresses into the fragile state of humanness which one kills when one learns to embody the wolf, and eat of its heart to make of it one's own heart, and drink of its blood, and wear its skin not as a mere garment, but as the focused intention of being reborn into its pack. And yet, as the seven of them continue their path towards the peak rising so high above them that it seems belonging to another world, he loses his resistance, and inwardly gives into the sense of the walls falling down around his heart. Lament silently spills out.

He should've shown Cub more love; more support. He shouldn't have named him Cub, to begin with. That was all pride. He probably turned the boy against him through that act alone, exacerbated by ignoring every sign that he wasn't like the others. Whereas most young men are overeager to take up the sword and wear the wolf, and plunge themselves into the fiery forge by which men are made and constantly tested, when he's honest with himself, retracing the trails of his memory, Cub resisted the ways of the wolf from the get-go. He wasn't the wolf. He

was a dreamer forced into wolf clothing; an owl naturally suited to searching the starry skies. If he hadn't been the son of the chief he might've made a good sacrifice to the gods. Instead he was protected, his resentment hidden away, his only remaining parent locked into expectation.

Dear gods, he adored Cub's mother, Ella. *That's* where Cub got it from. But, if he's being honest with himself, that's why he loved her, and, secretly, he always loved that about their son as well, and ached constantly at the regret of her not living to see herself in him. Their resistance to the traditional ways of Arian life was thought by many to be disgraceful. They both wanted something else; romance; exploration; creation. And while he was conditioned to be ashamed of such traits, someplace deep down Harold was proud of these characteristics, and internally celebrated their difference from him, and wished he could support them. It was as if they were the buds of spring trying to penetrate through the unforgiving ice. He should've cracked the ice. If only he can find his son, assuming he still draws breath, maybe it's not too late to make amends.

He'd start with apologizing for killing his mother. That was the secret source of his shame, and his inability to communicate with Cub. Every time he looked at him he saw his mother, and felt the dishonor of permitting her death. Because of him his only son would never know the love of his wonderful mother, and Harold knows, in such a deep, aching way, how much she would've loved him, and made sure that some other path was laid out for him, refusing to give into the prevailing, constricting judgments.

Instead, he killed her, and trapped his son in a life of expectation that led to this, to his resistance, to his wandering insolently away from their camp, likely to his own demise, one protector against an entire tribe of people whom he now must admit are far better suited to this place than he and his dwindling contingent could ever be. Now,

his own death looming over him in this foolish attempt to chase a legend and regain his glory, he'd be the death of them all. And that tragic tale started with her, the love of his life whom he murdered shortly after Cub's birth.

Not directly, of course; it wasn't by his own hand. But it might as well have been, for what is an Arian warrior who cannot protect his family, and invites the circumstances of their deaths? For, by his pride and ambition, he brought the Valkyrie down from the sky to claim her. The adder was only an extension of his own inadequacy, and of knowing only one direction in life. That was the failure that begot all of their suffering; the beginning of their end. And even if he could've brought himself to share his emotions with his son, how could he admit the depth of his shame?

Odin, she was beautiful. And talented. Because of his position *she* was permitted her natural artistry. Her carvings, and the talisman's she made for everyone, and the necklaces she strung from anything she could find; she was a natural craftsman, her abilities known across Aria. But the same privilege was denied to his son, for whom only a life of sword and hide was permitted, else he'd paint a target on both their backs. He was the great warrior, and would kill any man who said otherwise, or challenged him in any way. How could he permit his son to follow his mother's footsteps, even knowing how much more of her was in him than he. He'd do anything to go back and retract his aggressions against the eastern clans; anything to trade some of the inferno he'd held in his breast for the soft, glowing warmth of love that she'd forced him to feel.

When Cub truly was a cub, of the age when he was just learning to walk, they'd found her stumbling back towards the fort at daybreak, wheezing, barely able to walk. By the time Ketchum got ahold of her, it was too late. The adder had struck her several times. She died before being able to communicate what had happened. But through Ketchum's

divinations, combined with the report of one woman, who'd seen her in a daze leaving the protection of the walls in the middle of the night, and endless rumors about who had called her out and why, Harold, in an inconsolable rage, and following what were believed to be her tracks, east, decided that it must've been one of the medicine men of the eastern clans who'd cast a spell and called her out.

His mind reeled then much as it does now, haunted by the loveliness of memories made into horrors. Now, lamenting the loss of his son, he recalls how he felt then, futilely trying to hide his emotions, visions of Ella creeping into his mind. Sharpening his sword, calling upon his clan to prepare for war, one image of her after another assaulted his heaving heart and beleaguered brain. In his mind's eye he saw Ella laying nude in bed, carving his face into a polished piece of pine; he saw her swimming through layers of animal fur blankets, teasing him; holding Cub up to the sky, laughing, the look of pure, unadulterated joy on her face; the way she'd beam every time he made a discovery on one of his forays, and brought back some colorful stone or odd burl of bark or other curiosity that she'd transform into art, the few men he held in confidence chiding him about his evening walks searching for pieces for his queen to turn into some strange, striking new form.

He had no proof that it was the eastern clans that were responsible for her death. But it didn't matter. His fury needed an outlet, and they were it. They weren't even a threat, as scattered and leaderless as their land and divided clans had been at the time. He and his men slaughtered every last one of them, and much worse.

They were dismembered, many whilst they still drew breath, their pieces piled up and made into offerings for the wolves, their heads mounted upon spikes and set into the ground throughout Eastern Aria. Grief and fury were traded for horror, with lasting effect. For, as Cub grew and the

rage receded from Harold's heart, the easterners that survived found unity through their hatred of him, such that their alliance with Roland would bring about his eventual flight from their home. The flirtation with Katarina, his cousin's lovely wife who reminded him so much of Ella, was just an excuse, as was latching onto the prophecy of the Northern Gate and the New World. The truth was he had to leave that place for many reasons, especially the fact that, after Ella's death, it no longer felt like home, but like a reminder of the home he'd had, now burned to ash.

Of course, this was not for the Wolf Clan to know; that their alpha wolf wasn't *actually* tracking some sort of legendary prey, but running away, his tail between his legs, his heart bloodier than even the horrors that he'd wrought. All he could think, over and over, was: *you let her die*. She visited him every night, in his dreams, and every night he felt a sublime joy at her being returned to him, and again and again she visited him there, in the space between worlds, so constantly that he began to know when he was asleep, and ran from his awakening, even going through a nearly one year period where he demanded that Ketchum supply him with the means to stay asleep for longer and longer, until the whispers of his weakness grew too loud, and he was forced to take up the sword again and remind them that he was Harold, Old Blood, chief of the Wolf Clan.

Such are his reflections as he and his half dozen cohorts follow the fading footsteps up the mountain, the sun sinking towards the sea now near to twenty miles behind them. Upon summiting one hill they all stop to catch their breaths, and he looks them all in the face. And in his emotional state, his own face feeling as raw as his heaving heart, his fractured arm aching like the deepest depths of his broken being, he almost gives into the pain and says it:

I ran away, and you all were foolish enough to follow me. I don't hunt anymore, I howl over a broken heart. And I

shouldn't have kept playing king. I should've released you all from your responsibility to me as soon as we landed in this place. I should've paid attention to my son, instead of fortifying our camp and creating that inane vainglorious game of killing the water dragon. You all would've been better off if I'd just waded into the river and let the beast drag me down to a watery grave. Maybe then he'd have stayed. Maybe then I wouldn't be responsible for the death of my son because I couldn't come to grips with my shame.

That's when he hears it. A sound as soft as the leaves swaying in the wind around him. A voice, scarcely audible.

"Come, Harold, son of Agath, take refuge with me."

He almost asks the others if they hear it, but he can tell from their faces that they don't, and would consider his question a sign that he's cracked, and that Kraske must take over. So he stays silent, picking up his climbing pace, his mind awash with a mix of trepidation and wonder, uncertain what he's experiencing, remembering Ketchum's one-time admonishment that one shouldn't expect the gods to commune with mortals in the same way that mortals commune with one another. Either this is some demon that's sensed his doom, some hidden creature guarding this realm, calling him towards his coup de grâce, or it's the opposite, a being of light that wishes to protect him from his fast approaching demise. And while he's known nothing of this land but inhospitable beauty, the soft, sensuous voice fills him as he hasn't been filled since he lost Ella all those years ago. *Maybe it's her spirit.*

"I'm sorry, chief," Kraske grunts back at him after a brief conversation with their lead tracker, "but we can't be clear that this trail is heading towards Cub. And pretty soon we'll reach a point where night will fall before we can return to camp. Desae admits that he chose the track on instinct, because there are tracks everywhere, but this one called to

him. Do you want to keep going, and take shelter for the night upon the mountain, or should we head back down?"

Harold doesn't hear him, transfixed by the voice that has grown louder already, as if raised relative to their altitude:

"Keep coming, good chief. I need your blood and courage."

"Chief?," Kraske attempts again, alarmed by Harold's silence, with whom he's been on countless expeditions, never before having felt such vulnerability and uncertainty in his commander, he whom no Arian wishes to cross swords with. Even half-blind and with the use of one arm, his presence evokes power. Yes, the rumors may be true, he may've been chased out of Aria, found in disfavor by his kingly cousin, but he loves Harold as a brother. Such is the bond that forms when men fight for one another's lives.

"Don't be afraid, mighty wolf. I know how to save your son."

"Chief, you okay?," one of the other men asks.

"Yes. Let's keep going. I have a feeling about this trail too."

The air thinning as they climb, the once well-treed ridges turn more and more to barren stone as the sun starts to sink towards the sea behind them. Harold occasionally stops to take in the sights. From here much can be seen. The land is breathtakingly beautiful, even as it threatens to swallow them whole, erasing them from existence. An undulating tapestry of greens and browns of every conceivable hue drapes down from a mountainous head heaving with clouds caught by the gravitational force of the ancient overlord, while, in the opposite direction, the gently waving ocean of white-fringed blues seems to spread out forever beneath an endless sky, the horizon calling to his intrepid spirit. He senses he'll never return to Camp Water Dragon; he'll never see Ketchum or his new queen again.

But the truth is that he'd sacrifice them both in a second if it meant rescuing his son from peril; he whom both embodies the only love yet living and the only surviving remnant of the greatest force that's ever lived inside his breast: his love for Ella, his *true* queen, his eternal bride. Now that it seems he won't survive this place, that feeling has become all the more palpable, as if it's the only thing that was ever true, the rest being but a transient illusion set upon the road to Valhalla; a game concealing the only truths he's ever known for sure, only revealed for certain now, after breaking him all the way down to his immortal essence through bodily pain and exhaustion, akin to how Ella herself would reveal him in her carvings, the heart of the stone that's always been concealed within, revealed by chipping away the ephemeral and illusory until all that's left is what will always be. "This is *why* you're a warrior, my love," he can hear Ella say, "for the lover *must* be a fighter. How else can love be protected but by being fought for?"

"I'm sorry, my love."

He says it aloud, the other men turning to look at him, then at one another. But no one says anything, not even Kraske, the only man that knew her; the only other man that has any real understanding of what Harold lost that horrifying night; that knows how deeply his king's humanity was buried in the ensuing days, weeks, and years, as if he'd been hollowed out by pain, the remaining void entirely unable to be filled, even by all of the blood in Aria. Only Kraske agreed to the voyage with any sense of what their quest *truly* entailed: seeking the spirit that left that night.

Again the whisper comes on the wind:

"Prepare yourself, wolf-wearer. You are being hunted."

As twilight looms, the men more exhausted than they've been since surviving the passage through the endless sea of ice, Harold searches the ridgelines for signs of trouble,

but sees nothing. But as his men begin seeking a suitable place for the seven of them to hole-up for the night, Harold hears it; not the whisper again, but a sound reminiscent of Aria that he's heard numerous times before; when he was learning to hunt with his father; when he went with Ketchum up into the mountains to call upon, study and absorb the spirits empowering the clan; when night fell after dismembering the denizens of the eastern villages, the predators licking their chops over the offering. *Wolves.*

Looking at his throbbing, bandaged arm in the fading light, he realizes that he's been bleeding the entire time; not a lot, but enough to leave a tiny trickle of blood heading up the mountain behind them, akin to setting the table for those forever following their noses towards their next feast. Suddenly imperiled, the urgency of discovering someplace to take cover for the night and start a defensive fire takes primacy, with a few taking scouting positions as the others span out and draw their swords, assessing the threat.

What these wolves lose to the Arian Grey Wolf in size they seem to make up for in numbers, as where there were but a few set upon the fringes upon first being sighted, they seem to smell the men's urgency, and are thereby incited to instill desperation, their numbers fast multiplying as they probe for weaknesses, attempting to break the coalesced company into independent pieces so as to attack the most exposed amongst them. And the more rapid the men's movements, the quicker the turning of their heads, scanning for a safe haven, the more fleeting the fall of their ascending steps, and the more they move not as one unit, but as individuals, the nearer and more numerable the wolf pack becomes, emboldened by any sign of vulnerability.

When, finally, a suitable refuge is discovered, a natural hollow protected by boulders on three sides, the wolves are nearly upon them, snarls and growls echoing off of the surrounding rock, the predators seeming to encourage one

another, waiting for their alpha to set upon the strange upright creatures clad in their cousin's skins. A few of the men scan the floor for tinder, and, lowering themselves to the earth, their seemingly cowering profiles compel their stalkers to strike. Three of the men are downed in minutes, struck from every angle, the leading wolves clamoring up the rocks seeking elevated positions from which to deliver fatal blows. Two of the men are retrieved in the fight, swords slashing at and killing or mortally wounding a half-dozen of their attackers as the wounded pair are pulled back into the center of the circle just as the fire roars to life, the pack backing off. But only briefly, the whisperer on the wind now speaking to Harold as if standing beside him.

"The fire won't be enough. Prepare to flee. For what hunts you is unnatural, and descends with the darkening skies."

As they hear their number officially drop to half a dozen, the seventh man drug in zig-zagging directions away from their defenses before being torn to shreds, a few of the men pluck burning limbs from the flames and wave them about, keeping the killers at bay. It's quickly clear, however, that this fire won't last, the reachable, burnable resources almost immediately running low, the only way to retrieve more to venture out into defenselessness. Harold feels the walls closing in, but unlike his men, his eyes are now upon the skies in heeding the mysterious voice in his head. And as the sun finishes dipping beneath the waters, death at his door, he senses its symbolism, the sun setting on his existence, his spirit preparing to depart its vessel.

"No, Harold. This cannot be your end. You live not only for yourself, but for the future that I shall show you, my love. I will do my best to protect you, but you must climb to me!"

As the voice fades once more, he sees something in the sky, approaching their position. It's like a raincloud, barely visible in the just-lingering light, except that this cloud

moves, swirling and expanding and collapsing and reshaping itself, as if some formless force of malevolence. And, as it draws closer, the wolves begin to retreat, even as the fire loses its force, telling Harold all he needs to know: even they are no match for what's coming. As the strange storm cloud draws near, it screeches, the shrill sound of doom emitted from thousands of mouths at once.

"Protect yourself men!," he screams. "Look to the skies!"

The bloodsucking creatures of the night fall upon them, the Arians' swinging swords like the debris in a hurricane, once more mocking man's feeble attempt to overcome nature. As they tear into his flesh, so many of them that they begin bursting through his hide, Harold is suddenly struck by an unspoken principle oft-confused with cowardice: that fearlessness has its limits, and must ultimately bend to the foolishness of feigning invulnerability. With the sultrily summoning voice in his head and his dead wife and lost child surging up in his heart, he hears himself unspeakably say 'not today!' Accepting his dishonor, he turns and runs.

As what remains of his party has its meat torn from their bones behind him, a ribbon of the death-dealing cloud of winged demons peels off of its bloodbath and lines up on his heels, following him as he trips and falters over the rock, his feet then finding soil as he stumbles through a dense row of vegetation, falling and getting up, the insatiable winged beasts crawling and clawing and sinking their fangs into every inch of his exposed flesh, biting his sword-hand so hard that he loses his last defense just before falling into more foliage, finally reduced to covering his head and expending his last ounce of strength in the effort to reach what's either his delusion, or his salvation. It's only when he accepts his end that the salvation arrives.

A snow-storm suddenly drops down off the mountain, the force of its frigid winds so great that it pushes back his

attackers, his own movement stifled, yet still inching forward. So thick is the snow, and so potent the gale, he's near to blinded, the winged beasts of blackness still swirling above him, the cruel cacophony of their concerted shrieks menacing him just overhead, but with few now clinging to his bloodied body. At the same time he feels as if something takes hold of him and gives him strength, as though an invisible rope is now bound to his breast, pulling him upwards. Harold gives silent thanks for the mysterious strength, and for the freezing air cooling his flailed flesh.

Still slowly ascending, he hears a horrible sound penetrate the shrieking mass looming above and around him on all sides, just waiting for the storm to pass so they may feed. Turning to look, a particularly large black beast gradually makes its way through the mass, which parts to make room. Its red eyes bore into him, as if penetrating his heart, the heat and gravity of its gaze opposing the frigid gale.

Closer and closer it draws, and though he tries not to look, and instead focus all his attention and remaining energy on the seemingly futile climb, he can't help himself. And as he turns back, once, twice, three times, the creature seems more and more a force of evil, half creature, half a human possessed of pure perniciousness, and he's convinced that this particular being is less interested in consuming his flesh than consuming his very spirit, having come to take him into the bowels of the deepest, darkest nightmare, refusing to release him into heaven, to sit beside the gods.

Just as the horrible creature reaches out with its claws, its massive black wings beating just hard enough to counter the force coming off the mountain, descending upon him just faster than he has the ability to climb, something else descends from above, riding the flurry of the snowstorm.

Like a bolt of pure white, feathery light, a snow owl bravely bursts through and harries his attacker, barely visible in the

light of the waning moon, saving him at the last second. Hope propelling him forward, he summons his last vestiges of strength, pushing against the stinging wind. Turning around once more, the owl that saved him is now in peril a short distance down the mountain behind him, the leading winged beast of blackness now hovering, watching as the brilliant white bird of the mountain futilely flails against the onslaught of thousands of the creature's demonic minions.

Then, Harold not watching where he strides, the snowstorm suddenly subsides, and it appears as though, having lost its protection, the owl will be killed. Not expecting this sudden cessation of the storm, Harold is abruptly propelled forward by the lack of resistance as, in the same moment, the owl flees the fight and flies in his direction, Harold watching its retreat whilst blundering blindly forward. Tumbling into an unseen swale partially concealed by snow, he hits his head. His consciousness fades as he rolls down into the natural bowl cut into the rock. The last thing that he feels is the sense of falling.



Kylen, Cub and the bear cub flee through the 'burning fields,' patchworks of perennially renewed woodland and meadow kept cleared of maturing forest by the application of fire, used to maintain the conditions naturally regrowing the favorite food of the animals that they hunt, whom graze off of the plants springing from the ash-fertilized soil, many of which the Mahwah gather themselves, including berries and root vegetables, and those offering the tenderest edible shoots especially attractive to deer and elk. There they pause briefly so that the bear cub can sate its hunger upon the preponderance of salmonberry, thimbleberry and strawberries. The odd trio then continues to what Cub would later learn the Mahwah call the 'Three Sister Fields,' set upon a drier rise between the communities of the bay and the mature surrounding forest. The vast majority of Mahwah resources are harvested naturally, in ecologically-conscious consideration of the Great Mother, their provider. Only a few sporadic examples of agriculture exist in these lands. Moon Face and her people call this rare example of the mostly alien practice the 'Three Sisters Fields' because it's based upon a synergistic partnership between three plant providers: corn, beans and squash.

A few generations ago, the Mahwah had known none of these strange species, and their arrival, and those of their bearers, were received with a mix of everything from fear and hostility to a few outlying groups acting in what was considered a rebellious adoption of the practice of farming. Some of the elders considered it unholy, in fact; a slap of the Great Mother's face, in effect, telling Her where and why to disseminate her offspring. The audacity! Those who brought the strange plants were almost killed for doing so. Eventually, however, with the backing of those more open to change, the visitors were permitted to stay, in exchange for teaching the Mahwah the stories and ways of the East.

The visitors came from somewhere far over the mountain, and across great expanses of land, driven from their native ground by soldiers sailing in on vessels a hundred times the size of their own, propelled by great sheets set in the sky, bearing weapons so powerful that they harnessed the forces of thunder and lightning. The lands from which the visitors hailed suffered ongoing droughts, rain sometimes not falling for months. These tales of regular water scarcity terrified the Mahwah, for whom rain is not only guaranteed, but who spend as much time guarding against its excess as these foreigners devoted to surviving its nonexistence.

Teaching farming to those who harvest from natural providence, who know only of the fecundity of the forest, rivers and bay, was akin to a cultural assault. And yet, some, like the medicine men and the wiser of the elders and chiefs at the time, saw lessons in the teachings of the Three Sisters. Some of these more open-minded Mahwah saw reflections of their own teachings in the foreign tales, like the need for balancing, reciprocating relationships.

The corn rises first to anchor the process, quickly climbing upwards to give something for the beans, coming next, to rise up in a type of loving, encircling embrace, latching onto the corn. The field then coming into its own, the late coming squash spreads across the base of operations, shading and protecting the soil, preserving moisture for the entire partnership whilst preventing plants that might interfere with that partnership from taking root. When the three are fully established and making their food for the people in late summer, their three interlocked sets of leaves look out for one another, each giving just enough space for the others, until all angles of the sun are claimed.

When the visitors who brought the seeds that made the Three Sisters Fields finally rose up to be recycled by the Creator, returning to the Great Mother so that She, in Her unparalleled wisdom, may make of them their new form,

the fields fell fallow. And yet, by the innate resilience of their partnership, the three plants return year after year to reclaim their domain from the seeds perennially spread therein, with other flora rarely finding a foothold. This, say some elders, is a sign of the strength of the unity of three, much as the Mahwah teach of 'Father,' or Sky, 'Mother,' or Earth, and their 'Children,' the multitude of plants and animals comprising life, the Mahwah being the youngest.

Moving southeast on a line between her village and the Great Mountain in the distance, rising like a mighty granite guardian with a helmet of ice, they reach the ridgeline that Cub had considered the primary point of demarcation between his people and hers. From there, they continue east along the ridge, Kylen moving with a naturally athletic, fleet pace matching the Mahwah way, where every day is marked by easy, undetectable movement through their forest home, bouncing between endless points of harvest and worship, of inseparable work, study and devotion. This continues for miles, Cub straining to match her, Kylen only slowing when the bear cub fails to keep up, until she suddenly stops, motioning with her hands to stay low.

Kylen turns and whispers something in Mahwahn to Cub, and though it's unintelligible, it's clear from her hushed speech and steely gaze that they must proceed with caution. She then points at their little furry companion, making a clawing motion with her hands, appearing to imitate a beast with massive claws. *A bear.* And probably the same species; one of those golden brown behemoths he saw patrolling the endless string of archipelagos leading here. There must be a brown bear den nearby.

Mirroring Kylen's movements, they continue their gradual progression along one of an innumerable number of paths that her people have punched through the forest through generation upon generation of foot traffic. So long have the Mahwah wound their way through these woods that their

movements have made these pathways, they being almost unnoticeable, as subtle as, and indistinguishable from, those made by the passing deer and elk that they follow. The forest thickens, the number and diversity of trees and plants exploding exponentially. A surreal sense comes over Cub as he realizes *this* is the place he's dreamed of.

Kylen soon picks her pace back up, and they trudge on, snaking between trees lined with vines and moss, the ferns themselves sometimes being unsatisfied with the forest floor, climbing up the trees to intermingle with the layered high-rise patchwork of texture and color. Mile after mile they make their way through the strangely intermingling species, Cub's muscles straining as he rebukes himself for having once regarded these people as soft and craven. They finally rise up and over a hill holding a thickly-set string of berry brambles before dropping down into a great swale; a low-lying bowl shape in the land. At this point their progression comes to a crawl, for the simple reason that, in contrast to their former route, no natural path pierces this suddenly overgrown mix of short trees, bushes and vines, sewn together as if forming a natural fence in the forest.

The natural boundary is so thick that it makes Cub wish that he still retained his sword so that he could come to Kylen's aid, taking the lead position so as to hack their way through. But, as a recurring theme, he's made an incorrect assumption as to their circumstances, for she's well aware of where they are, and how to proceed. Ducking down low, Cub following clumsily behind her, stumbling with every other step, Kylen puts on a show of agile grace. She dips down into a tiny trench passing beneath a massive decomposing log lined with lichen, ferns and fledgling tree sprouts, sidesteps through a series of sprawling, unearthed roots wrought by the fall of a trio of once towering trees, pirouettes around a pair of enormous, moss-encased boulders, wades through a knee-deep bog bursting with its

own microclimate of strange, head-high flowering plants pouring forth with saccharine scents, and, finally, comes to what Cub will soon come to call 'The Portal of the Spirits.'

Erected by Kylene and her father over the years, something added with every honored visitation, the portal reminds Cub of having watched the Mahwah erect their wigwams back in village central. A collection of red limbs have been lodged in the earth about five feet apart, then curved into arcs to form a passageway through the otherwise impenetrable brush. Cub has to stoop over to enter the beginning of the arced passage, it being just tall enough for Kylene to move through it with a slight bow of her head, as if paying homage to the passage as she conducts her way through it, the bear cub moving through with ease, periodically glancing back at Cub as if to say 'Why so slow?' And as soon as Cub crosses the entryway and begins his conveyance, a chill runs up his spine, and along his exposed arms, his heart beating harder with every step. Then, suddenly, it opens up. Never before has Cub felt as though he's made a passage more spiritual than physical.

'Luckily my father didn't trust the traitor enough to show him this place,' Kylene thinks. 'This shall be our sanctuary.'

A hushed reverence stills the air as they enter. Even if he could understand her, Kylene doesn't have to say a thing; he can feel it. *Divinity dwells here*. Compared to the other side of the portal, the air here is cooler, and seems to sit, unmoving, as if suspended by some sort of spell. The young blocking brush has been replaced by ancient beings, a kingly copse of stately, corrugated trees tinged with red rising hundreds of feet above. So little of the light passes through their thousands of interlocking branches in order to find its way to the forest floor that it's as if they've entered a world of perpetual twilight, poised somewhere between day and night, or sleep and wake. The light that *can* be seen streams eerily through the limbs climbing the

towering trunks, each ray refracting wisps of fog coursing through a canopy so high that it seems intent on touching the clouds. And *everything* is wet, every inch of forest floor and plant life holding onto the endless coastal precipitation caught between the behemoths and the Great Mountain.

In the warmth of the spring day the plants reluctantly release their cradled moisture, slowly evaporating and needing to climb so high to escape that most of it lingers somewhere in between the decomposing forest floor of softly-springing, fallen evergreen needles and the sky high above, with the effect being like layers of hovering mist hanging at different levels of the rise, intent on reaching and becoming one with the fog. Every layer is different, grasping onto its own level of swirling, mixing moisture, each reflecting the light in its own special way. It's as if they stand within a primordial prism made from the marrying of the towering trees, the coastal fog coursing in from the bay and the mist made in the lofty space between.

To Cub, it feels as though they've stumbled into a lost world, and he half expects beasts commensurate with the mighty scale of the surroundings to come around a bend at any moment before plucking his bite-sized body from the forest floor, swallowing him whole. But Kylen proceeds with no such sense of trepidation, this being her most beloved and secret of spaces. She treads slowly, and with perfect ease, moving with no purpose but to fully be here, where her Great Mother greets her with the exhaling of her sacred breath. Then, as if the natural cathedral weren't wonder enough, they enter their hideaway, what she will, in the near future, teach him is called the Spirit Cavern.

A huge hollow has been formed here over the millennia, where a large number of old growth trees collapsed at the same time in the distant past, having surrendered to old age, or to some colossal force. The new forest sprung from these elders and grew on top of them, their massive roots

thereby stilted, reflecting the fact that they grew not from the forest floor, but atop their ancient ancestors, creating a natural niche beneath, stretching three times the length of an Arian longboat in every direction, everything overgrown with countless intertwined types of lichen, moss and fern.

With these rambling roots half the size of the surrounding trees, yet lifted off the ground, as high as eight feet at the center of the cavern, it's as if the Great Mother herself has crafted this sanctuary. Were she to rise from the earth, this would surely be the place where she'd choose to do so. Cub will learn that Kylan's father, the now lost Wahuchu, first led her here and revealed this cavern when she was young. And they returned intermittently ever since, usually on full moon nights when he sought the advice of the spirits, the ethereal glow of the white watcher hovering in the clouds lending its magic. He taught her that this is the oldest place in the forest, the place where Mother first fell from the sky and found her form, and where the first trees simultaneously fell to make way for the second generation.

From the decaying bodies of the first trees did the current old growth sprout in this swale at the heart of the forest, themselves the most magnificent of life-hosting giants, each wreathed in plant species beyond counting, crawling with endless varieties of winged and four-legged and miniature creatures, calling from various levels of the canopy rising precipitously above, one world stacked upon the other, their sounds mixing sweetly and strangely in the diminishing light, as if emitted by the stars being lit above.

These two factors, having sprouted from the massive fallen bodies of the fathers and mothers of the trees, and thus already raised well above the forest floor, combined with this having occurred in a natural low point in the earth, made for the magic of this hidden realm. Here, the air is sweeter, the sounds are purer. Here, it's as if time itself

has ceased from moving forward, and instead circles the place in reverence, refusing to enter and push it forward.

As far as she knows, none but she and her father know of its existence, for it is extremely well hidden. Not only is the area outside of the traditional hunting grounds formed by the natural passage of prey, it's also outside of the regular harvesting areas, being too difficult to access relative to its offered medicines and the many other gifts of Great Mother known to exist elsewhere. And, as Cub himself has now experienced, the surrounding area is so profuse with bound brush that it feels prohibitive to attempt entry for the few that come anywhere near this place. Of all the places known to Wahuchu and his daughter, this is the most divine. And not just because of the Spirit Cavern, but also because of what Kylen's father called the Tree of Life and Death; the Hollow Tree set right in the center of the cavern.

A magnificent petrified specimen, it's the only tree within the Spirit Cavern that actually touches the earth. Its blackened bark can't be seen unless uncovered, so many other plants cling to and call it home. One plant in particular stands out, what Wahuchu called the Fairy Flower, jutting out from the sides of the tree through the moss, lichen, mushrooms and vines, a profuse display of little white-spiked-blossoms in a sparkling climb a hundred feet high, where the tree terminates in a trio of chambers that look like chimneys. It's as though the tree turned into three trees as it grew, all sharing the same base, before the top was cleaved away and its innards turned to ash by some ancient fiery force, the exterior remaining intact. Brush aside the plants and find hollows pock-marking that exterior. Looking within, and down, it seems the tree has formed some sort of channel to the underworld, one's calls and dropped objects descending into a bottomless void.

Her father told her many things of this tree. He spoke of it being the heart of the forest before there was a forest;

when there was only the mountain and the sea, and when the bay was being formed by violent forces preceding not just the people, but most plants and animals as well, the mighty mountain standing strong against surging forces from the north battering the peninsula again and again, shattering the land into the archipelagos and endless inlets surrounding the peninsula. He said that this tree naturally formed into three from one base to signify the Holy Trinity: Consciousness, or 'Father,' Earth, or 'Mother,' and Spirit, the piece of the union of Mother and Father held in every heart. He said that this is the eternal relationship which every form of life lives as mortal forms of the eternal Three. He had many other stories of the Tree of Life and Death.

This tree, he said, is where Life split between the forces of good and evil, and, to this day, remains a channel between the underworld and the overworld. He always told Kylen that she was of the overworld, having come from its purest embodiment, her mother, the Wild Woman guarding and guiding the people from the mountain above. He also said that the purest embodiments of the balancing forms pass between the under and overworlds through this hollowed-out gateway; those that draw strength from feeding upon the weakness of life, and those who gain strength by strengthening life. He said that the Fairy Flower that climbs the tree is a sign that the fairies themselves, the first forms of life, the purest forms of the overworld, dwell nearby.

As Kylen ruminates on her fallen father's stories, a hummingbird with a shimmering magenta head hovers around the flowers, not feeding, but circling around them, as if looking for something. Kylen laughs inwardly as she recalls perhaps her favorite fairytale of all, amused at the thought that the bird is looking for a long-lost relative. For some of the Mahwahn storytellers, including her father, say that the first hummingbird was born when an especially picky butterfly developed a taste for the nectar of the Fairy

Flower, refusing to feed upon any other flower, spending so much time within the little pockets of it that it could find in the forest that it would sometimes stay up past dark, and become exhausted. One evening after gorging itself, it curled up between its spiked blossoms and fell fast asleep. And being small and the same color as the blossoms, she was unseen by the fairies when they emerged that night to perform their orgiastic spring mating ritual. Whilst sleeping, she was inseminated by sperm dripping down from the bacchanalia held above her, for fairies believe promiscuity to be not a sin, but a virtuous practice of loving generosity.

By the following evening, having not the strength to move from where she was unconsciously fertilized the night before, for the resultant conception was preternaturally taxing and immediate in effect, she laid far larger eggs than usual, so large that, as she laid them, they split her open and killed her. And the eggs shimmered like bubbles of oil, and were harder than butterfly eggs, being closer to those of birds, and bore brilliant bluish-purple caterpillars that crawled as fast as a snake can slither, and that began to pupate within days rather than weeks, fast forming chrysalises that reflected the sun like the glassy surface of a lake, the reflective capacity of the cocoons so strong that they glowed in the moonlight. It was from these that the cross between the fairy and the butterfly was born, a being with a resplendent iridescent head and a magical grace of movement. And only when the first hummingbirds, being no bigger than thumbnails, began mating with other small birds did the resultant larger offspring forego their pupation and come directly from hard-shelled eggs, completing their transition from butterflies into birds. Many other fantastic feats are ascribed to the fairies as well, including the makings of the medicines to which her father was devoted.

For some of the same storytellers say that the fairies were the first of the primordial pollinators, spreading pollen in

great spring flower-dancing orgies whereby every blossoming plant and tree was danced upon or mated within, the pollen sticking to their wings, thence distributed by their flutters and flurries throughout the young forest. A similar ritual was held in the fall, and some claim that it still is, wherein great flocks of ferries gather the seeds that result from the spring celebration and hand deliver them all over Mother Earth, praising Her by seeking out the most vivacious parts of her body to bury then in, even burying some of their favorite seeds along with their own deceased loved ones, the flora sprouting from their magic-blooded corpses, thereby naturally imbued with medicinal powers.

The fairies consider this practice to be both a holy homage to their Father, the Creator, and their Mother, the Earth itself, as well as an offering to every form of life which they witnessed evolve to play a particular role on behalf of their Mother and Father. The recipients of the gift of medicine included not only human beings, who would learn of them later as intended, as just rewards for those of them possessing the wisdom to revere and study their Great Mother, but as gifts to be broadcast across the entire animal kingdom, most of the recipients knowing of the gifts instinctually, without the need for observation and study. But as much as Kylene loves these fairytales of magical formation found in nature, others are more instructive.

For Wahuchu also said that, when the fairies were born, or, rather, *made* by Mother and Father, that the equal and opposite reaction inherent to every form of pure creation made their equals in the dark-winged servants of evil; that the fairies were born in a burst of pure white light that shot them up into the world while simultaneously shooting their evil counterparts downward. He says that this same dichotomy lives in every form of life, that it's all a matter of which of the two you feed the most, and that, as it is with everyone's war with themselves, Mother and Father once

tried to bury the forces of evil down deep, temporarily trapping them in the underworld, lost in the labyrinth passing beneath their feet all the way into the heart of the mountain, where everything originated. The evil would not be contained, however, and found freedom through the fissures, as every form cracks under sufficient pressure, including the heart, with the heart of the mountain called...

"The Crucible," Kylene whispers in Mahwahn. But that's not the only thing that Cub hears. As always the native tongue is unintelligible to him, but an echo of her voice hovers over the Mahwahn, as if whispered by the cavern itself.

"Wait, say that again," Cub demands, astounded.

"The Crucible," she says.

"I can understand you!," he exclaims, her Mahwahn mingling with and resounding in Arian. "How can that be?"

Grinning broadly, she says: "And I you... the First Council," she adds. "My father says this is where language was born, casting a spell; creating what he called 'The Spelling;' the first words bound to the forces of creation, the magic imbued in the words of purest penetration of heart and mind, able to transform; to clarify all confusion."

Touching the stilted roots with her fingertips as she passes through the rooted cavern, Cub can barely move to follow, as if his feet are rooted in the earth, the tendrils of his heart reaching out and tying him to her, and to everything around them. Inside himself he soars as high as his surroundings. *This* is what he sensed the first time that he saw her. Not just her magic, but the magic of the forest inseparable from her, each bound to the other, the whole not only greater than the sum of its parts, but part and parcel, Kylene looming above it all, as mighty as the greatest of the trees, he as ephemeral as the mist passing

between their branches, sucked in by a spiritual gravity that gradually assimilates the smallest into the largest.

This is the realm of the miniature and the mighty, with few other tress standing between the magnificent wooded giants and the interlacing swords of ferns fanning out across the forest floor, the plant life draped across the stones and hollowed out logs, or spreading across the stilted roots of the cavern itself, else existing as the fungi set somewhere between the plant and animal kingdoms, born to play the role of recycler and bridge-builder, buried under the endless sea of dead needles and the humus that it makes from an existence serving the preservation and interconnectivity of every form of life living in the forest. Their fruiting bodies, the mushroom caps, come in all shapes, sizes and colors here, some small, green and slimy, some red with flecks of white, some bright orange and shaped like organs, some white with bands of grey like the fanned tails of turkeys, some a tawny golden brown.

Stooping down to examine a cluster of the golden brown mushrooms, Kylene is lost in reverie. Cub counting them in his head, there are ten in the group. When Kylene finally speaks, her voice is a force of transmutation, her native tongue becoming his, uttered in a half-whisper, as if sharing a secret. He's struck by cognitive dissonance, wanting to believe his experience is real, yet not entirely being able to, as it so exceeds his sense of reality that he has a hard time accepting it as anything but a dream.

"My father says that our Great Mother is the only teacher anyone ever needs, and that here is where Her spirit most thrives, offering the Mahwah lessons like nowhere else. The fungi are the fullest forms of her greatest truth, being inseparable not just from each of their visible fruiting forms emerging from the occlusive appearance of separation from their full forms, mostly buried beneath the surface, but being inseparable from every life herein. At first glance it

appears as if everything that lives here is separate; as if every form is an individual with an independent identity. But like all of life and the works of its spirits, this is an illusion. Separation, individuality... these are the lies of ignorance, born in the gap of knowledge. We can't see the connections until we unearth and hold them in our hands."

Bending down to examine a cluster of mushrooms, she plucks a small golden brown cap and holds it up to the soft light. Seconds later she puts it in her mouth and starts chewing on it, beckoning Cub to come closer. As he approaches and crouches down beside her, she spreads the decaying needles away from the base of the cluster of mushrooms to reveal that the nine remaining caps are actually three sets of three, each set connected to its own thick white stem before disappearing into the rich black soil.

"Where there are nine, there are three," she says with a gorgeous grin. "But that is only the first layer of the lesson."

She then begins digging between the three clusters with her fingers, fast revealing a branching network of white filaments connecting not only the nine of the first cluster, but several other surrounding clusters. Digging deeper, the thick fibrous roots of the overlord old-growth trees are revealed, and look to be tied to the mushroom filaments.

"The deeper down you dig, the more connection you find. And that is the true nature of life, my father says: interconnection. Were we to complete this exercise, we'd find that there's not one tree, not one plant, not one stone or being that exists in isolation. At every level of the forest, at every point in the bay, and the rivers running the line between, and the sky's embrace with the clouds and canopy, there is one recurring lesson: interdependence. The only true identity is the inseparable identity. Oneness."

"The mushroom you just saw me eat is special, the Golden Teacher of the Forest whom embodies inseparability so

strongly that when you consume it, you can feel it. It passes some of the power of its embodiment of inseparability into you, granting insight into the realm of the spirits, where Mother and Father recycle form. Take enough of it and you can see and hear it too. The illusions fade, revealing the unification buried beneath the surface; revealing the formless heart of every form. You see the swirling mingling of everything in creation, and that the Creator unfolds everything from the same source, like one endlessly unfurling flower of every size, shape and color. What the mushroom embodies, it also grows in the mind.”

“My father once told me that *his* teacher, Xaxu, found an ancient record of the earliest people in this land, before the age of ice, before they retreated to the warm innards of the mountain to stay warm and survive. He spent years decoding it. It told of a people that weren’t *really* people; not yet. They hid in the trees for fear of other predators, and had simple minds, and no tools, and no language, and no stories. But then came Ahnawahbe, the first of the medicine men, and he was more curious than most, and tried eating plants that others feared, and sometimes made himself sick, and almost died many times. One day he was called into the forest by the unspoken voice of our Great Mother, and, following it to the heart of the forest, he was the first to find this place, and the first of the people to consume the Golden Teachers, and to absorb its lessons, and fully open himself to Mother. Xaxu believed that it was *this* ingestion, and bringing it back to the people, and their group consumption of the Golden Teachers, that opened the spirit realm to the first people, and invited the first contemplations and experimentations, and that *this* was the catalyst that led to their development into the Mahwah.”

She traces the roots of the tree and fungi with her finger.

“And what Ahnawahbe learned from the Golden Teachers, and Xaxu and Wahuchu, remain bound to the shroom,

both above the earth, in its reproduction, and below the earth, in its ageless purpose of feeding, recycling and connecting. As it grows and binds all to itself, helping everything to grow, to replenish their living parts with their expended parts, to be the bridge between not just the dead and the living, such that all death is seen as the renewal of life, but between every form of that life, the Golden Teacher grows around these lessons, taking them into its being and instilling them in those who consume them. And so all of our spiritual leaders partake of this sacred ritual, and thereby set themselves at the roots of being, where everything is revealed to be bound to everything else.”

“He says that it’s all one big network of energy, the spirits sharing with one another, communicating with one another, and offering that communication as a holy communion to those who absorb the body of the lesson. By this practice the medicine man or woman not only better learns the ways of the forest, and the particular gifts of each of its interdependent forms, but experiences their inseparability, their ultimate convergence with the force of creation, and is thereby able to help others to uncover the same sacred teachings and gifts of the plants, and show them the balancing point between what they take from Mother and what they must give in return, in service of all.”

“Only by this bridging and the love that it evokes, the emotion of interconnection, may we truly know our kinship with everything in the world, and be spurred to treat not one as another, but as a part of ourselves, keeping the whole complete, the survival of one the survival of all.”

Recalling Ketchum’s words, Cub suddenly speaks up:

“Futhark, the father of all Arian seers, once said:

The appearance of being is stone; fixed, staunchly set and separated, stacked one atop the other. The truth of being

is water; a fluid, forever flowing confluence, seeping into everything and dwelling within the slightest of spaces."

"Yes, exactly!"

Kylen sounds shocked to hear Cub speak these words, so much so that he looks at her crosswise, feeling offended.

"I'm sorry if I sound surprised..." she offers, aware of the effect. "That can only be my pride... the obscurement of my ego. For the water of which you speak flows into all, and all may tap into it. Only my vanity would prevent me from seeing the truth that medicine men and women exist *everywhere*... anywhere the people commune with the Great Mother. For surely Her body must extend to the four corners with the winds, and so, too, must her messages."

"It is said that, after meeting Heimdallr atop Himinbjörg, our highest mountain" Cub continues, "that Futhark peered into the sky and said: *I am as everything touched by the sun*, at which point he vanished, conducted into Valhalla, where he guides the gods to this day, reminding them that the eternal source which brought them into being enlivens all."

Kylen smiles broadly, triggering Cub's heart to surge. Then walking over to one of the arching roots of the cavern, she gently removes a clinging clump of moss. Needling at the sodden brown-green cluster with her fingers, she soon peels it apart to reveal three separate strands, each a different color and texture, and holds them out to Cub.

"If each of these forms exists in balanced harmony with each of the others, playing its part for the whole, and all depending upon the tree for support, how then can we say that they've not been fused, married into one being? And it's like that everywhere, the lesson repeating itself over and over such that only by never examining anything in detail, or hearing what the medicine man reveals, may one remain trapped in the delusion of individual identification."

Holding the strands of moss near her face, she continues:

“My father says that these lightweight little beings, these plants that live without laying down roots, are the oldest of all the creatures of the forest; older even than these trees. He says that he knows this because they can live on nothing but stone, air and water, sucking in all they need from what the Four Winds deliver, and so lived even before the forest was here, spreading even across the barrenmost rocks of the mountain above us. They represent the first partnerships between the world of plants and the world of stone, bridging the gap between the mountain and the forest. Only the marriages between the Sky, where the Creator dwells, and our Great Mother Earth, and between the Ocean and the Winds of the Four Corners, are older.”

“Working with the storms and rains, they made the rocks of the mountain and cliffs into the first fractures, spreading in between with the waters to break off the pieces that would become soil. They do so to this day, continuing to absorb the energy and spirit of the stone and carry it deeper and wider so that it can be absorbed by the entirety of the forest. So it is that the forest invites its smallest forms to bind to its largest forms so that this energy, and the lessons it absorbs, may be shared. And so now these smallest of Mother’s agents, these ancient stone masons, live throughout the forest, even among the tallest of trees and largest fallen logs, sipping from the pooling, dripping water, catching air from the wind, whispering of a time before such abundance, when it wove itself in the rock.”

“And so, from these tiniest of beings do the mightiest depend, and vice versa, each lovingly holding its place for the sake of everyone else. Everything gives what it takes. Everything shares what it makes, saying thanks to Mother and all to which She gives birth by the very way in which it lives. This is the Great Weave; the eternally interwoven basket of being. Without this weave everything would be

weak, and would fall apart. Only by binding together does the forest know strength, as it is with the people, too. Only interwoven may the basket of being contain the fullest form of life, and hold the weight of everything it comes to bear.”

“My father told me that everything around this place, which he called Spirit Cavern, grew so thick with life because this is the very heart of the forest, where spirits are purest and find their fullest form, and where the Great Mother most often visits her human offspring. Her lifeforce is thickest here, and so the surrounding plants breath it in, becoming the greatest version of themselves that they can be. And my father...” tears come to her eyes as, in this moment, his loss falls like a great force upon her, his spirit entering into hers, embracing her core, evoking the pleasurable pain of a departed love, an invisible cord binding the mortal form to its immortal essence, plucked upon the most melancholy of instruments. “He was killed before finding his full form.”

And yet, to Cub’s immense surprise, Kylene doesn’t seem to blame him for what’s befallen her father, or her people in general. Wahuchu assumed dead, Chief Makunah and the other elders poisoned to death, an end unworthy of anyone, much less the great uniter of the tribes of the bay and his acolytes, her people in turmoil and she being forced to flee her village, she’s devastated. And yet the fury she felt the day before, when she saw red, has abated. She’s purple, her red becoming blue. Her broken heart no longer demands vengeance, only wishes it. Instead, she’s faced with the realization that *this* is what it took to make her realize how much she loved her father; that she didn’t know it, not *really*, until it was taken from her; just how much she depended upon him, how much he’d taught her, how much his spirit was, *is*, tied to hers.

It’s as though that spirit of Wahuchu is all that remains, and is therefore a greater, more important force than ever. She feels like the foremost lesson that the Mahwah talk about,

about tapping into and feeling the essence, the spirits, of life flow through and inform and make everything real, is now something she's forced to rely upon. The teaching of it is over. All that's left is to live it. It's either that or capitulate to the pain; give into the grief; lend credence to the sense that she's been voided of everything that once sustained and brought her joy, with nothing but loss and helplessness in its place. That *cannot* be how her story ends, nor that of her father. She will honor his spirit through her own life, her war made less about vengeance, about making Zande pay for what he's done, than about fighting his threat of what's sacred. This will, however, take time and self-fortification, and she's not yet able to eliminate her sudden sense of vulnerability at the loss of the life she held most dear. The vacancy is too great for anyone to fill. And yet this strange man seems up to it, he whom *should* seem an alien, and yet feels like her kin.

They both know that this never would've happened had not his people arrived to unleash the evil long-brewing within the village, and yet it was the pride and rage of a *Mahwahn* that resulted in the devastation. To blame the Arians would be to blame the tension in the bow for the fly of the arrow, and even in her grief she knows better than that. It was *Zande* who let the arrow go. Now she must clutch the point that has passed through her and pull the shaft all the way through, then patch up the hole and hope that she'll heal.

She understands Zande's motive. His self-regard and desire was greater than the wisdom passed to him since his birth; a delivery that found its recipient dry; fixed in place, staunchly set and unabsorbent, like the stone. And her father, supporting Cub's expatriation, seeing in him a bridge between their peoples, a river flowing through and uniting their two proud peoples, a strong, loving mate for his beloved daughter and the potential answering of an age-old prophecy, was simply in the way, as Cub's own

father had been. Her heart a storm-swept sea, a deep, churning whirlpool of grief and fading fury, and even self-chastisement at not having seen this coming, she wonders at her father's end. In her mind's eye she sees the traitor plunging his black blade into his back. And she wonders how much of his treachery was based upon his need to possess her, sweating over the prospect that, had she found a way to stomach his interest, to at least pretend that she wasn't repulsed by him, this could've been avoided.

Watching her rock back and forth in the Spirit Cavern, Cub can't help but find her beautiful, despite, or perhaps *because of*, the emotions passing through her, rising up, swelling and crossing her countenance before falling away like the tide, only to rise back up with the next surge of emotion. No more words are spoken that first night, during which they sporadically hold one another in silence, the bear cub nuzzled between them, then standing and pacing with Kylen, mirroring her anxiety. Even with the translative magic of the cavern, words are less useful than one another's reverberating presence, as if each of the three of them forms one side of a resonance chamber made by the trio, a triangular prism wherein the discordancy within one finds concordance through the others, with Great Mother herself set at the base of the prism. For all three of them, even the little cub, exude melancholy, whilst Cub, too, has lost, his father presumed dead, his people slaughtered in response to their refusal to abandon their riverside camp.

And yet the feelings are different for Cub. He's almost ashamed to admit to himself that he feels more relieved than enraged, even as he's vowed to himself that Zande will be torn limb from limb for his evil. He's embarrassed to admit to himself that the dishonorable part of him, the part that's always resented his father's domination of his life, owes a debt to the usurper for his role in his emancipation. For Cub was never onboard with this mission to claim and

spread the Arian seed in the New World, sensing that his destiny went beyond the spreading of Arian blood and culture in new, fertile soil, per their prophecy, knowing it for absolute certain the moment Kylen emerged from the mud.

Kylen rises and walks the cavern on and off the whole of their first restless night together, sometimes peering up through the mighty roots towards the clouds above, both of them attempting to convince themselves that this new reality is, indeed, real. Cub can sense that she's invoking the gods, or spirits, as the Mahwah call them. He watches her, feeling as though every emotion which he's been trained *not* to heed is now breaking through the walls of his heart, his trained stoicism made feeble by the force of her magic. The feelings are so strong, watching her pace, and gaze up and out, and sing to the spirits in her melodic, heart-wrenching voice, that it's as though they're happening to him as well. At one point the skies open up, thunder and lightning cracking mightily overhead, rain pouring in and streaming away from the cavern, and it's as if Kylen herself has called it, nature matching her passion, the storm of her heart, the tears streaking down her face transmuting in form through the power of her Great Mother.

In her emotional tumult her heart pours out, purifying her through her pain, her broken down sense of self washed in raw emotion, delivering a clarity that can only be known when the walls have fallen, the essential all that remains. She realizes that this strange man feels more familiar to her than anyone she's ever known. It's as though she knew him the moment their eyes met. She's never felt this way before, not even with her father, as if she's close to him not as a matter of choice, or even the present circumstances, but because they were born of the same spirit, the geographical separation set between them at birth being nothing to their kinship. Kylen feels in Cub a closeness transcending even her closeness with her own

suddenly imperiled people, reminiscent of what she felt when she first started exploring the forest with Wahuchu, when she came to love the land as if it were an extension of herself. Somehow she knows that Cub's outsider status is an illusion; that he is as much of this place as she is; that he shall become as inseparable from this land as she and her father; that the force of innate unity, 'love,' transcends spacetime, the spiritual sun illuminating the illusion of otherness that those relying on five senses can't see, its gravity of such force that even spacetime bends to its will.

When not pacing the cavern, Kylen tries to rock herself to sleep in Cub's arms, the bear cub fighting for space between them. She imagines the baby bear to be her father, conceiving of the possibility that, after passing into the clouds and embracing the Spirit, he returned to Mother and found the cub open to him. Perhaps this is why the little creature is so comfortable with them. Cub, meanwhile, can't help but feel ashamed at how much he enjoys Kylen's vulnerability and overwhelming need of him. Not until dawn looms over the eastern highlands does she finally give into her exhaustion. And as she meets the spirits on the plane between worlds, she dreams of her father, begging the spirits to confirm her suspicion that he's already returned and is there beside them, and, if not, to permit his reformation as soon as possible, so that he may return and guide them through the struggle to come. Yet, upon this plane she sees *not* his death, but something sinister. He's suffering horribly, trapped somewhere, caught between life and death, darkness descending, wrapping around him as if the wings of an evil spirit.

In her dream she stares into the dark, stormy sky, begging the Great Mother to come to her father's aid. She can feel his suffering as if her own, and, after what's recently transpired, it's more than she can bear, her whole being reaching out to the spirits, begging for his salvation,

promising that she'll do anything. And yet it isn't Mother Spirit who answers, but her own mother. Coming face to face with her in the dreamworld, the fierce blue eyes of the Wild Woman of the Mountain pierce through her perfectly contrasting ebony hair, hung about her face and hovering all around her as she descends from her mountainous kingdom on an avalanche of ice, coming to her child's aid. Embracing Kylan, briefly comforting her, the Wild Woman then takes her hand and pulls her up onto her cascade of ice, which then sweeps them both down into the lowest reaches of the land, into the murky underworld mysteries.

Creatures surround them, most of them unfamiliar to her, their eyes flashing in blues and reds. Feeling something fall onto her shoulders, Kylan looks up to see that she's in an immense cave lorded over by countless bats. Every moment they add more guano to the floor of the cave, which appears to stretch forth endlessly before her, every inch covered in a thick white carpet of bat excrement. But these are not the bats she knows from her night outings with her father. These are far larger, each bearing bloody fangs, hard to see except for the blood-red eyes flashing through the cave in terrifying trails of phosphorescence. And she gets the distinct impression that they wish her harm, and would descend upon her and eat her alive were she not under the protection of the mighty mystic matron.

That protection her only comfort, and despite her terror, Kylan and the Wild Woman move deeper into the cave, further and further into the lair of these terrifying winged creatures of death that swirl around them in the thousands, their sounds and flight as unnerving as anything she's ever known. As the pair proceeds through the underground, the black surrounding them somehow blackens further, as if the lack of light is but the first step into the underworld. This sense is matched by a mounting feeling of dread, a chill creeping up her spine, the blood pumping through her

veins turning to ice as they approach the center of the lair, a massive cave filled with the shrieks of the aerial monsters, the red streaks of their flashing eyes paired with their shrill cry as they begin encircling them. And just when she thinks she can't take it anymore, and begs her mother to bring her back, blindly pressing forward in the dark, seeking an escape, they stumble upon a mountain of desiccated corpses. Their tissues giving into decay, the creatures of the forest, those she's been raised to learn and love, are stacked before her. A tremor shoots through her heart upon her realization that every one of them has been drained of its blood. That's when she sees him.

Crouched to one side of the pile of flesh, a creature chomps down on the neck of a stag and begins sucking its blood. He appears much as a man, but is too hideous to be a human being. And yet, the thing seems just as warmly familiar as it does chillingly alien. He's disfigured as though some horrible unnaturality has befallen him. But still, she recognizes him. *It's Wahuchu, her father.* The realization drops her to her knees, tears pouring forth faster than ever before at seeing her honorable father reduced to this state. And yet it's not *really* her father. Never before has she felt more torn in two. Her body turns to ice one second, rising like a forest fire the next, the blood in her veins burning like acid. She loves this creature as much as she reviles it. She wants it dead as much as she wants to embrace it. It's more than she can take, the joy at his still being alive balanced by sheer disgust at the form that life has taken.

Instinctively, she knows how dangerous the creature is, and yet, at the same time, she knows that she has nothing to fear from it. Her wild mother helping her to her feet, the goddess of the mountain then extends her arms to her sides and, speaking in a language that sounds more akin to the sounds of the forest animals than human, her deeply resonating, raspy voice resounding throughout the cave in

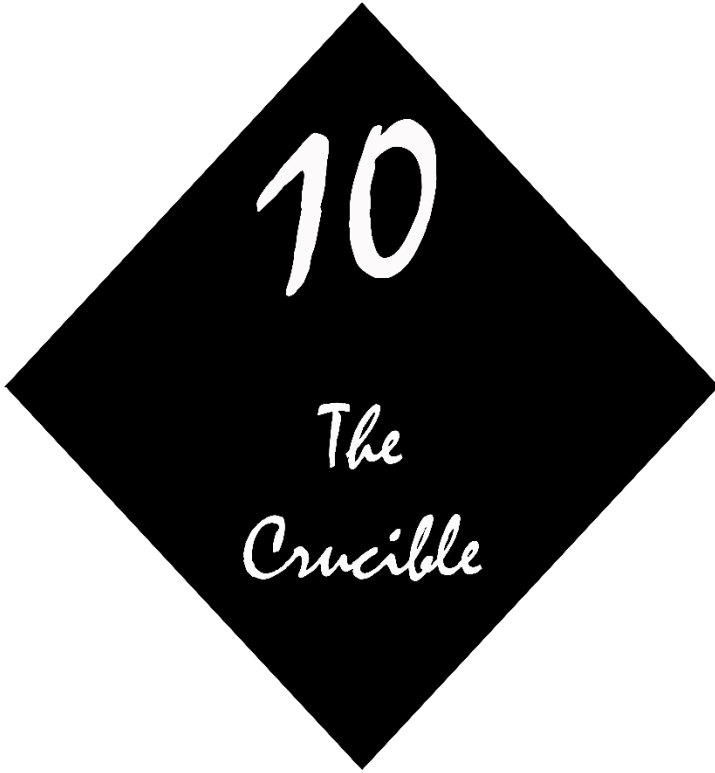
a cacophony of cries, like a gaze of racoons colliding with a band of coyotes, the bats flee in response to her spell.

Moments later something begins to form in her mother's left hand, an ice sickle, its point as deathly sharp as any knife made by her people, whilst, with her right hand, she suddenly reaches out and snatches one of the terrifying winged creatures from the air and, in the same savage movement, bites its head off, spitting it to the floor. Turning the creature upside down in its natural hanging position, its blood pools onto the floor of the cave, seeping into the guano. A second later the spot sprouts a thorned plant fast blooming into a crimson flower, which she plucks to reveal red roots dripping in blood, every drop sending up a new sprout, the smell of the blooms like that of a rotting corpse.

As the Wild Woman holds both the ice sickle and the gorgeously blood-red, seeping flower out to her daughter, Kylene suddenly understands her choice, and her heart sinks. She must decide: Would she rather that her father be killed, and pass into the ether above, mixing with the Creator, recycled into rebirth, tied to a new form, or shall his life be maintained, as miserable and inhuman as it is? Tears streaming down her face, Kylene seizes the sickle and approaches the creature, who seems to understand, and lowers himself to his knees. She's about to plunge the ice pick into his heart when she peers into his eyes, seeing the loving depth of her father through the disfigurement.

Screaming, she tosses the sickle aside, which instantly melts, then walks back to her mother and grabs the crimson flower. It's hot to her touch, and its thorns prick her hand, her own blood adding to the blood already falling from it. The intermixing of her own blood and the blood of the roots reacts upon the ground to sprout new flowers of every conceivable color, the stink of fouled flesh intermarrying with the sweet scent of wildflowers. Despite the wonder of this, and the evocation of a memory from

childhood, Kylen scarcely notices. Lowering her head in shame, she tosses the flower at the feet of the creature, who immediately snatches it up off the floor of the cave and swallows it whole. Eyes turning red, it raises its arms as if wings and, with a great leap and series of ascending acrobatics, scales the walls of the cave and climbs up and away. And just as it disappears from sight, Kylen wakes up screaming, in a pool of sweat, Cub trying comfort her. But there's little he can do. Quaking at the palpable sense of the dream being real, the cold air of the cave still set upon her skin, and her father's eyes still peering from behind the beast, she doesn't think she'll ever be comfortable again.



Slowly coming to, his first glimpses confuse him. As Harold opens and closes his one usable eye, his vision is badly blurred. This in itself is of little concern, for all Arians are familiar with the effects of concussions, and no warrior worth his mettle leaves a *practice*, much less a battle, without a little head trauma and its after effects. 'Ringing ears come after clashing swords,' it's said. What *is* concerning is that he seems to be looking through another, far-off eye, up into the clouds whisking by overhead, as if his own vision is being projected through the eye of a god.

At first he thinks this must mean that he's died and his spirit has been lifted up towards Valhalla, perhaps perched upon some point between life and the afterlife. But he quickly realizes that, were this so, he'd be looking through *two* eyes. What with this and his broken arm feeling as though it's been broken all over again from the recent traumas, it's clear that he somehow survived the ordeal. As the haze recedes, the fact that he remains on Earth is confirmed by the realization that he's looking not through the eye of a god, but through an oculus high above him, a perfect circle set dead center in the ceiling of a rock dome.

Sitting up is agonizing. It's as though every piece of his flesh has been chewed upon by those horrible creatures that descended upon he and his men. *His men...* to have died that way, torn to shreds by wolves and those foul creatures... there's no honor in it. Is this why he came to this place? To sacrifice his men to the inglorious insanity of a wilderness who's beauty belies its brutality, its promise of endless resources making a mockery of those who come to claim them? He, too, would have been eaten alive were it not for that voice... Performing a damage assessment, he's shocked to find that he's been given some sort of treatment whilst unconscious. The animal skin wraps of his face and broken left arm appear to have been removed, with some sort of shimmering white plant stuffed into the

wounds, then re-wrapped. The same treatments have been applied to his whole body, shining like little stars over bitten flesh. Though the pain is great, every wound tingles; a good sign. A sign of healing. But who treated him? Why?

Looking around, he's in a massive ovular cavern. Strange, sporadically-strewn formations hang from the ceiling, like irregularly-shaped, downward-pointing spikes, each slowly exuding a white, milky substance dripping down onto similar, upward-facing spikes lining the floors directly below them, as if one is feeding the other. The air is thick with moisture and a strong, biting odor that reminds him of the hot springs he's visited in the mountains of Aria several times, usually after battles when Ketchum advised the journey for the purpose of healing and mental recovery for he and his surviving men. There, natural pools formed in the rock hollows were fed by underground springs, and by a natural medicine within the mountains, the provenance of which the holy men liked to argue about. He'd leave the springs feeling not just rejuvenated, but drugged, as if he'd taken one of Ketchum's sleep concoctions. And here, too, it appears there's such a pool, set directly below the oculus, a light mist hovering inches above its surface, the warmth of the pool evident from his position a few feet from its edge. He must've fallen into the pool and been drug out.

Now that he thinks of it, his body is damp. Not wet, but damp, as if he'd been drug out of the waters hours ago and has since had time to dry. Except for his loin cloth, he's nude, his wolf hide set beside him, wetter than the rest of him, which makes sense; it's more absorbent than his own skin. But who drug him out? Who undressed and treated him? Scanning the large open space with the pool set in its center, he realizes that someone lives here. Various tools and other implements, potentially weapons, he can't be sure, are leaned against the outer wall surrounding the cavern, the wall itself looking to have been

painted long ago, depicting a mural that he can't quite make out, but which appears a pictorial of a people that came down from the mountain into the forest and the bay.

Cord is tied between crevices naturally formed at different points below the mural, plants bound to them, drying; drying very slowly in such a humid environment. And bound to other cords are animal skins; *many* of them; maybe hundreds, almost all of them unique, as if every animal that dwells in these lands is represented. Small furnishings abound as well, mostly tables appearing to be manufactured by a master woodworker, each polished, the legs carved with unfamiliar etchings, each table stacked with assorted natural objects, especially stones, as well as figurines carved from those stones, or from pieces of one kind of wood or another. Indeed, there are as many different kinds of wood and stone displayed as there are animal skins. The entire space, in fact, reminds him of a story that Ketchum once told him of the store of artefacts that the first holy men of Arian kept, called The Record of Being, before the first clan divisions brought warfare, and its destruction, and the history of Aria was made into ash. But who, exactly, is the record keeper... there he is! *She?*

Someone, or something, appears asleep in a far corner of the gaping space. With great difficulty he forces himself to his feet and begins closing the distance. As he moves towards the person, he grabs the nearest thing to a weapon he can find set against the wall, an implement that looks like a club, remembering that he lost his sword while fleeing the menace that'd descended from the sky, a great dishonor in itself for those taught to treat their swords like irremovable extensions of their arms. Drawing near, he realizes that it's a woman. It must be she whom called him here, perhaps to skin him and hang that skin on her wall. But why didn't she do the job while he was unconscious?

The woman sleeps soundly on her back beside a massive bowl seemingly carved from the same strange, dripping stone lining the ceiling and floor, filled with the same softly glowing white plant that'd been applied to him. The embers of a dying fire are set beneath the plants, producing a slowly rising steam that lingers over and around the bed upon which she lays, which looks to be collection of animal furs stacked waist high. A blanket appears to have been fashioned from the same ghostly white plant, and is pulled over her sleeping form. Stranger still, it looks as though a white bird of some sort has been torn apart atop the blanket, as streaks of blood and white feathers are scattered everywhere, mingling with the mist. What *is* she? The holy woman of these people, calling me here to finish what she started, wanting not just my eye, but my heart?

Raising the club overhead, he's about to bash her when a flashback hammers him instead. The snow owl! The owl... *is* this woman? Or her messenger, perhaps? Did she kill it? As he slowly lowers the club, she smiles, her eyes still closed. Then she speaks, the voice unlike anything he's heard before, the same as the whisper that he heard while climbing the mountain, but this time even more bewitching, creeping into his veins. But it's not just the *sound* of her voice that throws him, but the fact that there seem to be *two* voices, spoken in two very different languages. Something entirely alien is coming directly from her, ejected in terse, strident tones, more the sounds of an animal than the language of a human, while the second voice is Arian, spoken perfectly, and echoes around him.

"Were you going to club me to death, Harold the Wolf? Me, a poor, defenseless woman, lying asleep in bed, healing from defending you? Do you always repay kindness such?"

Removing the blanket and rising gracefully to her feet, almost as though lifted from her reclined position by an invisible force, she's nude. As she rises, she drops a red-

wooded lash she'd been holding, hidden beneath the blanket of glowing white moss. *She was ready to defend herself. Was she testing him?* Her skin is like the blanket, alabaster white, so perfect it, too, shines. Excepting the fact that it's covered in little bloody bites that look to be healing before his very eyes, some with white feathers still clinging to the rapidly remediating marks, her skin looks never to have seen the sun, as if it's never before been touched, her form as beckoning as any he's ever seen, a sultry curvature commanding his manhood. Her ebony hair is long and unkept, and hovers about her head like a halo as she moves. But it's her eyes that are the most disconcerting. As soon as she opens them his knees grow weak, rendering him hot and cold at the same time, an inferno encased in an igloo. They're starkly albino, like those of the few he's seen born blind, or blinded in battle.

She, however, *can* see. And not just see. He has the distinct impression that she's looking not at him, like a human being, but, rather, *through* him, straight into his head and heart. He's never been afraid like this before; not in battle, not even when he looked at his son for the first time. This is something different. This is a supernatural force. Stepping towards him, he steps backwards, now the second time he's retreated, counting the irresistible urge to flee up the mountain yesterday after failing to save his men; well, he *assumes* that was yesterday. How to know?

"Do not be afraid, Harold, son of Agath. I mean you no harm. But you're right. I am not like you. I am an in-between. I am a bridge between time and space, between spirit and person, between energy and matter. I am the pure white seed of the people, uncolored by the sun."

Continuing to backpedal, he scarcely notices that he's entered the pool, for her presence is overwhelming. Not only is she spellbindingly gorgeous, excepting, perhaps, the chill firing from her eyes, but never before has the force

of a person produced such an effect, the energy of her palpable, as if some invisible aura is bound to her being. He can't tell which is greater, his sense of terror, his feeling of reverence, or his desire for her. He wants to fuck and fight, worship and run, all at the same time. And this from someone who's conditioned himself *not* to heed his feelings; to bury them, treating them as debilitating distractions at best, the ways of the defeated enemies.

"And yet it was your feelings that led you here, my lord. Your feelings for your son, and for your fallen wife."

He's locked in place, astonished. 'And she speaks Arian...'

"Well, not really, Old Blood. You *hear* Arian. I speak one language, and not one you'd understand. Not even one that my people would understand. It is the emergence of language from animal calls; a remnant from when Mother and Father were testing the placement of sentience in the animal kingdom, back when it was thought that the land and animals needed stewardship, before humankind was gifted with language. It was here, and in a few other special places in this land, that the Great Mother and her closest confidants explored communication; where every possible component and purpose of language was studied. Some of her first agents, the Animists, the first walkers of the bridge born between the realm of the spirits and the beings that bear them, believed that bequeathing language to humanity would be not a gift, but a debilitating *curse*."

"They believed that language should remain the sole purview of agents such as themselves; that it would only confuse and corrupt humanity, turning them away from their instinct, their pure spiritual sense of reality, clouding their minds and raising an occluding veil between them and their perceptions, thereby falsifying those perceptions. It was argued by those that argued for the 'purity of muted man' that language would make humankind unaware of

the world around them, trading a true, unfiltered sense of reality for adulterated approximations of that reality limited by the definition and interpretation of the words unnaturally used to circumscribe the people's experience of reality."

"Some of those who voted to deny the evolved tongue to humanity took it even further, suggesting that language would end up being used as a weapon by those better able to use it than others, ultimately employed to trick and deceive, to exploit and enslave the weak, to overcome reason by manipulating the illogical passions of those with lesser reasoning skills, to drive imagined wedges between brother and sister, between father and son, thereby turning dangerous fictions into entrapping delusions. They foresaw this leading to the forming of deceived, mindless mobs whose purpose wouldn't just end with supplanting the reasonable and the good amongst human beings, but with the forming of an army that would be enlisted in the attempt to claim divinity itself, supplanting Great Mother."

"Finally, however, Great Mother, in communion with the Creator, chose to bestow the power of language in its limitless form, saying that the ways in which it would be abused would ultimately shed light upon the power of its purest purpose, the evildoers accidentally serving the good through the gradual revelations of their inflicted sufferings. These discourses tied magic to language, to 'spelling,' imbuing special places such as this with the essence of language, coating them in translative power. So when I speak, the walls resound in the language of the listener. Not that I receive many guests here, and never one so... *virile* as yourself, nor one of such an important destiny."

Harold is up to his waist in the warm water before finding the courage to stop, allowing her advance, the club still held to his side, pointed at her. This she touches first, the head of the club, her fingertips tracing its line down the shaft to the handle, her eyes locked on his the entire time.

The effect of her gaze matching his is such that he becomes lightheaded, the longer he looks into her eyes the weaker he grows, all resistance fading, succumbing to her power. By the time her fingers find his hand, he's melted into total non-resistance, his walls deconstructed. And upon touching him, he lets go of the club and is instantly struck by a successive series of visions, felt so strongly as to be indistinguishable from living them.

He becomes disoriented as he relives Ketchum spinning inside the whirlpool in his mind, then continuing the spin in the mouth of the beast whose hide they'd targeted for their grand prize, feeling the immense force of its jaws clamp down on him. He smells ash, and feels fire singe his flesh as his camp, what they'd named after that prize, is engulfed in flames, his men relinquishing their courage and dying in abject horror. He feels the weight of the bear cub in his hands before the unknown native drops it in the pit, and the torn flesh of his face made by its mother, which, at the evocation of the memory, feels like it's seeping with fresh blood. His chest and arms are pulled tight with the force of the cord bound about him, tying him to the tree, as he experiences what his son had. He's alive! Thank Oden!

And as the love he feels for his son washes over him, it's not lost, but replaced by an equally powerful force: the love that his son has for this young native woman, the potency of it surprising and overwhelming him, being stronger than anything he's ever felt. He's now following her, as his son, pulled by that same force, as present and real as anything in the forest through which they tromp to some unknown location, some natural temple of trees, one imbued with its own great potency that feels much as the presence of this strangely captivating creature running her hand up his arm.

"I called you here Harold, son of Agath, because you need me, and because I need you. You've none left in this land but your son, and I'm losing all I have; my daughter; all my

people. Without one another, our children shall perish, and our futures with them. Your son, and my daughter, *they* are the reason you're here. It is for them that you crossed the great frozen expanse, though you didn't know it. The prophecy of your land is a part of the prophecy of *this* land, though, again, you were unaware. Every truth is concealed within misleading perceptions, just as every destiny is concealed within the semblance of choice. Were it possible to bring him here alone, he would've been. Unfortunately, suffering is often required in order to bring the bounty of my Great Mother to a future people who will never even know that such sacrifices were made. Your people were doomed the second they set sail from Aria; sacrifices burned upon the pyre of destiny. Your holy man has perished for attempting to gain power over my people and this land, trying to wrest it from the Great Mother, thinking the prophecy to be about glory. Your queen has also perished, along with the rest of your people, for falling to the treachery of my daughter, who manipulated the weak link in my people, for her own power, glory and revenge."

"Your... *daughter*?"

He can scarcely speak, so otherworldly is the experience, the relaxation of the waters overtaking him just like those of the pools in the Arian mountains, the scintillating sense of the beauty before him, her spellcasting touch, the strange smell in the air suddenly craved, as intoxicating as mead. Almost tumbling over backwards into the water, she now supports his weight with her hands upon his shoulders. And as she presses her body against his, chest to chest, it's as though he's set in the center of a flower just as it unfurls into life, opening itself to the pollinators for the first time, the taste of the sweetest nectar on her lips as she touches them to his own, her honeyed tongue tied to a breath of blooming wildflowers. No desire could be greater.

"I shall tell you everything you need to know, alpha wolf. But first, you shall know what happens when my bed has gone too long without being warmed by a worthy lover, for it is not just a human quality to need the touch of another."

Leading him to the bed of softly-stacked hides, they make love. And it's not like any carnality he's ever experienced. Rather than growing weary, he seems to gain strength and desire as time slips easily by. She rides atop him, and with every movement, every kiss and gyration of her hips, something shoots into his mind, filling the full of his third eye. He senses a timelessness, a being beyond creation and destruction that opens like an egg, the shell split into a perfect dichotomy of balancing forces, the soft and the hard, the feminine and the masculine, each groping desperately in the dark until they find one another.

And when they do there's an explosion of pure white light, and a sense of space beyond reckoning. And an indescribable sense of the two forces filling the void, the essence of one becoming real only by mating with the other. And from their formlessness forms are soon fashioned, and they spin and vibrate and accelerate with such force that, when they collide, new forms are made, as if a game of galactic dominos is being played, each collision creating a constellation, the stars splintering and exploding, their discharges cooling and condensing, becoming worlds, finding a natural rotational rhythm around the center of a warm, gravitationally-dense energy.

He sees worlds he didn't know existed. Falling into one, it's a world of endless water, with waves as high as mountains. He's there, hovering over the face of the deep, feeling as though he's the very embodiment of masculinity, naked, void and lonelier than anything he's ever known. So lonely that the feeling almost cracks his chest open as his heart heaves and reaches out for its missing half, reaching for the sky, for Valhalla, beckoning for completion. The

divine feminine then forms from the sky, dropped from the full moon as it reflects the sun, as though she's the pure white, reflected light itself. And into the sea she splashes, and down into the deep, breathing the water as though she's within the womb. Peering up, she soon longs for the light from which she came. And, raising her arms up, a great whirlpool pulls her up from the seafloor, for miles and miles, steadily rising to the surface, its cyclonic force so great that the ocean floor is swept up for miles, and cracks open the floor beneath her, erupting an underwater volcano, the floor of the ocean and the cooling magma rising and setting her between the heavens and the Earth.

When Harold finds his mind once more, it's late. Peering up through the oculus, stars hover over him, and it's as though he knows them for the first time. Long have the stars and constellations been a mystery to his people, with theories of their formation and purpose as manifold as the stars themselves. Now he knows what they are: extensions of One wanting to be many; side effects of the formless needing form in order to find itself in the balance between.

Its first phenomena were made before there was such a thing as time. It's all one endless existential experiment of relativity made from the single absolute, so as to explore the infinity of being. He knows himself now, too. He, too, is a form of the One, his mortality and unique form the priceless gifts granted to every special condensation of its energy. The sudden sense of inseparability from the everlasting fills him with peace. There's no such thing as 'other.' All enmity is made by the illusion of individuality. All sense of hate is grown in that illusive gap, when one form threatens what the other form has most tightly tied itself to.

"Yes, Old Blood. Your blood is older than you know. You are a part of the grand experiment of being. You are here to help me protect the bridge, for much suffering comes from the burning of the bridges, awaiting future architects."

“You mentioned your daughter before. Is she... *the flame?*”

“The escaped fire of the furnace,” she says with melancholy. She’d been resting beside him, waiting for him to willingly exit his visionary state, knowing it’s better for the mind not to be forced from one reality into the other. She turns over on her side, and he turns to face her. Even after having had her all day and into the night, somehow he wants more. But he knows she’s there to teach him as well, and that only by listening may he know his destiny.

“It’s my fault,” she begins. “I knew what she was from the beginning. I knew the force from which she was birthed, in balance with her sister. But I couldn’t bring myself to destroy her when she was a child, even after she’d confirmed my suspicions of her. I loved her, still; she is of me; of my blood, and the corruptible side of my spirit. And still... I cannot say I would’ve been right to kill her when she was a baby, as part of me felt was necessary then. For though she seems to be a blight upon this land and my people, even blight may serve a purpose for Great Mother in the end, revealing the way to bring out our best through the holy war with all that acts to weaken and imperil us.”

“Now my dark daughter gains strength, and her father is falling to her force, for neither I nor my other daughter, the one whom your son is in love with, can bring ourselves to kill him. That is the way it is with love, is it not? It plants a wonderful weakness in its possessor, such that even when we despise what we love, the love overpowers our disgust. We cannot choose who and what we love, we can only serve it, having faith that this service *is* the highest calling, and shall reveal the meaning of the light by the darkness. This is the secret of suffering; that it calls upon and creates champions, they being the only ones with the strength to bear the weight of the world in bringing it to its full fruition. So listen now, Wolf King, for I’ll tell you about this land that you think you’ve come to conquer, and what I’ve done.”

“Eighteen sun cycles ago I had a premonition that the Prophecy of the Moon Child was coming into being, the rising of the Spring Fountain destined to wash away the dark winter that would rob my people of their land and culture. And so, being part Mahwahn, I knew I needed a man to seed my womb, so that I may bring her into being, and that this man must be the purest of the people. So I called for him, and he came, and, later, he returned to take her down the mountain, to be one with those whom she’d someday save. What he *didn’t* know is that the daughter whom he took down the mountain was one of two twins.”

“I gave birth to Kylan and Kezlan. But this, you must try to understand, is not the same as when other women give birth, for I am only part woman. No, this is about primeval forces finding form in the living world, the rare birth of such beings always being an embodiment of something essential; something tied to the very essence of being, missing from existence, their birth filling a void. Kezlan was born first, right as the waning moon disappeared, darkening the skies, Kylan born after, as the new moon first began to wax. This was the Great Mother’s sign.”

“I could see the boundless generosity of Kylan from the beginning, she whom smiled often, flashing big, light blue eyes that resembled the snow-capped mountain of her birth, holding her hands out in an affectionate desire for embrace, and to comfort me. Her sister was the opposite, her deep, dark eyes void of that glimmer, being more like the deepest caverns of this mountain, seeming to suck you in rather than outwardly shine like her sister’s eyes. From her first breath I saw it in her eyes; her nature is the same as the darkest recesses of dying hope, sucking you into a place where no light exists, her demeanor sullen, turned inward, resistant to touch, never smiling, not even showing emotion until, being unable to cast her into the fires at the

heart of the mountain, she came of age, and her emotions were suddenly revealed, despite her attempt to hide them.”

“I experienced her dreams whilst lying beside her at night. She found refuge within a hollow tree whose roots penetrated into the very center of the earth, and into the labyrinth of the mountain, the underworld, its very nature feeling like an affront to the Great Mother who builds new life around a piece of her own spirit, endowing it with her essence. For this tree was not like any other, and was not of this place. It made me cold and frightened just to look upon it, and I’m not one to frighten easily. She had other dreams as well... she’d stand in front of a mirror set in the center of the hollow tree, admiring her beauty, for yes, she is beautiful, beyond beautiful, just like her sister. But she seemed to be more than admiring that beauty, for all of us admire the beauty manifest in the beings born of the Great Mother. This was something different... like she was worshiping her own image. And, as she stared at herself in the mirror, gawking, unblinking, other mirrors grew around her, and she smiled as they sprouted up in the hollow, each reflecting her sickeningly self-satisfied gaze.”

“And the more that she aged, the more she demanded to be released from this place, and to join her sister with ‘her people’ down the mountain. But I knew that I couldn’t allow this. For her insidious powers grew daily. Being unable to release herself from this place physically, she began to flee in her mind, projecting her psyche, as only those born with the gift, or cultivating it as your holy man did, can do. She searched the land for some way to free herself, attempting to enter the minds of the people, and call them to do her bidding. I do this myself, but for very different reasons.”

“Most of the Mahwah were strong enough in spirit to keep her at bay, especially with my help reinforcing their will. She kept visiting the villages, however, and not just the Mahwahn villages, but all the peoples of the bay, and I

eventually realized that she was probing them for weaknesses; trying to find someone to enter into, for even if her body was trapped here, she could live through a suitable vessel down there. I questioned her about this, of course, and eventually realized that it was the delusion of individuality that she was searching for; that a few possess ideas of themselves as being separate from the rest of the people, which leaves them isolated and unprotected, as they've voluntarily untied themselves from the great weave that makes the Mahwah, creating a vulnerability that can be manipulated and entered into, such that they can be possessed by darkness. When what one believes oneself to be is divested from the communal identity, they become easily corruptible. And, finally, she found her target, one whose spirit was consumed with jealousy, lust and ambition, which she began to psychically encourage, entering his thoughts despite my intervention. And not only did she uncover the perfect Mahwahn mark to con, but I feared that she'd penetrated the soft spots of many, invading every tribe of the bay. So I had to stop her."

"But, as I'm sure you can guess, she refused to be stopped. She started trying to escape, getting a bit further each time, playing tricks on me, sedating me, tying me up, pretending she was playing hide and seek. She even tried to poison me once, but I'm immune to it. After she attempted to cut my throat in my sleep, I decided that she had to be kept from the people at all costs. So I followed the Path of Creation and Destruction in order to find a place within the mountain that could contain her. It's a series of interconnected passages formed eons ago, when the land was born by fire, and marked by they that came before me: The Sky Woman and The Underlord. Part of their story is there, carved into stone," she says, gesturing to an etching above an opening that looks to drop down deeper into the mountain, "with other parts carved into the passageways running in every direction beneath our feet."

Barely visible, the large mural looks as though it's been eroding for eons. In it, two triangles, set one atop the other, point in opposite directions, sharing the same base at the center of the etching. The top triangle, pointed upwards, contains a woman who appears as though falling from the sky, birds holding her up by her tunic, slowing her descent, a nearly full waxing moon set just above the tip of the triangle. Up from the point of the bottom triangle another series of winged creatures appear to fly up towards the top triangle, as if escaping the inborn crypt of the mountain, holding onto the tunic of another woman, as if pulling her upwards. Below the downwards point is a tiny sliver of the waning moon, the sliver being the same size as what remains for the waxing moon above to fill into a full moon, the phases of the moon mirroring one another, equal and opposite. The line forming the base of both triangles extends horizontally past their bases on both sides at an equal length to that base, the full etching thus being equal in width to three of the triangle bases, and on both sides of the two pressed together triangles there's a tree growing upwards from that shared center line, and an identical, mirrored shape growing down, as if it's the roots of the trees, or else channels descending into the underworld.

The left and right trees are mirror images of one another, reversed as though reflections. On the left tree there's a hollow on the top portion, with bats flying up from the roots, or channels, below and, upon exiting the hollow and flying up and away, becoming winged creatures displaying human forms. On the right tree the depiction is reversed, with the hollow on the bottom instead of the top, in the center of the roots, or channels, this time with the same winged creatures with human features, including arms and legs, flying downwards and out the bottom hollow, as if into the earth, and becoming bats as they fly out of the hollow.

“It’s about the origin of existence, embodied by the first fight, between the Sky Woman and the Underlord, the war which created not just the world, but the entire universe. It’s about the Everything that came from the pure white illuminating light emerging from the void of the Nothing, calling for the Creator to fill it,” she continues. “It’s about creation and destruction, life and death, good and evil. It’s about how they appear as though in conflict, but were secretly born of the same source, and are both serving life by the competition of equalizing forces, each made stronger and knowing its purpose in balancing opposition to the other, their everlasting competition sometimes swinging too far one way or the other, evil inviting good and good inviting evil, each thereby forever calling for the other to resurge and re-create the equilibrium forever sitting in the center, with our Great Mother. I think she was teaching me, and everyone else, through these murals.”

“And when it comes to the Path of Creation and Destruction, on *this* side of things, as you move down into the mountain, into the darkness, the entryway to the passages are marked by the downward-facing triangle set above a series of thresholds. But when you come up from the other direction, from inside the mountain, up into the light, they’re marked with the upwards-facing triangle on the other side of the lip that frames each entryway. And the upwards facing triangles are all perfectly etched, as if with tools by an artist, with great care and skill, whereas those pointed down are irregular, and all a bit different from one another, as if carelessly, hurriedly clawed into the rock.”

“I don’t know what I thought, exactly, employing the Path for the purposes of trapping Kezlan; maybe that she belonged down there, or that it was the only way to keep her alive whilst preventing her from feeding on the weak. I fear I’ll live to regret it. For I led her deeper and deeper into the mountain, following the passageways, reading the old

stories whilst passing through thresholds guarded over by the etched triangles, dropping her down into ever deeper crevices that had cracked open between passageways, feeling ashamed of myself each time, telling myself that it'd be better to kill her than to punish her for her nature."

"For how can one hate the scorpion for stinging the frog, even knowing that when the scorpion is allowed to interact with the frog, its trickery will end in the death of them both? I didn't *blame* her for being the scorpion, but she was too dangerous to let loose. So I kept going deeper and deeper into the mountain, dropping her into places that she hadn't the strength to climb out of, even as that strength grew in league with the darkness by the day, forcing me to go even deeper to keep her trapped. But I knew how lonely she was, I could feel it. It so wrenched my heart, not only that I was inflicting suffering upon my daughter, but that, by not having the heart to kill her, I was making her darker by imprisoning her in the mountain. So I'd visit her, and she'd say the most vile things to me as she withdrew deeper and deeper into herself, the loneliness and hatred of me manifesting as hatred for everything in existence. And as we dropped deeper down during these agonizing acts of ongoing imprisonment, Kezlan often kicking and screaming in her binds, the environment of the Path began to change, the once freezing stone encased in ice gradually becoming warmer, producing trickles of icy water dripping down into steaming pools below, heated by the mountain's molten core, the fiery force that once gave birth to Mother's body."

"Then, one day, I dropped down to where I'd last left her, but when I got there, to this place wherein I knew she couldn't climb out, she was gone. And I soon realized that, instead of trying to climb up and out, she'd decided that trying to climb out was futile, and so she rebelled by following the path even deeper into the mountain, the cauldron calling from below, matching the seething hatred

in her heart. So, lighting my eyes with the glow of the full moon, I followed her trail. For days I followed it, for beneath the Path is the Great Labyrinth, concealing the matrix in which the Sky Woman and the Underlord first fought, and came to puzzle-out the course of existence.”

“Finally, I found evidence of life, a blood trail staining the stone. It led me into the core of the mountain, where no mortal may enter, for not only is there nothing to breathe, and shall they assuredly fall to their death in the darkness, disappearing forever into an endless crevasse, but the stones slowly become as hot as those my people use to cook their meals. The sweat poured off of me and immediately evaporated as soon as it hit the heated rock. Somewhere in there, after days of tracking her blood and other bodily fluids, I came upon a doorway, this one larger than those of the Path above, and even older, I believe. Over the top of the doorway was etched a familiar symbol: two triangles, one facing up, the other down, their bases pressed together. This was where the two triangles meet.”

“And, in the deepest recesses of my memory, I suddenly remembered being told of this place; like a whisper; the voice of my mother. She told me the origin tales when I was young. She said that the forces that gave birth to me call that place the Crucible. It’s the violent source of Great Mother’s expansion; how she extends her body to the four corners of existence. It’s where the Earth forever violently gives birth to new forms of itself, creating through destruction, balancing the forces, forms and phenomena that are responsible for creating and sustaining all of life. She said that the most powerful people are like that, sitting upon the seesaw set between creation and destruction.”

“These gifted people, ‘the Rebirths,’ she called them, are like the deepest, most molten core of the mountain, as naturally creative as they are destructive, usually leaning more one way than the other, depending upon how they’re

raised and otherwise influenced by their environments and experiences. They're volatile by nature, unstably bouncing between the mercurial poles of their passions, creating when filled with and surrounded by light, destroying when overcome and consumed by darkness. They are, in this way, closest in nature to the Creator, being the greatest embodiments of the divine provenance of all things. You cannot possess such power and passion without the risk of losing control of it, or of it turning to devastation if the possessor is sufficiently pressured or corrupted, and lacking in the restraint and knowledge to control it. Their gift is their curse, for the great axe always cuts both ways. This makes it essential that such gifted people develop the fortitude and discipline to constructively channel the fiery force, the piece of the Crucible within them, for any weapon forged therein can be used for the evils of attack and enslavement, or to protect and empower the people."

"I knew when I found my way into the Crucible that my daughters were as the purest balancing embodiments of reformation, each made in balance with the other. I also knew that, driven by her anger, frustration and loneliness, that my dark daughter had found the source of that power, the heart of the Great Mother. For, as I passed through the threshold, and beneath the two triangles, I was struck by a vision that brought me to my knees. At first it was as though I was blind, desperately looking about for my sight."

"Then, from this perfect darkness, a point of pure white light formed, its shining rays becoming ever more blinding, shooting across the black expanse until it suddenly exploded outwards into a sphere, expanding faster and faster and faster until, on a scale that I felt, but cannot describe, more immense than anything you, or I, can conceive of, its rate of expansion suddenly began to slow, more and more, until, stopping for a moment, it then began to collapse in on itself, faster and faster until there was

nothing but an imploding blackness folding in on itself, denser and denser, until another little dot of perfectly pure white light was formed within it, and the cycle repeated.”

“It was a glorious vision. The perfect balance of creation and destruction. But when I came out of it, I was suddenly struck by a foul stench. Looking around me, I was within a perfectly spherical cavern. The ceiling above me moved, flapping creatures covering its every inch. And their bodies were littered everywhere, and stacked along the outer ring of the cavern, all decapitated, some with their wings torn from their torsos. Blood was everywhere, dripping from every dead body; so much that it pooled in the sphere’s naturally-formed trough, in the center of the floor of the cavern. The entire space steamed with a perfect humidity, cycling between rising from the floor to condensing on the stone above and back, all intermixing with the white droppings of the creatures, brewing some hot, heinous potion of blood and excrement and rotting decay. And right in the middle of the pool, there was Kezlan. But *different*.”

“My daughter was becoming something else, right there in front of me, finding new form in the Crucible, willing her release through reformation. She was squirming around, in the middle of the pool of blood, like some sort of horrible primordial stew of transfiguration, a tadpole squirming about in the sludge. As she wriggled about, moaning, I couldn’t tell whether in pleasure or pain, maybe both, I could see that her collarbone had cracked, and her legs and arms were broken, with wings looking to form in the space between them, her skin transforming into black fur. It took all her strength to prop herself up. Then she spoke.”

“She pointed with a deformed hand, her fingernails cracking into claws, at the walls around me, upon which one big interconnected mural had been carved. In the other hand she clutched what looked to be a perfect triangle, and I knew that she’d somehow pried it from the

floor, and that, claiming this piece of the Crucible for herself, she'd poured into it all of her hatred of her will for revenge and domination. She said that, though her mother had failed her, her ancestors couldn't. She thanked me, scornfully, for teaching her that she could only rely upon herself, on the natural forces, and on the people that were once as foolish as I had been, thinking that her kind could be trapped here forever, and especially, she said, for leading her to what she called the 'Crib of the Underlord.'"

"The mural that she pointed to as she spoke, telling its tale whilst pointing her crooked appendage at its progression etched in relief around the space, told of an ancient race of humans, the First People, the descendants of Sky Woman. They were haunted by a creature of pure destruction, one that rose up from the heart of the mountain as soon as Sky Woman fell to earth, a creature like our mountain lion, but far larger, with massive canine teeth, blacker than a starless, moonless night; a predator that couldn't be killed, that feared only daylight, and that delivered constant death upon them for many dwindling generations, pushing them near to extinction. She kept referring to this Underlord as her 'ancient father' and 'true teacher,' accusing me of having concealed him from her, though I knew nothing of him excepting faint memories of my mothers' stories. Sometimes Kezlan called him 'Ven-Dahl-Dooh,' which she said meant 'Vengeance of Living Death,' that which insatiably consumed the first humans for their crimes, the First Council thereby formed for the sake of their survival."

"They were the forebears of the Mahwah, and they lived here, in this cavern, and in the warm hollows below, when the world was encased in ice, and when this was the only survivable place for many, many miles. This is how they knew of the labyrinth beneath our feet, leading to the Crucible, in a time before there was forest, when the inside of the mountain was survivable, its heat countered by the

constant freeze surrounding it, when the snowstorms were of such force that a single gust could simultaneously freeze and launch a person off their feet, shattering them with a crash to earth; when one could walk across the bay on blocks of ice, assuming one survived the freeze. Only the creature of death, whom came from below, whom was made by the same force that made my mother, was a threat to them. All whom it killed were buried right here.”

“Well, actually, it was *I* who buried them. I know their story from these walls in part, and from the etchings below, but mostly because their lives passed into me as I buried their bones. They still speak to me in my dreams, as I sleep upon them, like floating on a sea of a thousand whispers. They mostly lived below, where it was warmer, and better insulated. This chamber was their tomb, for they couldn’t actually get through the ice to bury the remains of their loved ones, and would come up here to deposit their remains beneath the oculus, a transport to the heavens. The ceremony is portrayed on these stones,” she adds, gesturing to the surrounding walls faintly depicting the tale.

“They would burn the bodies of the dead right in the middle, directly below the oculus, on the top of what was once an impenetrable slab of ice, carrying fire up from deep beneath the earth in stone receptacles holding embers from the molten core of the mountain. Their wise men and women, their seers, were ‘fire-bearers;’ fire was critical to their development, and their most holy of people were appointed to gather it from below, and guard and feed the flames with whatever fuel they could find, and regarded the fire as an ancient life-giving spirit. The fire-bearers would lead processions up here to burn the dead.”

“And they would chant incantations to the Great Mother, whom would sometimes visit this place as an apparition. They’d watch and chant and share remembrances as the essence of their departed rose up and out of the oculus,

imagining it to be a portal transporting their people's smoking spirits into the sky, and that their holy people, their fire-bearers and healers, would be honored by being placed in the night sky as stars, so as to watch over their people from the heavens. They sung such things as '*Spirit of the sky, body of the earth,*' and '*Through the eye of Spirit, to see perfection once more, suspended as a star, else falling back into being.*' Then they'd stack the bones along the walls, more and more, the walls of bones growing up and in, crowding the space. Eventually some of them survived the age of ice and left this place, seeding the fledgling forest and bay with the first of the Mahwah."

"But in order to survive that long they were forced to overcome their enmity. For they'd once been divided into numerous clans, each one inhabiting a different cavern within the labyrinth connecting the Path of Creation and Destruction. Ven-Dahl-Dooh preying indiscriminately upon them all, they responded to the threat against them by coming together, arming themselves as one. Somehow they captured the creature and imprisoned it in the heart of the mountain, dropping it into the deepest crevice they knew of. There the being was trapped, unable to claw its way up and out, enduring seemingly endless suffering, knowing only constant starvation without death, until, discovering the Crucible, it found the force of its creation, and, envisioning its transformation, became the first of the blood bats in order to escape its prison, promising to repay mankind by giving birth to a new species that would kill *not* to eat, but to suck every ounce of blood out of every last person, leaving their bodies to rot, as they'd left it to rot."

"I cannot tell you how horrible it was to see my daughter undergo that same metamorphosis. That was the last time I saw her, except in my dreams and day visions, of course. That was my last chance to kill her, when she was weak. But instead, my own weakness won over. Cackling and

screaming shrilly, she completed her transformation and finally escaped, becoming the black-winged beast, flying past me. Now she hides somewhere outside my vision, afraid to step into the light and reveal her location, for not only has she become the beast that evolved to live in the darkness, being so averse to the light that it burns, but she gains her strength in her rebellion to the light and my sight, and fears that history will repeat itself. She's the darkness, reborn. And without your help, and without bringing our children out of harm's way, I see a violent swing towards the darkness befalling this land, lasting a thousand years."

"Can't you stop her? You obviously have the... *ability*."

"She's a clever one, my dark daughter, this you must understand. She's a thinker. A plotter. She means to spur in me exactly that thought. She means to make it impossible for me *not* to be drawn out by that motherly instinct to protect *all* of my children, and especially she whom was drawn directly from my womb, and upon whom so much depends. For Kezlan knows what I know. She knows that the future that I fight for is embodied by Kylen, and by her union with your son, and that they must dwell there, in the forest, to unearth their full form and function."

"She also knows that *that's* where I'm vulnerable, outside the protections of this place, imbued by the aforementioned fortifying forces that survived the first forms of life in these lands; that first forged the alliance between humanity and divinity. So, you see, I *must* deny her. I cannot allow the pain she produces through the suffering of my people to so provoke my heart that I lose self-control, for that is her plan," she says with a pathos so immense that Harold succumbs to it as well, thinking of the death of his own people, and his wife, and the peril faced by his son, and the fact that, indeed, it feels much as a test, like something is spurring him to fly from this cavern and kill. "I cannot risk perishing in the forest, and leaving

this place open to Kezlan's plot. For, Harold from Aria, if she comes to rule from this place, with our offspring dead, this realm shall plunge into darkness, and her conned converts shall multiply, sweeping from sea to shining sea."

Harold, exercising his third eye in following the wonderous woman's words, is lost in the tale, seeing it come alive in his mind by her spellcasting support. He can see countless blood-scenting bats gathering in clouds so great that they blot out the sun, sweeping across the land and leaving nothing but drained, pocked corpses in their ravening wake; he can feel them crawl across his flesh, and burrow into his eye sockets and ear canals as if they're caves, and sweep in and out of the mountain through every one of the innumerable crevices cracking its snow-strewn, rocky façade before descending into the fiery cauldron below, bursting into flames and firing back up again, carrying the furious heart of the mountain with them, up and out of the oculus, igniting the sky with an inglorious inferno. He sees mass shrieking swarms of them, like bloodletting bebies of locusts tailing great ships flying black sails with upside down triangles beside every shore from here to Aria and back. The vision enrages him, chilling his blood, and he knows that everything must be done to prevent this future.

"Why, if you know of smithing, do you not teach it to your people? Surely they'd be better protected and empowered. Do you not leave them more vulnerable without it?"

She smiles a sideways, knowing smile, the outer rim of her fierce white eyes momentarily flashing with a blue so deep and pure it looks to have been stolen from the deepest glacial recesses of northern Aria, where many are lost, vanishing into the endless crevasses of the forever freeze.

"You are asking of the great accord of my kind, my love. That's meant to remain a mystery between humankind and its progenitors. But since you asked, and since you and I

are bound, I'll tell you this: It's not the divine way to give a gift that hasn't been earned. If you give power to someone who hasn't developed the ability to use it wisely, who doesn't understand the nature of what's suddenly at their disposal, you unleash a terror. Human beings find enough such terror without our help. Also, the lessons required to use something in service of the people are gathered during its development. To take that development away is risky, to say the least. It may appear, at first, that you're doing them a favor, but they're more likely to annihilate themselves with an unearned gift than to use it for their betterment."

"It's like giving a weapon to someone who'll treat it like a toy, or like tearing a butterfly from its chrysalis before it's developed the strength to fly. My providence is to guide but not to interfere; to influence but not impose; to walk the razor thin line between determinism and free will such that both are true, and exist in balance. Those closest to the Great Mother are protean by nature; the ageless alchemists; like uncontained vessels under continuous fermentation, forever adapting to and becoming what our environments, and the beings affected by those environments, need us to. This is the essence of spiritual practice; possessing an unfixated, forever unfolding identity, ungrasping, uncontained, drawing as near as possible to the non-identity of enlightenment, thereby able to become and understand and empathize with any identity we encounter. The more fixed and finite the sense of self, the more trapped it is by individualization, the heavier and more rigid the ego desperately holding onto the misleading sense of self, the easier they are to target and corrupt."

"This is why the pure spirit of the Creator, and the Great Mother with whom it partners in making the forms of their combined selves, are limitless in their manifestations, and why I am of the white, of the light, all colors, ever able to become what is most needed, able to slip into the skin of

any being whom I encounter. Thus do I watch without being watched, gleaning what I must and guiding where and how I can, passing subtle signs to my people, typically only subconsciously recognized, through the actions of the creatures of the forest, of land, sea and sky, and through the ingesting of plants that peel the third eye open, and through mingling with the subconscious in their dreams, their interpretation evoking revelation. In this way is my influence akin to making little invisible course corrections in their lives that add up to every meaningful difference between being suspended above the abyss of randomness and meaninglessness, and falling headlong into it.”

“That is the life of the mortal, without most of you being aware of it: you’re held above the abyss by your mostly unnoticed communication with the divine. At the same time you’re instinctively aware of the evil that comes when this communication falls upon deaf ears; when you believe that you’re doing everything on your own; that you’re above and more powerful than the Mother whom birthed you, and the agents in whom she more strongly seeds her divinity, knowing that such acolytes are the difference between life staying suspended and dropping through the nothingness. This agency is as real as it is unnoticed; as powerful as it is subtle, noticeable only by the few who dwell nearest to the nothing that gives birth to the everything. Besides, when it comes to the forces of war of which you speak, they have no real use for such powers here. The Mahwah live mostly in peace, excepting extraordinary times like these, for this land is rich, and gives them more than they need. If and when they have need for such technology, they’ll find it.”

“But what happens if more of my kind arrive, from across the seas, carrying that technology? They’ll wipe them out.”

Tears welling in her eyes, the Wild Woman says:

“Yes. It has been foretold that the people from your continent know nothing but division. Division of tribes; division of beliefs; division even within people themselves. They are always at war with otherness; with identity; with ideas of personal belonging that haven’t even occurred to my people. And because of this they are like great big fires to the moths of darkness like my daughter, who seek just such discord and selfishness to exploit. They will come, just as you say, first with your weapons, then with lightning sticks shooting projectiles far more powerful than our bows and arrows. As a result my people, and their ways, will approach extinction, forced into hiding, waiting for the great hunger, the Wendigo, to eat itself and the land near to nothingness. Only then will our Great Mother be called back into the light, Her ways leading humanity towards salvation, for only in communion can life be sustained.”

“You have a long sight. It’s hard to act on that...”

“Yes. It’s far easier to simply react to the present, and yet the present is always causing the future, and time is circular, as human ideas such as knowledge and development and progress will eventually prove to them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that the more that humankind develops and believes that it knows things, the more that it produces and enforces and invests in its forms of knowledge, the more that it acquires and believes that it’s ‘advancing’ in its learning and technology, the more it loses touch with the truth and divinity embedded in and exuded by the Great Mother. It’s like this gradually occluding optic. In the beginning, and in its earliest history, humanity was entirely open and wondrous, its third eye agape; humanity felt and connected to the truth and power innate to the natural world, and sensed the spirits everywhere, moving through everything, and looked to the spiritual realm for truth and

meaning. Humanity gradually closes that third eye through its belief in what it presumes to be superior perspectives.”

“It supplants the spirits with its own self-worship within its mind, and places this perspective over its third eye. It becomes deaf, dumb and blind to natural, instinctive, divine truth by virtue of its artificial noises, knowledge and technology. Tribes that consider themselves greater than others are typically only so in terms of their ability to force themselves upon others, with those others actually retaining a more advanced understanding of the natural forces underlying existence. So the trend of ‘progression’ comes at the considerable cost of *regression* in the capacity to connect with more fundamental truths. They can’t hear the spirits because they can only hear the sound of their own prideful voices and ‘advanced’ mechanisms. They can’t see or feel their connections to the world around them, of which they’re spiritually inseparable by nature, because they’ve closed themselves off from that nature through all the unnatural things and beliefs with which they surround themselves and come to serve.”

“Those refusing what others consider advancement pay a horrible price for staying closer to the spirits, because they’re run over by the violence of ‘progress,’ but all of that will eventually come full circle, as the Great Mother becomes overwhelmed, and as advancement collapses in on itself, and as the true leaders of humanity offer salvation through a return to the lost truths coming through divine connection, the sustainable, symbiotic forms of spiritual partnership with Great Mother. The quiet, the listening, the observant and reverential, *these* are the people that shall ultimately inherit the Earth after the passing of the Age of Greed and Ego whose fake leaders shall bring humanity to its knees by their blindness, corruption and self-serving destruction. They’ll believe the lies spread by their collective egos, that they supplanted the archaic and the

uncivilized, but it's precisely those whom they'll believe that they've surpassed who shall ultimately show them that 'advanced' has nothing to do with humanity overcoming nature, and everything to do with humanity harnessing the divinity in nature through a natural partnership between the finite and the infinite; between the mortal and its immortal roots. And I believe that our own children will play a key role in humanity's future, preserving the ancient memory while building the bridge between our continents, thereby preserving a divine link and reducing future devastation."

"Our children...you keep speaking of that. Why *them*?"

"There is a great force of the Creator that makes for the completion of one thing through the makings of another, and through their connection with the world around them. It is a part of the lesson of oneness, a teaching of the illusion of independence, known through this law of attraction of equal halves of a manifested whole. They may only truly know themselves, and fully appreciate their purpose, when challenged by, grown through and ultimately set in league with the other, facing out into the world hand in hand."

"Dichotomies like 'good and evil' are deceptive; seemingly at odds, they're actually halves of the same whole; equal and opposing reflections that only have meaning *because* of the other. Why be time if not for space, where everything would otherwise happen in one place, at the same time, and so void time's very purpose? And why be energy without matter, the Creator without the Mother, the seed of life without the flower, that which draws to itself so as to condense into form? And what is form without the function that spurs it through adaptation to the challenges of its environment, and for the survival of the whole, so that function is made into form, and form is meaningful because of its fit with the whole? So it is with our children, separated by space for the sake of the combination of complementary bloodlines carrying two halves of one destined whole."

“I see...”

“But they shan’t survive to know this without our help. For that is *our* function, an inseparable part of *our* purpose. And for you to know that purpose, Harold, to play that pivotal role, you need new form, so as to lead the pack. But first, you must rest and recuperate. I need you strong.”

With this she leads him back to the revivifying mineral waters of her strangely-scented pool, a scent that at first seemed malodorous, but that’s growing on him, like the moss and lichen that so loves this land, for, like the microscopic legions of plant life finding their home upon every natural edifice of stone and wood, the water of the pool, and even the mist hanging over it, seems to warmly adhere to him like a supportive lover, lending him strength. She bathes his nude body in it, embracing him from time to time with her own bare form, as if performing a nurturing ritual, the comfort he receives seeping deep beneath his skin, dripping all the way down into his bones. She then leads him back to her bed, lays him down, packs a wooden pipe with some of the white ghost moss she’d been evaporating into a enfolding halo when he’d first hovered over her, contemplating killing her, and, taking a big puff, she leans over him and blows the smoke through her kiss.

“Sleeeeeeep...”



There's no way of knowing how long he's been down here. Wahuchu isn't even certain it's the same day as when he fell in. He only knows that it must've been recent, as he awakens with his face set in a puddle of puke and instantly falls into a coughing fit, trying to expel a combination of vomit and the smoke and ash of the forest smoldering from the fires set by the misled Mahwah still sweeping across the top of the pit many body lengths above. He's not sure what hurts more, the effects of the fall, or of the medicine that saved him. His stomach still wrenches from the Crimson Clover root that appears to have saved him from the attempt on his life, and which he can only assume ended the lives of the elders. The flesh of his face has contorted from the root's side effects, disfiguring him in the process, and tugs at his skull still. His right shoulder feels dislocated, and the entire left side of his body throbs mercilessly, with his ribs badly bruised, if not broken, and, fingering a protruding bone, his arm snapped like a twig.

Peering above through stinging eyes, his twisted face blackened by ash, he realizes the miracle of being alive at all. The first five feet of the inside of the approximately ten by ten by twenty foot tall pitfall is covered with carved limbs lodged into its sides, pointed up and outwards in order to mercilessly impale any creature unfortunate enough to accidentally fall into the trap. The floor is the same, spikes facing upward to spear anything falling past those above. And, by some fortune of fate, he missed every last one of them. As near as he can tell his sideways-turning fall permitted his narrow passage through the first line of limbs, after which he'd bounced off the clay wall and continued his sideways descent, stretched-out and landing hard on his left side between the lodged spears lining the floor.

'Perhaps it would've been better *not* to have survived,' he thinks, his heart aching almost as badly as his body, thinking of every elder dead, his daughter likely taken as

some sort of slave by that horrible man-child he'd taught. 'How could this have been avoided? How did I fail him? Maybe this is my punishment for permitting him access to the village after I realized what he was; to die here, alone, in agony, never to see my beloved daughter or people again. This is what comes of not following my instinct.'

Then again, maybe Zande was right. Maybe he, and his father, the undoubtedly dead chief, and the others, *should've* listened. For he can imagine no more horrible place than this. Nothing nearer to absolute desecration. Nothing that dishonors Mother's gift more. To suffer and die here, in this way... he can feel the very force of life cry out to him for exactification. Only a barbarous species would kill an animal in such a cold-blooded, dishonorable manner as now faced by him; a manner which, by its very nature, hasn't the least respect for the spirit within every living thing, whether eaten by people or not. How could such a people even pretend to deserve to live in his forest? The pain of sitting up nearly renders him unconscious once more. Barely summoning the strength to crawl over to the wall, he braces himself before slamming his dislocated shoulder into the wall at precisely the right angle to reset it, having done the same for many an active Mahwahn in the past, after which he slumps into the corner and passes out.

When he awakens it's dark, only the surreal glow of fading fires passing through the smoke lingering above providing a hint of illumination, like the penumbral play of shadows cast by the recently departed spirits of those whose bodies burn therein. Examining his broken, bleeding arm, it's clear that it'll kill him if he doesn't find a means to bind it and stem the blood-flow. Crawling on his side between the spikes, he finds the carcass of a dead raccoon and, continuing the crawl, comes upon his brown bear blade. The pains in his stomach beginning to subside, the hopeful

sensation of hunger returning, his predicament reminds him of the tale of a party once lost to a monstrous hunger.

Ironically, it's a tale teaching the dangers of both betrayal and of not knowing Mother's divine providence; of the risks of ignorance and all that's lost when you turn against your own people; of not knowing how to live off of the land and, forsaking one's people, of not being able to rely upon communal knowledge. The story goes that a group of men raped a young woman, almost to death, and fled the village rather than face the consequences determined by the elders. They were young and inexperienced, and thereby forced to wander further and further in order to find the few food sources that they knew, and which, in their debilitated states, didn't run from them or fight back.

Starved to near blindness, they'd confused the Crimson Clover with the common clover and set to feeding upon it, roots and all. Finding refuge in a cave as their mistake revealed itself, the few who survived the resulting sickness were so weak that they resorted to feeding on the flesh of their fallen. Once they'd gained sufficient strength to emerge from the cave, missing their tribe and willing to do anything to regain acceptance, their faces had been so badly deformed by the Crimson Clover that they terrified everyone with whom they came into contact thereafter.

Their people treated them as monsters, chasing them back towards their cave whenever encountered. Some say they'd died there in the cave, while others tell an even darker tale, saying that they became the 'nightwalkers,' part human, part beast, addicted to rotting flesh, afraid of the daylight, digging deeper and deeper burrows, feeding on rodents and corpses until learning to use the corpses they'd discover to lure in fresh meat. It's said that they'd drink the blood of the bodies they'd scavenged and use the drained corpses as bait. As a result their spirits departed their bodies, and they traded their worship of the Great

Mother for worshipping evil. Some say that, when they decided to eat the corpses of their dead, that they opened their spirits to possession by the father of darkness hailing from the inner mountain, and that it was he, through their corrupted hearts, whom taught them to drain bodies of blood and use them as bait. Wahuchu can't help but wonder if he now faces a similar fate: choosing between death and monstrosity. What a horrible way to learn that living is relative, and that some lifeforms aren't *really* alive.

With his bear-tooth blade in hand and the tale of evil haunting his brain, he crawls over to the dead raccoon and begins gutting, skinning and cleaning the corpse, as he's done countless times before, though never with a raccoon. Hacking at one of the stakes sticking up from the ground, he finally breaks off a piece approximately the length of his arm. Then, biting down on the handle of the knife and using part of the raccoon skin and some cord tied to his waist, he forces the broken bone protruding from his left arm back into place and is just able to bind it to the stake and set the break before once again losing consciousness.

Upon awaking next it's dusk, the smoke above having mostly passed, the sweet scents of his beloved forest returning with the cool mist sucked off the West Wind sent by the sea and sweeping down the river, cleansing the air. Closing his eyes, he takes a series of deep breaths. His stomach growls intensely. The only thing available is raccoon. So he busies himself using the little strength remaining in his already lean body to break free enough of the sharpened limbs lodged into the earth to produce kindling. Then concentrating his failing ability to focus, he spins a small, straight stick into the top of a larger broken limb over and over, building the heating friction and burrowing a small hole into the top until, after *far* longer than normal, he manages to start a fire; one that'll use up all the wood at his disposal, but at least permit him to eat.

Gorging on the creature who'd had the misfortune, though his own fortune, of falling into this ungodly pit, he uses the bear tooth to dig a hole and bury the entrails of the creature of the night, then falls asleep upon the makeshift grave. With strength returning to his body, he dreams of his daughter. He sees her beside the alien youth, a bear cub between them, a pack of wolves at their back, not hunting them, but taking defensive positions. A white owl is perched on her shoulder. He knows it to be her mother; the one his people call the Wild Woman of the Mountain; she through whom he'd conceived her nineteen years past. He can feel the Great Spirit, the Mother and the Father above, circling them, offering protection and guidance against a darkness that, in the distance, descends upon the land, suffocating his tribe, enslaving his wayward former pupil.

While the dream is hopeful, and suggests that his daughter is alive and being protected, what disturbs him is that he feels as much of a kinship with the darkness that hunts her, and with the apprentice who gave him to the evil, as he does with Kylen and the Wild Woman themselves. That which comes for them comes for him as well. But whereas from his daughter and the light-skinned alien youth and the spirit who gave him his daughter the darkness wants only death and the absorption of their strength, from him it wants something else; something more. He can feel it deep down in his bones, the chill of it sweeping over him, his flesh rising into goosebumps. *It wants his very spirit.*

He sleeps all day, his body desperately requiring recuperation. Upon opening his eyes once more, the sky overhead looks to be ushering in the sunset, the wisps of cloud streaked with scarlet. *That's when he smells it.* It's a scent that's both familiar and strange at the same time. It smells much as the raccoon had when he was cleaning it. Something... *animalistic.* It smells like... *blood.* Looking around him, he notices something else strange: the clay

walls of the pitfall are now lined with little red roots. Tearing one free, it drips red, as if exuding blood, but that's... *impossible*. It doesn't smell like any plant he's ever smelled before. Tracing the roots with his eyes in the low light, he looks up to see them terminate in the strangest sight of all.

Wrapped around the upward-pointing spears near the top of the pit is a series of red vines with large blue bulbs forming upon them, the emergent flowers looking as though they're just about to bloom. And as night falls, the light of the sun giving into the soft glow of star and moonlight, they do just that, bursting into a show of deep blue blossoms with blood-red pistils. Even more peculiar is their scent. Whereas he knows almost every flower by the smell of its nectar and pollen, this one is as foreign as the big, burly, light-haired invaders. It smells like a fresh kill. Minutes later, he finds that the odor acts as a beacon.

He hears their shrieks first, the shrill screams of the bats outpacing their flight. Within seconds they hit the pit like a torrential downpour, slamming into the strange flowers above and impaling themselves upon the spikes in the process. In the living, breathing, violent storm of flesh and blood, many descend into the pit along with the blood dripping down from those impaled above. They bite and claw at him, and line the now living walls, clinging to and stripping away the red roots embedded in the clay, already a ruddy brown, more and more painted the color of fresh blood. In the nightmare of thousands of piercing shrieks and penetrating bites and claws of his suddenly seeping flesh, he's forced to fight back, and starts rolling around and slamming himself into the floor and walls and hacking wildly with his bear-toothed knife, each move eliciting anguish from his already torn-up body before, no longer able to consciously absorb the horror, he passes out.

On his back, his mouth falls open as those creatures that he wasn't able to kill suck the blood from his riddled flesh.

Above him, more and more fly into the spikes, their blood dripping down, some falling into his mouth. Only a trickle makes it into his mouth at first, producing a reaction from a few of the bats feeding upon his flesh, whom release their bites and fly up and away. Then more pours into his gaping maw, and more, until their blood fills his mouth and throat, triggering the rest of the bats to fly away. Suddenly suffocating on the blood, still unconscious, he reflexively swallows, then immediately jolts awake before doubling over in pain, his throat closing up, his stomach seething.

For the briefest of moments he feels on death's doorstep, his heart stopping, a great white light filling the sky above, beckoning him to rise up towards it. When his heart regains its force the beat accelerates to an inhuman pace, the flow reversing. What was once pounded out and through is now sucked down and in, outward bursts becoming inward implosions. Within a matter of seconds another sense never before felt enters into him, tied to the movement of all the nearby creatures of the forest, suddenly sensed not by sight, sound or even smell, but by the feeling of them passing through space, the patterns of their movement like invisible signals sent through the air, their activity producing inaudible echoes bouncing down to him off of the walls of the pit, received by a radar that he never knew he had, heretofore unfelt, else suddenly spawned within him, like an alien ability. The last bat within the cave, clinging to the wall nearby, suddenly takes flight, and, entirely without thinking, he shoots his bear-tooth blade into the air above him with a rapidity that surprises him, impaling it. Bringing the creature down to his mouth, he bites off its head, spitting it out and holding the overturned, decapitated body above him, drinking it dry before losing consciousness and going into convulsions.

When he awakes once more the night seems to be as the day, the lumens lent by both the stars and the moon

seeming to burn brighter than were he to look directly into the sun. To his astonishment he senses the creatures that had attacked him, then senses as them. From his position in the bottom of the pit he can feel himself flying with them through the forest, detecting prey to feed from, finding that the young smell especially tempting. He senses the whole of the forest in an entirely new way, his entire being now comprised of scent, vibration and the need for fresh blood.

The desire is like nothing he's known before. It *will* be obeyed. It *cannot* be resisted. And so, in his darkening heart and twisting mind, he is one with the need to feed, and at one with his brethren flying in ferocious whirlwinds somewhere in the night, making his way into every crack, crevice and cave of the forest and mountain, looking to rally more seekers and feeders to the only remaining cause. And, throughout the vision, the mountain looms over them all, but not like it did before; not like a protective force housing pure spirits guiding the Mahwah, but now felt as much the opposite; as some overlording, imperious force spurring a surprising rage. Somewhere far in the background, across the bay, a whisper: '*Our stolen home.*'

And so, in his mind, he flies eastward in a fury, tracing the mountain, looking for its heart, trying to identify the enemy. Near the peak a snowstorm descends upon him, and with it a different whisper; another voice, familiar, and yet not feeling as it once did: '*Remember... you are Wahuchu. You are the protector of the people. You are not this thing.*'

He darts about, angered by the voice, seeking its source. Upon the peak of the great mountain he finds it: a snow owl. And when his eyes meet those of the creature a great schism is triggered within his dying heart, as if he's being split in two, and simultaneously clings to life and death. Darting at the owl, it flees, and drops into the mountain, and flies through a series of interconnected caverns and passageways. Down and down they descend, the

passages becoming hotter and hotter, until finally they fly through a threshold with two triangles set above it, base upon base, one pointed upwards, the other pointing down.

He enters a perfectly circular space as hot as a furnace. The heat of it is agonizing, at first matching his fury. But he soon finds he can't take it, and needs to flee. Yet the snow owl blocks the threshold, keeping him locked within. And she's stronger than he is, forcing his captivity. Heat rising, he falls to the floor. He's the bat; now dying; sweating and screeching, melting into the center of the circle in a pool of sweat and blood. And, as he feels himself dying, helpless, his sense of being cleaved in two heightens, such that he doesn't know who, or what, he is anymore, simultaneously being what he was, a being of light bound to the earth, and what he's becoming, a creature of the night bound to the darkness. He takes big, heaving, wheezing breaths, and isn't sure if the sweltering, humid air is entering the lungs of Wahuchu, or a vile creature of pure feeding frenzy. There, locked in a state of total confusion, losing all sense of *who* the visions and sensations belong to, his breath begins to fail, each attempt to take in oxygen more and more futile, until ceasing entirely. Whatever he is, he ends.

Awakening in the pit, everything is different. All sense of what he once was fades into the back of his being, as if a memory of a dream more than a recollection of a reality. His hunger is a greater force than anything he's ever known. He gulps up every drop of dripping blood with relish, and bites into and sucks at every bat that's fallen dead into the pit, and tears the red roots from the walls of the cave and laps up their drippings, which, where once seeming strange, now seem like nourishing succor. He even digs up the entrails of the raccoon, licking up every bit of blood. It's suddenly as if he's hollow within. He has a sense that something great once lived within him, but has

been displaced by a primeval force, the feeling of its loss aching in his transforming heart, now an enormous void.

Only after every drop of blood has been ingested does he pause. He can now feel his own blood circulating through him like a river of flowing fire, passing into and through his emptied core, beating with power and rapidity in his hollowed breast that reminds him of something he can't quite recall, involving slamming something and sitting around a fire. And there's a flash of a face in his mind.

A young woman. He sees someone carrying something down the mountain, something wrapped in a cloth of some sort, but doesn't know what it is that's being carried, or why. People surround him, smiling at him, trying to embrace him, but he's not sure who or what they are, or if they're real. He wants to fly from them, and find somewhere dark. Peering above, he realizes that he's in a pit, but doesn't know how he got here. It's not so high above. Were it not for his broken left wing, he could fly free. Walking to the wall, he crouches low then bounds straight up, plunging the fingers of his right hand into the wall. Then, pulling himself into a leaping position, his feet frogged against the clay, he readies himself and launches up to a spike. With one more cling and pull, he rolls free.



“Your mission is incomplete. Yes, you’ve claimed the council fire and shall soon bring your people to heel with my help, that is certain, but that help came at a price, and you’re bound to pay it, for I’m not like those whom you’ve ousted, Chief. My spirit is absolute, and requires that the promises bound to it be honored. Honored they shall be.”

As the final scarlet streaks of the sun sink from the sky, the eerie glow of the last light of the dying day dancing off the waves beyond, Zande’s queen has arrived. But where he’d been vigorously borne into action by the confluence of his ambition and lust only days before, finding that Kezlan quenched his hunger as never before felt, he finds that the unending feast that he’d envisioned has been poisoned, his ravenous feedings belying an emptily bottomless pit.

For, while the sense of hunger now dominates his every moment, food now entirely fails to satisfy, not only the sense that it no longer offers even a hint of satiety, but also because it’s been robbed of taste, the first bite bland, the food seeming to rot in his mouth before he can swallow it. Deep down, somewhere in the recesses of his instinct, his waning humanity shudders at the knowledge that only the flesh of two people can sate him now. It’s as if the very feeling of hunger has been corrupted, made into a sick compulsion beneath every being, for even feeding upon carrion and excrement, the vulture and fly still serve life.

“Your sister was here when I left to wipe the land clean of the invaders, which I’ve done,” Zande defends himself. “I had no reason to believe that she would flee. I thought that she would stay and help her people. As for that boy...”

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss others, *Chief*. Seeds are small and buried, but give birth to great beings, revealing that they’ve always held an embryonic power. The same may be true of this so-called boy. He’s more than you can see. Especially if he manages to mate with my sister. For

though you've always lusted after her, like all weak men do over pretty women, falling for their spells. For the deceptions they paint across their skin and smiling faces often hides a not so pleasant nature; in this case, you fell for the lustrously deceiving skin of a dangerous girl."

Zande shakes his head slightly. For though he fears this... *woman*, this spirit, whatever she is, whatever force he's given himself to, he's having trouble understanding her at the moment, two sleepless nights haunting him with the pricelessness of rest, his psyche reeling, his cognitive capacity cracking from the force of some deep, dark drive buried in every animal, his care for himself losing to some power beyond reckoning, slowly sucking the life from him. First he thought it was his conscience, but that's not it; not all of it, at least. This is something he's *unable* to ignore.

"I don't know how he escaped his binds... I had to get him out of the village to avoid arousing Kylan's suspicion..."

"Are you really that blind? *She helped him escape*. They're connected, my sister and this young man. Their connection is what has brought them together, facilitated by my mother and your father, though only my mother did so intentionally. And we must sever their connection before it gives birth to new form. You must trust me. This is about forces beyond your perception. And until you give me what you promised me, their bound bodies for my extractions, you, too, shall be bound to those forces. That is beyond my control now. You shall receive exactly what you've long called for in the night, though you may deny it. You shall feel only the hunger which your life has represented. For you, my boy, are chief in name only, and not by the ways of your people, but by craving what wasn't yours. And everything taken comes with a price, and your debt is due."

Zande says nothing. It's as if every emotion that he's ever avoided accosts him at once while, at the same time, he

can sense that his ability to receive those emotions is dying, like his current emotional state sings the swan song of his heart, everything that he was now gone, everything he's becoming unable to appreciate what he'd wanted.

"Long have you bowed before the hollow tree, Chief Zande, feeding it your spirit, hacking away at it, demanding of it the filling of the unfillable, like scooping up air whilst deluding yourself that it's water. It is *this* that made me aware of you, don't you see? This that called me to you in your sleep, and swept you across the bay. It has always been I that has heard and heeded you. I have made water from your air, Chief, just as you wished of the spirits. So it is only suiting that, having failed me, and hungering your whole life for the power and respect of others, rather than cultivating it within yourself and finding your natural place among your people, as your Great Mother bids of all Mahwah... so it is that, until you fulfill your pact, and make me whole, you dwell within emptiness, the same emptiness that your incompetence leaves for me, knowing only need."

"What can I do..?"

Confused by the war raging within him, by the changing reality of everything that he's lived by, that, in his privilege and youthful naivete he assumed unchangeable, he wishes she'd leave him to mourn himself; that she'd just give up on him, and let the darkness consume him. Everything to which he'd sought claim is dead or dying, either facing mortal peril or being twisted into something he'd never thought possible. All that which he'd *thought* he hated has been revealed as love, illuminated by absence.

Closing his eyes, in his mind's eye he sees a soft white light becoming softer under an occluding influence, like drawing a shade over a distant star. The feeling of it fills his veins, circulating through and poisoning his body and brain, slithering through him like a snake in the shadows,

whispering that all that matters is sating his hunger for a woman that he once wanted even more than his father's respect. Fantasies of making love to her, of her sitting by his side around the council fire, once akin to an unappeasable force, now dim as that force fades, replaced by a pitilessness pouring froth from a spiritless realm, ushering in entirely different images which he'd never thought himself capable of having; images of him forcing himself on Kylen while she's bound and half-broken, Kezlan's dagger poised over her chest; of him begging his queen not to take her heart until she watches him tear the light-skinned alien limb from limb, adorning his intestines like a necklace, his own joy rising with Kylen's horror right up to the point where his queen severs her heart from its arteries and yanks it through her cracked breastplate, biting into as Kylen's eyes roll back in her head, Kezlan's pupils dilating as her darkness consumes her sister's light.

A sense of the deepest self-loathing and shame mingles with a sense of descending into madness, of losing control of his body and mind, as if forced to say goodbye to the dimming light lingering in his third eye, his fading spirit warning him that its spiritual sight shall not long be able to pierce the descending occlusion. A heart once bursting with un placatable passions, however misplaced in their focus and form, now grows as cold and damp as the cave into which he's retreated, set half a mile or so from the village along the base of the cliffs; those granting vistas that his mentor, and his mentor's mentor, so loved. His humanity fades, his skin losing its natural sun-scathed brown, becoming pallid, pulling taught against his bones, his darkening eyes sinking into their sockets. He's no longer able to hold down food or derive from it the least bit of satisfaction. He's turning into something monstrous, futilely trying to refrain from imagining that monstrosity.

His people, the honorable, Great-Mother-worshipping Mahwah, have begun degrading before his bloodshot eyes, those same eyes retreating into his head as if afraid to see the results of his treachery, of succumbing to the temptations of the underworld, of suddenly being blinded as much by the sight of his faltering, fracturing, leaderless people left to be 'led' by his four youthful, loyal-most lieutenants, as by the ever harsher glare of the sun. Slumped at the feet of his queen, against a rock wall almost as cold and unforgiving as she, her voice fades until he only half hears her; the subservient, sold-out, bewitched half. The other vanishing half, his humanity, looks out at the waves lapping against the shore beyond the entryway, the water seeming to call for his purification, wishing to wash the pain from him. Hypnotizing himself with the waves' carefree, rhythmic cavorting with the shore, he imagines standing and walking past Kezlan, giving himself to the sea, the human killing the monster *before* it forms. Better to be swallowed by the sea than live like a beast.

The cave is not nearly so immense and intimidating in its stateliness as is his queen's, some miles across the bay. Rather than the reflective black obsidian with its manifold obelisks jutting up into the air like some indomitable prehistoric creature, one so obstinate that it refuses to capitulate even to the unrelenting poundings of the sea, this cave appears to have been formed without resistance, carved into the greyish-white sandstone cliffs that feel as though they may collapse at any moment, much like his heart and mind. At low tide a body-length of sand interspersed with shells separates the base of the cliff from the sea, from there requiring a leap to catch hold of the soft, eroding bottom of the mouth of the cave, pulling oneself up and through a vertical crack in the sandstone so narrow that it requires a half body turn to penetrate it, as if made by a god hurling a massive spear into the cliffside.

At high tide the saltwater comes almost all the way in, forcing one to retreat to the back to stay dry, whereas most of the day it only threatens such an invasion, poised upon the eroding mouth of the cave, as if to declare itself the domain of prehistoric creatures testing the cave as a place to take refuge as they gradually transform themselves from the seabound to the landlocked. And nearly a hundred feet above lies the large carved stone set by the people in honor of Xaxu, Wahuchu's teacher, who'd been found dead on the spot. The Mahwah imagined him spending his final hours meditating to the sun sinking into the horizon beyond, his stiffened muscles holding his cross-legged position even after his body was evacuated by his soaring spirit. Beneath the stone, carved with the image of the sun to which he worshipped, his body was set, in the exact position of his death, as if he'll forever be staring out to sea, now *through* the earth which he knew so well; that which endows the people with life through the shining sun.

If forced to confess *that's* the reason that Zande is here, as much as any other; because it was Wahuchu who showed him this cave, and who spoke of his spirit journeys held within it with his own cherished teacher, and who confided in Zande why he was so fond of this place: because he felt the presence of Xaxu here better than anywhere else; because the cave acts as a natural sun dial, casting light and shadow across its white walls relative to both the time of day and the seasons, whereupon, around the summer solstice, the arc of the sun is such that one can see it dive into the water even from the innermost depths of the cave; because a section of its walls are lined with a peculiar bronze-colored plant that looks to be a cross between a seaweed and a moss that can't be found anywhere else on the peninsula, and which he'd throw into his small fire in order to inhale its smoke, enhancing his visionary capacities; and because, like all such refuges, this sea cave provided the solitude which every listener to the

ancient sound of silence seeks, the silent stillness forming the opening into which everything true is naturally poured.

And whereas Kezlan scowled upon her first entry, disdain painted across her countenance, as though the place wasn't suitable for her indiscriminating winged posse, much less for *her*, Zande, in the heeding of his decaying spirit, realizes that his own attraction to it is threefold: firstly, he knows, deep down, that he deserves no better than the chilly dampness, and a refuge that, should it reflect the justice of Great Mother surrounding and seeping into it, shall surely collapse upon them both; secondly, that, rather than dissolving, his sentimental side has grown *more* pronounced since he realized that his sentiments shall soon be silenced forever, like someone who only knows that they love someone when their own foolishness irrevocably fouls the waters of the relationship, or like the rebellious heart that refuses to capitulate to mortality, raging against the dying of the light, as he once thought he'd heard someone say; and thirdly, in connection to the other two, that it's easy to imagine Wahuchu's spirit visiting this place, and perhaps accidentally, or with the most begrudging reluctance, passing some token of wisdom to a disciple who, in his treachery, couldn't be less deserving.

The descent of night now complete, he can hear his new brothers and sisters sweeping in from the sea, their once strident shrieks growing more mellifluous every night. He's at once repulsed and attracted to their sounds and actions, and to those of their mother, his queen, like the feeling one has when one anticipates giving into a dissolute gratification. 'This is it!' he imagines his heart screaming, 'become the beast, else drown the monstrosity in the rebirthing waters of the bay, washing away the sickness with the only honorable act remaining to you!' But it's too late. He hasn't the will to defy Kezlan. And his brethren have arrived, reinforcing the manipulations of their master.

Besides, he's too cowardly to kill himself. The beast is laid bare, the voice of its leash-holder rising in volume, as if her followers can only intensify her powers. At the same time he hears the voice of his teacher, words that only mean something now, as the diabolic displaces his spirit, the lesson learned precisely because it's too late to matter:

"Some things *can't* be drowned," Wahuchu had told him here, peering past him as though at some immortal being hovering above the ocean, soon to pass over the horizon. Wahuchu's still long-cast shadow only darkens his self-disdain. "It's as if they're held forever aloft by an innately buoyant force beyond earthly reckoning; as if, no matter the weight that they bear, no matter the mass set upon the shoulders of their heaving vessels, they'll forever find the surface again, and soar above water and earth, above mountain and sky, ever returning to the weightlessness of their essence, loyal only to the pure force of renewing salvation which not even the most vile of villains may mar, much less vanquish. How and why this force enters us is as varied and unpredictable as the movement of the Four Winds, the only prediction we can make that, when our Great Mother hears the silent, honored cry of the anguished, voided heart, She shall send to it a savior who may reveal to it a depth beyond the deepest chasms of the ocean, from which the ancient lover within every heart shall rise to balloon the breast, demonstrating again and again that every depth of despair is mated with an equally opposite ecstasy, and that never shall one be untied from the other, every temporary pain borne by every victim ultimately remade into the timeless pleasure of pure love."

"Are you listening to me?," Kezlan forces him from his wistful reverie. "I asked you a question. Did the one you call a boy leave anything here? Anything personal? Anything I can use to track him? There's something that I

can try; something that my sister will be immune to, possessing my blood, but the young wolf can be coaxed.”

“He left his weapon. I took it from him when he was here.”

“Yes, that should work. Good... you’ve not yet failed after all. Retrieve it for me, Chief. The intention of its forging shall be made to do our bidding, turned against its bearer.”

The thought of returning to the village, even under the protection of darkness, fills him with dread. Upon his departure two days before he’d informed every Mahwahn who would listen that he’d be out on a spirit quest to honor the fallen, his teacher, father and the elders, and to seek their guidance from the great beyond. Strangely, however, when he works the revelation ritual that Wahuchu had taught him, which he’d performed earlier this very day, he senses that his teacher is still present on *this* plane, or near to it, at least, as if perched somewhere between life and death. He never came close to matching Wahuchu’s mastery of the ritual, but is well enough practiced in it to at least achieve a vague sense of the spirit realm, and others’ placement thereupon. And Wahuchu seemed to be suffering much the same as he is, yet somehow differently. Alas, he assumes this to be but a symptom of his own transformation, and the declination of abilities that were amateurish even at their peak, or else further proof of his failures as a student, as what he sensed of his teacher was so far removed from what he knew of him when he was alive that he assumes his interpretation to be incorrect.

As he exits the cave and enters into the night, wading through the lowering tide along the base of the cliffs, headed towards his village, Zande finds that he’s somewhat aroused by the heavenly show of soft starlight intermingling with the thin slice of the remaining, waning moon high above. The feeling of the nocturnal light is much the same as the sun once was, the comfort of the

sun's warmth on his face replaced with the soothing chill of the evening air matching his cooling blood. Somehow the celestial ceiling feels lower than it once did, the stars brighter, a blinking blanket descending to wrap itself around his shoulders, relieving his burdens. He remembers how hot his blood had felt only a few nights before, in Kezlan's bedchamber, and wonders at the meaning of the reversal, and can only associate it with the dissatisfaction of his appetite; an appetite that, much like the bodies left by his flighted brethren, has been drained of satisfaction. But that no longer matters, it seems. He must do her bidding, for he senses that not to do so would invite a horror eclipsing even the creatureliness entering into him.

Entering the periphery of the village, it's not at all as he'd remembered it. Fresh supplies of what Kezlan has dubbed 'the dreaming herb' and 'the elixir of life' have been delivered and set upon the shore, and he thinks, with his dramatically improved night vision, that he can just make out a series of canoes leaving the bay, headed out to sea on the trajectory he himself had recently taken, no doubt paddled by the strongest amongst her claimed Mahwah children. Hearing sporadic laughs belonging more to deranged creatures than the warm mirth he ascribes to his people, interspersed with crying children and the grunting sounds of sexual satisfaction, he notices that the stockpiles at the once consistently oversupplied work stations have been dramatically reduced and, even more strange, that some of the stockpiles have fallen into disarray. Just as unsettling is the fact that many containers once held in central locations conducive to communal use are now being spread about and set in front of specific shelters. He's about to move through the village, finding that he's more comfortable in the darkness than ever, and thus better able to convey himself surreptitiously, when a calamity breaks out near the recent shoreside delivery.

A few Mahwahn have literally stumbled upon the fresh supplies, one of them having tripped over and toppled a container, and it's as if they've become scavengers, each seizing what they can and fleeing whilst defending whatever they can hold in their arms, fighting off others who wish to reclaim the prize for themselves, the noise arousing more Mahwahn, and then more, the people who'd always worked in concert now descending upon the pickings as if each is an entirely different species of animal. To his irritation it soon turns violent, with shoving, punching and even a club blow to the back of one head. His pride rages up within him, and he considers interjecting as the chief, but soon realizes that this would betray his mission, which is only served by this distraction, and so, just able to restrain his impulse to attack, he circles away from the devolving debacle, using it to his advantage.

Within moments he's made it to his wigwam, where he'd left the sword, and finds that his belongings are in the process of being looted. Two of his trusted lieutenants are fighting over the sword that had been set beside his bed. Already on the verge of losing self-control, the sight of this betrayal breaks through his last ounce of self-restraint, and he leaps upon them, biting the closest man, Padam, a man whom he's spent more time with than anyone in their shared lives. Clamping onto the back of his neck, he sinks his teeth into his flesh with a force that surprises even him, and gives him a sudden surge of strength, as if from a drug-inducing dose of adrenaline, the taste of blood bringing a bloodlust as great as his lust for Kezlan in her lair. Spinning around, Padam flings Zande against the other thief and runs from the wigwam, leaving Zande to fight with the remaining intruder for the right to the sword.

Yanking the sword from the young warriors' hands, who'd had a grip upon the blade, Zande slices them deeply and, screaming, his opponent stumbles towards the entryway,

but not fast enough, as Zande, one hand upon the handle, hacks at him from behind, cutting into his neck and nicking his carotid artery. Dazed, his foe falls into one of the front support pillars and, just as he stands back up, his hand pressed against the arterial spray in the attempt to stem the bleeding, Zande thrusts the sword forward, puncturing him from his mid back through his upper stomach. Falling to his knees, Zande can smell the blood in the air, and spilling upon the earth, and it seems to him a great treasure, sweeter than honey, each drop a loss. He drops his full weight upon the dying warrior, wrapping his arms and legs around him, forcing him into a seated position.

The man's right hand still pressed against his flowing wound, but weakly, Zande cocoons himself around him and removes his hand, immediately placing his mouth over the wound, and drinks, and drinks, and drinks, the sensation as if satisfying the greatest longing, indulging in a drug burrowing into his deepest recesses. In his mind he hears the flurry of the winged creatures, and can sense them flying in circles above the cliffs overhanging his cave, his queen there, waiting for him. He's at one with them. He's no longer of these people, he knows that now. And, as he drinks, giving into the thirst completely, his only discomfort is the eagle talon he'd hidden under his tunic, the talisman burning more and more the more he drinks.

Finally draining the body dry, he jumps to his feet, feeling as though he's cracking a cocoon, flinging his limbs open, the corpse slumping unceremoniously to the floor as if the discarded chrysalis of the previous version of himself. Tearing off his tunic, he grabs at the eagle talon, burning its imprint into the palm of his hand, and casts it aside. Pulling the sword from the back of the dead man, fallen forward at the waist, he licks it clean. He then heads back into the night, which calls for him as if an ancient, inviting friend. Invigorated by the meal as never before, he strides

with ease around the periphery of the village, this time grinning at the nearby sight of the fight for Kezlan's gifts.

Minutes later the bats welcome his return to the cave. Flying in circles high above, they descend and enfold him, forming a funnel of shrieking glee, as if celebrating his recent meal, passing inches from his face in an embrace that would have terrified him days before, but which now feels as natural as had the discarded bark fiber tunic and eagle's talon when he was his former self. Zande leaps with ease up into the cave, this time without need of catching the lower ledge of the opening and pulling himself in. Kezlan drinks from a decapitated bat at the back of the cave, and when she sees him, his face spattered in blood, bare chested, pupils dilated, the blade of the invader gleaming softly in the starlight, she smiles, a massive, bewitching, blood-dripping smile, as a lioness recognizing one of her own, welcoming the lion to the pride's feast.

"You see, I told you that you're now of the night."

"I was a fool for doubting you, my queen."

Approaching, she places her face against his, then licks a trickle of blood running down his cheek before inhaling his scent. As she slowly circles him she runs her fingertips up the blade, then across his collarbone, and, moving behind him as she speaks, across his shoulders and back, her minions mirroring her outside, spinning in a circle around the mouth of the cave, some entering and clinging to the soft walls of the cliff as if to pay homage to their leaders.

"And yet, I must forewarn you," Kezlan says. "The blood of your people shall not always satisfy you. Indeed, soon you shall only feel this surge of strength by my blood, and the blood of your brethren here," she adds, motioning at the bats clinging to the inner cave. "You are not a pure blood, and may only stay strong through *our* blood; through *my* goodwill, my chief. Mark my words. Without us you shall

shriveled towards death. But just as importantly, should you continue to drink of the people, it shall only accelerate your change, and we need you to appear as one of them in order for them to accept you as chief. They may otherwise disperse and seek shelter near the mountain from which they came, a knowledge buried in their blood, for that shall be their instinct if they trade their current pleasures for fear and survival. We must make of them a new tribe, controlled by new appetites that they're not prepared to resist, rather than scaring them into my mother's arms."

"I understand."

Kezlan laughs. A haughty laugh, full of disdain.

"Not yet you don't. Pray you never fully understand. Pray that you continue to show me that you're worthy of me."

Taking a few steps towards the soft white walls glowing in the reflected nightlight of the moon and stars, she strokes one of her followers clutching thereupon, then holds her forefinger out to it, offering it her blood. It hesitates, as if afraid that what it's being offered is too good to be true, then, with a few more reassuring strokes, finally clamps down, all the other bats, both within and without, suddenly screeching with manic delight. It drinks its fill of her, then, as if charged by a bolt of lightning, blasts out of the cave, all of its brethren following it, disappearing into the night.

"Tilt your head back, and hold out your tongue," Kezlan softly commands, whispering into his ear.

He complies, and she holds her dripping finger over his open mouth, dripping in a few drops. The triggered sensation is overwhelming, harkening back to his time with her in the obsidian lair, yet even stronger, unencumbered by the dreamy, erotic ecstasy of the pipe. A sense of pure carnality comes into him, his senses heightened, his adrenaline shooting through the roof, his heartbeats

accelerated, hammering inside his chest, his vision so acute that the night-lighting of the cave is almost too bright. Her natural scent sweeps into his nostrils, that sweetly rotten mix of wildflowers and decaying flesh. He can hear every beat of her heart, smell every inch of her, all the way up inside her, as if the warmest, dampest, most hospitable cave ever conceived for the creature that he's becoming.

"You must learn *control*, Chief."

Indeed, it takes every ounce of strength not to give into the urge to take her, to eat of her in every way, as if she's the garden of paradise itself, the richest of earth just begging to be plowed and seeded. Still dripping from her finger, she takes up his hand opposite the sword and bites into his palm, then touches it to her finger wound, their combined blood trickling down his forearm and, as it begins to drop to the earth, she directs his other hand, holding the sword, with her own, sweeping it beneath the droplets. And as soon as the first drop of blood hits the sword, he's gone, his mind flying from the cave, coalescing with the bats.

As their blood continues to drip onto and down the blade of the sword, they both simultaneously tilt their heads back, their eyes going grey, their minds at one with the colony as it sweeps east along the bay, then, catching the scent of he for whom the sword was crafted, suddenly darting inland, just above the dense treetops of the forest, over ridges, through glades, honing in on the young prince.



“What was that?,” Kylene rhetorically inquires of Cub, unable to shake the feeling of the dream of her unnaturally twisted father. “Was that reality, or some cruel trick of my psyche, punishing me for not preventing his death? I *knew* Zande was up to something, and yet I did nothing...”

The imagery of the dream was disturbing, but far more so was the *feeling* of it. It was as though she’d experienced the impossible, the greatest source of light on Earth consumed by blackness. It was like she’d been accosted by the unfathomable sense that he whom she most regarded with reverence, and loved for his connection to all forms of life made by the Great Mother, could be reversed into the unnatural and impious; that he whom personified what it was to be Mahwah could be made into the lowest form of life. And perhaps the worst feeling of all: that, in an experience so real she can’t deny its potential reality, that she’d failed to find the strength to put him to rest, choosing to force him to live as an aberrant beast rather than allow him to pass back into the recycling current of energy flowing between the Creator raised upon the firmament and the reforming realm of Mother below.

She’s not sure which would be worse, that he’s perished from some cowardly backstab of that traitor that he’d so long trained, that he’d trusted with the ways of the woods, or that he still lives, but as that... *thing*. And she’s long since learned to regard dreams as messages, her father once saying: “Dreams are conversations between the mind and one’s innermost self; the spirit and the deepest parts of the mind coming to a consensus as to what blocks the path of our progressions, so that we may clear the way. This is especially true for you, as you come from an old blood that’s nearer to the forces of creation, and, thus, your mind is unclouded by the illusions and delusions that haunt those whom build their identities around false learning. You have a greater ability to tap into purer forms

of truth. Someday you'll develop this ability, uncovering your connective capacity, and use it to save your people."

As it often is with dreams, visiting the one you love on the ethereal plane makes it seem that they're still there, beside you, when you wake up, the force of that love lingering, the heart filled with them, desperately fighting to keep them in, especially if they're not just gone from your life but have passed on, the reminder of what one felt for them as real as anything one can experience, dream or otherwise. If the dream was positive, if it made you feel closer to them than ever, and perhaps brought resolution to a haunting conflict, you want to return to it, so much so sometimes that it feels like a need. And so you curse your wakefulness, praying for the power to return to the truth of the dreamworld. So it is with Kylan, the visitation, and the horror of his state, only sharpening her memory, evoking all connected emotions, opening the mental and spiritual floodgates to his ghost.

Walking the Spirit Cavern, Cub and the bear cub following fawningly behind her, she remembers her trips here with him, each plant she touches harkening back to an experience imparting a lesson, and realizes that Cub was brought to her not just as a protector and lover, but to be a student of Wahuchu *through* her, for how else to bridge his world and hers? This is how the people pass their wisdom, eternalizing it through the stories that they tell. And so she soon finds herself speaking Wahuchu's words, his presence as fresh as if he were standing there beside her:

"Every plant and tree has secrets to share with those reverent, patient and observant enough to listen. All flora have relationships to lend, as well as food, medicine, tools or material for crafts or making shelter, along with lessons to teach, and their own way of providing for the forest in a manner better balancing everything, so that the whole may be sustained. The same may be said for every animal. And here, in our ocean, bay and rivers, in our marshes and

streams, in our hills and forests, and upon the mountain, there are plants and animals beyond counting. So it is that the wealth and the power of the people is rooted in their knowledge of and partnership with all living things, and that wealth and power is always relative to the knowledge and practice of that partnership. So is it also that the only poverty the people may ever know is the ignorance of this partnership, and the failure to practice its divine, living art.”

“I’m speaking of the natural wisdom innate to all living things, and of the insanity of needing anything else. In fact, there is no natural being, plant or animal, that does not build a balance with the Mother Spirit. Except, perhaps, *your* people. For, before you walked into our village, our scouts told us that your people tore down the forest to make their settlement, and burned it to make more room for themselves, and were hunting the water spirit for sport.”

“We hew the world for our purposes,” Cub responds, thinking of the teachings and, as an continuous point of contention representing the only negative energy felt for Kylen, feeling the need to defend his people and culture from her insinuations. “You’re either the one who acts, or you’re the one who is acted upon. You can’t be both.”

“And why do you assume that you can *hew* something? Why, because you control it? Because of this idea of personal possession, where you claim a living thing and the *most* living thing, the Great Mother, the sacred birther of all things, as your own, to do with as you please, for the gratification of your manly pleasures? You think because your weapons are stacked in a place, or pointed at a thing, that place, and that thing, are yours? No! That shall not be! Maybe you can do it for a time, but the natural way, the oldest blood, will someday be pumped back through creation by the spiritual heart, and redeem human flesh.”

“Flesh falls to the sword,” he replies. “Without a strong enough shield, and without the ability to fight back, the strong do what they can, so that the weak invariably suffer from the whims of the strong. This is the way of things.”

“That is the way of the predator, and not a natural one. You are not the bear or the bobcat, the fox or the wolf, feeding for the balance of life, you are some foul black beast that will never stop feeding until Mother has nothing left to give, and retreats from an existence lost to shame.”

In this moment Cub reflexively looks towards the gateway through which they passed the day before, his heart reeling, thinking that he’s perhaps made a mistake falling for her so easily, seeing as she holds him in such contempt. But that’s how it is, to fall. It isn’t an intentional leap, it’s a plummet. Besides, there’s nowhere left to go, and he doesn’t *really* want to leave. When he looks back at her, his face flush with anger and sorrow, his legs start to fail, such that he leans against one of the raised roots for support, slowly lowering himself to the ground, fingering an unfurling fern. He’s barely able to look at her, uncertain as to his own beliefs, half his heart still of Aria, but that half calcifying. *This* half, the half he’s found here, has been planted in well-fertilized soil, and promises endless growth if he can take the growing pains. Yet, he’s ashamed of his weakness, and confused by their cultural conflict and its constant suggestion of Arian inferiority, and embarrassed that he’s willing to betray what he’s been taught his entire life for the sake of someone who seems to despise him.

Kylen frowns, her eyes tearing up. With all the loss, the last thing she can afford to do is alienate this man whom her Great Mother has brought to her, to fulfill her destiny, and help her find a way through the darkness for her people, regardless of the destructive ideas he holds in his head. She doesn’t have the strength to say it yet, but somehow she knows she loves him already; that she’s *always* loved

him. She must choose her words wisely, for he's lost as well. She must speak from an equal level, else be unheard.

"There may be a better way," Cub summons from some humble, painful place beneath the pretense of pride. "It may be that one shall act upon others first, before being acted upon, yet act upon them without harming them."

"Yes, that is so. Acting and acted upon need not be at odds. When one serves the other, when the actor and acted upon enter into a reciprocating relationship such that there is no such thing as one side or the other, no such division between actor and acted upon, such that both know their natural function and purpose *through* the other, all grow strong. Binds bring strength, divisions dissolution."

"Where I come from there is only the clan, everything outside of it, and between the clans, is division. As far as I know, there has always been division. I want to believe in what you're saying, I can feel it within me, but it is not my experience, or what I've been taught. We take, or we give to the takers, or we die resisting the stronger takers..."

"Yes, your people seem to think that such is the natural division of the world, giving and taking... as if you've never known the spiritual growth that comes when you can't tell the difference between the giver and the taker, the cultivator and the cultivated; when the greatest rewards are taken not at the point of a spear but from the fruits growing from shared roots that grow what is taken *through* what is given, so that the people take what is given *because* they give, and because they protect that which gives the most."

"But what of those who care not for such lessons? What of those who take without permission? If this is the way of the world, at least the way of the world that I come from, is it not honorable to enlarge oneself and one's people by taking, knowing that, if you don't, you're taken from?"

"You must see where that philosophy leads, do you not?" she inquires, immediately regretting condescending to him.

"No, I guess I don't understand. I understand nothing but my own experience of the world. Yours seems a fantasy."

"And yours seems fantasy to me; a dark fantasy of destruction; a fantasy so fantastical that our scouts didn't even recognize it. They reported to the village long before you walked into our village. They were flabbergasted; unable to understand what they were seeing. They saw the resources stacked near one of your people's tents, and they couldn't understand its placement. They assumed resources were being gathered in an inconvenient place, because your people didn't know how to properly organize a village. But as they watched they were disturbed to come upon a concept that was as alien to them as your people. This wasn't *disorganization*. This was something far worse. This was assignment of divine gifts... what do you call it?"

"Ownership," Cub replies, smiling inwardly at the innocence of this heavenly creature, yet frowning outwardly, a physical manifestation of a secret shame.

"Ownership..." she utters embarrassingly, as if speaking a curse word. "A lie that the powerful tell the dispossessed to make it seem they have a right to continue oppressing them. It's how you justify the unjustifiable, it seems."

"Perhaps... But your words are strange to me, though I have an understanding of them in this place, somehow. I can *hear* what you're saying, but it's hard to listen... Imagine things from my perspective. Imagine being raised from the moment you can think to believe that honor is to bring to your clan and your family everything that you can."

"This is why you are here, my love," she says with a big smile, her heart broadening at his struggle, the opening of his mind made in inverse proportion to his subduing of his

pride. She leans down and places her hands on his shoulders, then leans in and kisses him softly on the forehead. He leans forward and hugs her, his heart bursting forth with every pain he's holding, melting away.

"There is no honor in ownership," she whispers, the embrace softening her fury at facing the ideological enemy. "It's all an illusion crafted for control. You must see that. My father foresaw these things. He said a sickening idea was coming to this land, and that it is a master of illusion, and shall delude anyone showing weakness, and make of them its servants, manipulating their insecurity, taking their egos. It will spread like disease, metastasizing across the world until all possessors are possessed by their possessions, all sense of true freedom gobbled up by freely serving greed."

"But our land was ours, we loved it because we owned it."

"No, Cub. You loved it because it gave and protected your life, and provided a place for your people to come together. That is not ownership by man, that is natural providence. And no man may own either the land or the divine, though the corrupted make both mistakes through the illusion of ownership, pretending to own both the land and, as religion, to own the divine, as the people from the East told my people of. But tell me this, how can you own what will outlive you? We connect to life, that is love, but those connections don't last on this plane of existence, only on the eternal plane that forever gives birth to new opportunities for connection. And so, then, how can ownership, which sounds to me like the everlasting claim to define and control, be anything but an illusion sold by those with more force and control to the less powerful to trick them into relinquishing divinely granted providence?"

"But wouldn't you say that you can only know the value of something when you possess and extract that value?"

“No. I wouldn’t say that. I’d say that the divine purpose of all things of value is to serve life as a whole, that it’s very function, its reason for being, is made by its utility, by its *usefulness* to life. And that usefulness is grossly restricted when confined to the control of one excluding person, clan or family. And so the purpose of the thing is *dishonored*, because its inherent value is mostly squandered, as that value is increased not by its hoarding, but by its *sharing*.”

“Hmmm...”

“To restrict the utility value of anything to any one agent or set of agents is to limit its limitless purpose, such that its potential can never be realized. Purpose, value, utility, potential... these things are interdependent, and none can truly be known or grown into its fullest form if confined. Exclusion, restriction, absolute ownership... these are slaps in the face of the Great Mother, She who bore the world for the sake of *all* of life, not for any one type of life, or the more aggressive within any one subtype, as with human beings. When you enforce these unnatural restrictions upon Her creation, you displace nature; you displace commonality and collaboration with division and cutthroat competition for gifts that suddenly seem prizes. And such a way for life can only make the dispossessed resentful of their dispossession; of their inability to make natural use of what the takers aren’t fully utilizing by claiming it for their camp. This puts barbarians at the gate, for it is the hoarder that makes for the barbarian. An imbalance is created between inherent value and utilization, and that imbalance breeds pressure, which breeds animosity and the violence equalizing pressure.”

“Interesting ideas, to be sure...” is all Cub can muster.

“It’s just cause and effect. It’s the logical end that comes from the lies of ‘I am this and you are that,’ and from ‘This is mine and that is yours,’ and ‘We are the chosen people,’

and ‘This is my land. I *own* it.’ I can hear Mother laughing at the hubris from here, then crying, seeing the end results of that sickening foolishness carving Her up until She’s no more, forced to cleanse the land of a humanity who once lived in thanks for an endless bounty, ended by greed. But I think *that’s* why you’re here, so we can bridge the divide.”

“But aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What’s that?”

“I’m only here because I *wanted* you. I wanted you the moment that I saw you. You’re not someone who’s given to anyone and everyone, you are someone claimed by the worthy, are you not? Did you not think me worthy *because* I felt the need to capture your heart after you captured mine? And was I not brought here by the conquering spirit of my people, whom, however misguided they may be, have spread themselves across Aria, and to the shores of the great continent beyond, *through* covetousness? Are we not out to *conquer* what we want, whatever words we may use to describe that desire, and to attach lessons to it?”

“*You* see that as conquering, as claiming, as owning. But you’re compelled by an illusion. Even if it gives you what you think you want you’ll invariably find that, when the dust settles, and your spirit fades, none of that *belongs* to you, and so what you *really* wanted hid behind the illusion of ownership: *connection*. You wanted the right to love what your heart told you that you loved. That isn’t ownership, that is kinship. You can bind to something without needing to own it, which denies everyone else’s kinship with it.”

“I *had* to be with you, that’s all I know,” Cub adds, bowing his head. “And I would’ve done anything to make that true.”

“Anything? So long as you get what you want? Regardless of the impact on the lives of others?,” she demands, standing up, looking down at him. “How much of this world

would you claim for yourself, if you could? And once claiming becomes your calling, how do you escape the Sickness of Greed, that calls to your ego, that plies your insecurity, tricking you into believing that the more that you take for yourself, the larger that self becomes? And how many others believing the same lies would you cut down to fill the bottomless hole within? Would you ever realize that they are you, and you are them, and that your conflict is inherently hypocritical, your gains made through losses, all that you take being taken from those who think the same?"

"I don't..."

"How many would you dispossess, stealing their ability to claim as you too claim? Were your army here, rather than murdered through the insecure ego and covetous claims of the Mahwahn usurper, would you do that same as he has done? Would you claim me and the land and the right to rule my people by force? Would you murder us, or simply enslave us, saying 'This land is now mine, and to live here you must obey me, and feed my greedy interest?' For that is where your conquest, your possession, your ownership shall go, into the bottomless bowels of everlasting destruction, into a realm of endless dissection and desecration and enslavement, binding yourself to greed and ego, and chaining the so-called 'weak' to serve the same, until the whole world sinks into the black hole of bottomless consumption, the molten heart swallowing us all up and exploding into the reformation of all of life."

"I wouldn't do that..." he barely manages, holding back sobs. "That's not who I am..."

"I know..." she says, lowering herself back down beside him, staring into his misting eyes. "I wouldn't be here with you if I thought that's who you are. I wouldn't take you into the heart of the forest if I thought you meant to poison it. But those ideas are poison as well, and you must expel

them. For when you fail to be a loving partner of the Mother Spirit, and instead care only for taking and domination, not only do the spirits of the forest, and the Mother Spirit herself, slowly turn away from you, but so, too, does your *own* spirit. Then you are alone; separated from your spirit and unable to feel and wield the magic imbued in nature. You become isolated, trapped by fake boundaries. You become the worst thing you can be: *an individual*. You become cut off from the teachings of the land, and unable to appreciate the wisdom of storytellers. For you cannot come to a place and expect to dominate or destroy it without angering the spirits that inhabit it. To do so is not only to remain an alien, but be a self-destructor.”

“I believe you.”

“Honor must become heart. And heart dictates that we take only what the Mother Spirit can afford to give, then use what we take as completely as possible, sharing it amongst the people as much as possible so that what we take has the most possible value to the people, without which that value is wasted. Greed is waste, don’t you see? Greed destroys inherent purpose. Instead, we must be grateful for and honor that purpose. And we show our gratitude for what we take when we talk to the plants and trees, and the earth and stones that nurture and guard them, and when we protect those we take from against destruction, and by helping them spread their seeds.”

“Yes, Kylen. I’m sure that you’re right...”

“You do not *own* anything, you only use it to make life better, else you retain it only for your use and the use of your clan, and so deny its ability to improve every other life, denying its natural, honorable purpose of existence. And never may that use be destructive to that which is being used. We are, in essence, borrowing from the Mother Spirit, and everything that we borrow must

eventually be given back. That is the nature of things. Your heart, where your spirit sits, knows the difference; it knows the parasitic enemy, and the symbiotic friend, and that nothing belongs to oneself alone, *ever*. Your heart knows these things even when your mind, and the words you use to think and describe such things, doesn't know them. It knows that when we give something, we *always* receive something at least as valuable in return, and that what we receive need not be an object, or some action, in order to be of benefit. In fact, that which benefits us most comes into our spirits felt but unseen, and silently enriches us."

"But mustn't we claim something to know its value, in order to make proper use of it? A tree is just a tree until we claim it, and tear it apart in order to make it into homes and weapons. They are things to make use of, and the value of that use is only known when we force our will upon them."

"What about the will and life of the tree itself? What about its spirit, and its interconnection with all other spirits of the forest? In *your* language, you identify all as a *thing*; all but yourselves, the only beings you grant personhood. By your words you spread the illusion that everything is absolute, fixed, and separated from everything else; that everything *but* you is only something to be used, and that humankind stands at the top of a hierarchy, ruling nature. We don't recognize this hierarchy, for it's fabricated. It's not a part of Great Mother, but must be *forced* upon Her. It's a form of rape, the worst kind of rape there is, for it's not rape of one being, but *all* being. Thus, it cannot last, for Great Mother's ways are the true foundation, and will eventually grow around your artifices, confinements and fake ownership, Her endless manifestations ultimately rebelling against such injustices. Your ways will lead to Her seeing you as a parasite to be purged, rather than as a family member."

"I don't know... I mean, I *think* I agree, but if an Arian clan tried to live that way they would be conquered. If we didn't

possess the clanship, and take the land that we want, and make it clear to others that we're in control, then others would surely come in and take it all, and then enslave us."

"It is for the true, wise leaders to change their people for the better, is it not? Can you not be both strong *and* connected and compassionate? Is there no way to defend the land without claiming it and everything that lives upon it? No way to partner with nature for the sake of *all* of Her offspring, not just those whom you pretend to be superior to all others? No way to use language reflecting the fluid, interconnected truth of being, rather than reflecting falsely set realities used as justification to take advantage of the defenseless? You say 'I *am* this or that,' and 'this or that is *mine*,' and 'take what you want,' as if these are absolute truths, and can never be otherwise, even as identity is unfixed and forever changing, as nothing truly belongs to you, and as those things you take *always* return to nature."

Cub hangs his head in contemplation as Kylen continues:

"You do these things even as some of your own seers teach the truth underlying the ways of your conquerors, like what you told me recently about your people's first seer. All identity is fluid; is water, as he said. Perhaps this seer ascended into the sky because he was fed up with the lies lording over your people. I think you can judge the wisdom of a society based upon how many wisemen opt out of it. I think my father would have opted out of such a society; of a way of life that so dishonored Mother and the interlinked truth of being. He once told me that the purest people are like litmus tests for the societies in which they live, being more naturally averse to the impure. They absorb evils differently, and are more adversely affected by them, even when others are unaware of them. And, if their societies can't be changed, it forces them to fight back and be killed, else flee the contagion in order to avoid being sickened by it. For the Mahwah don't think or speak as you do, but as

your wise man did. In our words and thoughts, *nothing* is fixed, and anything can turn into and act as anything else.”

Walking the edge of the inner forest now, at the margins of their sanctum, where the thickets give way to the sunlight on the other side, the rays of light just finding their way to the forest floor, she places her hand upon a beautiful tree loaded with leathery, saw-toothed leaves and fragrant white, five-lobed flowers emitting a sickly-sweet scent.

“This tree, what we call the Heart Tree, for its leaves, flowers and berries ease the tension of an over-exerted heart and blood-flow system, is *being* a tree, but that being can and will inevitably transform, so it cannot be considered only that. By our action and awareness and consideration, it can and will be medicine, shelter, tools, a story, a way for the spirits to message and guide us... while also birthing its next generation, and interweaving with every being nourished by what it gives back to Mother. Its being is dynamic; it *appears* fixed to your eyes; stuck in your language; but it isn't. Your language lies to you. It limits the modes of your thought, and so acts to limit *you*.”

Running her hands down the rough grey, scaly bark, she crouches down on the soft decomposing carpet crafted of innumerable decaying leaves. Brushing a section of the cushioned forest floor aside, she reveals a cluster of dainty little flowers so fine in appearance it seems a strong wind may uproot them. Sets of spiked pink petals point up into the sky at a forty-five degree angle to the stem, beneath which the top, drooping portion of the flower terminates in a tiny, white-spotted pink blossom with long pistils, as if opening its face and letting loose its tongue, so as to dip itself down low enough to lap the moisture from the earth.

“This flower lives off the death of the trees around it. Decomposition ushers in new composition, such that any difference between the decomposed and the composed is

temporary, and no composition is really *new*, but a composite of the old, going back forever. There is no separation between life and death. How, then, can the trees that feed and shelter it be only themselves, and not also the flower? How can there every really be death, what your language calls the end of the life, if the end of one thing is the birth of the next, as one immense living web?"

"The language of your people seems to mostly be about forcing the finite upon the infinite; about separating *things*; about pretending beings are objects. But like all that's extant, a being is never fixed in time, space, or form. You make them objects in your mind so that you give yourself permission to claim, extract and conquer them without remorse, even as your heart, your spirit, is tied to the Mother Spirit, and thus aches at taking such inconsiderate, destructive action. Our language, on the other hand, is mostly *action*, not object. Our identifications are *fluid*, for like water, that is the truth of being. Our words recognize the forever changing nature of the forms and phenomena that the spirits take; that they may embody and enliven."

"But we must call a thing a thing so that those with whom we converse know what we are talking about, right?"

"Yes and no. Only if it's known that such a 'thing' is only *relatively* separated from everything else. If you pretend that being a 'thing,' as you say, means having no life, no right, no moral backing or protection, no connection to the rest of the lives that depend upon it, your words have paved the way for subjugation and desecration. Because *nothing* is fixed. *Everything* is alive, in motion, changing and developing and becoming *all the time*. But, because your own thoughts, and the language that you depend upon to form them, are fixed and stagnant, so your mind itself becomes, rendering action and movement and being and change either unrecognized by you, or outright unrecognizable *to* you. It's as if the constantly changing

essence of all things is secondary to some absolute truth that doesn't actually exist, or, worse, as if natural essence doesn't exist in the first place, and the lie of absolute truth is the only thing that actually does exist, when it doesn't."

Continuing their walk around the outer ring of the ancient forest, the bear cub sometimes trails them, and other times is caught by a curiosity, chasing a butterfly as it bounces between blooms, then a dragonfly that seems for a time to dance with the baby bear, the two running into and around one another until one swat of his paw comes a bit too close, and the dragonfly flees, escaping into the precipitous canopy. The soft trickle of a canal concealed by overgrowth catches Kylen's attention, her ears bringing her towards a bright yellow flower ricocheting off a series of stones protruding above a small pool crafted into a stony semicircle, the flower set upon its surface. The large, bright yellow bloom perfectly suits their primordial surroundings, seeming to come from a different time. A white streaked starburst center framed by crimson stamens are the only colors other than the dominant yellow, connected to overly thick stems dropping beneath the water surface in route to large rhizomes spreading across the bottom of the pool.

"This we call 'Sun on the Water.' It's prized by the elders. When their joints ache, they grind down the heated roots and apply them directly to the pain. You see how it's expanding below the water, reaching out with its sideways roots, that one stalk soon to snake into countless more?"

"It's an intensely bright flower. I've never seen it before."

"To our people, everything is coming into and out of endless stages of being. The seed becomes the roots and the rhizome, and the flower follows, and the cycle returns, and it's all entwined together, and it finds a way through all restrictions by becoming something new, even as that new thing itself is an emergence of the old. Thus, in our tongue,

it's the *verbs* that rule, not the nouns; not the fixed idea of a thing only ever existing one way, or for one purpose. So, you see, you have become mentally corrupted by the language that you use to form your thoughts, and which make your communication restricted in purpose, and in what is being conveyed. But perhaps the worst thing of all is that, to you and the people from whom you hail, all that exists that is *not* a human, or maybe even one of your own people, is called an *it*; a thing. What we consider beings that are equal to us, and usually older and wiser than us, you reduce to a mere object. This, of course, suits a culture of conquest, giving you the permission to conquer, reduce and enslave what you assert to be but an object.”

Beside the pool a smaller white flower is just opening itself up to the pollinators. She places her hand beneath it, holding the base of the petals, not to pluck it, just to feel it on her hand. Just then a small, glimmering blue butterfly obliges the request made of the flower, setting itself upon the center, entirely unconcerned with Kylen's close hand.

“I think your language is like a dark spell of illusion, crafted by conquerors to justify conquering. Nothing has personhood but you, and so you possess all entitlement, and all rights and protections. All else is but there to serve you, and for you to do with what you please. And so, of course you tear down the forest without thought, and you kill without consideration, for you've placed an artificial boundary between you and your own spirit, and all other spirits, and all the *things* which house those spirits. You raise your children to see, think and speak in this way, pulling the wool over their eyes from the moment they become dependent upon your language. This can do none other than turn them into narrow-minded enemies of all the beings they can't see. They see *trees*, not the *forest*.”

“This is why I believe the language of my people to be more accurate; more aware; more considerate and

conducive to connectivity, to divine communion, and to the building and sustaining and protecting of community. You have walls erected everywhere, between everything, in your mind, and so you've alienated your spirit from yourself, and have forgotten your sacred spiritual inseparability from the world of spirits that surrounds you all the time, living within everything. You thereby divide, disempower and dispossess everything with your words. Thus, were I to serve as a guide for you, and ask if you truly wish to see and to know, then you must *change your words*, and therefore your thoughts and actions. You must see and think and speak in *being*, in *Yawe*. In fact, I think *that* should be your new name here, serving as a constant reminder of the being, the yawe, forever surrounding you."

"Yawe... I like the sound of that. It has... *feeling* in it."

And as he speaks his new designation within his mind, Cub finds that, indeed, some power is connected to the word, as if he's found the key to a lock, and has opened a door, and must now follow this heavenly creature through it. As Kylen speaks, her words cross a barrier that he wasn't even aware existed, and make their way into him without restraint. It's as though he's not just hearing, but *listening* for the first time, her words sown in rich earth.

"Our stories tell of how we were raised by the forest, and that our own spirits grew in strength *because* of the strength in the plants that we ate and whose scent we breathed in, and that became our bodies and built our spirit. All our strength, our growth as a people from before we were the Mahwah, the holders of spirits, came because of the sacred medicine of the Mother Spirit. Those who didn't take the medicine did not grow to become Mahwah, and were weak when the sicknesses and attacks came in the days of trouble, and could not fight off the reclamer of spirits, and so did not survive. We only survive and stay strong because of what we absorb from Great Mother. Of

course, as you can see, some lessons stick to some of my people better than to others. The ego is... oh so slippery.”

“I agree. The only things that stick to it are those things of like kind,” Yawe responds. “The shadow self grown in the darkness of delusion, through mating with compatible illusions. It’s enlarged by taking what it thinks it deserves.”

“Yes. And, as I hope you are beginning to see, it’s not for humankind to take what it will, to subjugate the world into objects of pleasure and amusement, as accoutrements of its pride grown by accrual and hoarded belonging, for this is the nature of a voracious, self-aggrandizing beast bound to death and destruction. Rather, it is for humankind to recognize the divinity living within all things, and to make use of what that living divinity wills *itself* to be, and thereby what it wills us to do with it, in partnership with its innate purpose. For this is of an altogether different beingness, one that shall transcend the bloated beast pretending that voraciousness is a virtue, and so shall inherit the Earth.”

“It’s a matter of surviving the beasts’ assaults. For, being of an unsustainable nature, it shall consume itself,” he offers.

“Indeed. We, you and I, must come to embody the deepest virtues of my mother and father. We must consciously live within the mutualistic nature divinely provided and alive in our Great Mother. It is *this* being that we must be. We must ever keep our hearts open so that its rays may shine through our eyes and thereby reveal the truth concealed by the semblance of objectivity, so that we may ever know, and be thankful, for all that has been bestowed upon us.”

“That’s beautiful...”

“My people begin every morning with the Thanksgiving, led by my father and the chief, though I’m uncertain if that honored tradition shall continue now,” she adds with a sense of sorrow so palpable that even Yawe tears up.

“Tell me about it, if you would.”

“First we face the rising sun. On our knees, in a signal of gratitude and endless respect, we thank it for bringing the warmth and light of life. In the evening we begin on our knees facing the opposite direction, as She sinks into the sea in Her resplendent, crystalline show of light and love.”

“Do you say something... while you watch... *Her*?”

“The words are different every time, for every one of us, reflecting our special relationship with the Great Mother. But yes, we speak, some of us aloud, some only within themselves. The elders say that what matters most isn’t the specific words spoken, but the *spirit* in which they’re spoken, and the firm possession within one’s heart of the sacred intention to connect with and remember and pay homage to everything the Great Mother gives to us.”

Yawe stares at the sunrays refracting through the glowing clouds, feeling as though they’re reaching out for him.

“Thanksgiving is about never forgetting, or taking for granted, the great bounty born by Her, and that, by taking in that bounty and honoring each of its forms, we remain as close to Her as possible. We must never forget the forces, spirits and cycles that She brings to us. So, each of us are encouraged to search our minds, and reach out with our hearts, pulling at the invisible strings connecting us to everything that lives; every plant and animal of the forest.”

As she speaks, his flesh rises, as if a multitudinous tether that’s always been tied to him is suddenly revealed, springing out like an immense spider web to bind itself to everything in sight and beyond, with his heart at the center.

“In the way in which my father performs the Thanksgiving, and the way I try to do it, though I don’t think I can do it as well as he, the forest is explored in the mind’s eye. He

covers the forest as if remaking his mental map, passing through its regions and naming the trees and plants and the animals they host, and reaching out and touching their spirits, paying special attention to those of most value to the people; those that give the most important food and medicine and resources for our crafting and hunting. For that is his role: to know what's most important to us, and that which gives us the most irreplaceable power of place.”

Continuing along the burbling brook encircling the heart of the forest, their sanctuary, she bends down to examine a gorgeous purplish-pink, hairy, tubular flower resembling a multifaceted hood. Cub lowers himself to the ground beside her and gently bends the stem so that the flower sits under his nose. Its scent is a cross between mint and juniper. And as it comes into him Kylan touches his hand, where he's taken hold of the stem, and as she does so something happens. He's transported through spacetime, to where and when he can't know, but he sees the whole flower being boiled, the resulting concoction handed to an old, convalescing woman laying on a matt made of red bark by a man with white ash covering his face, wearing a necklace of seashells. Ravens sit upon a limb above her, and as she sips the tea they kraa, and then take flight.

“Wahuchu contemplates his partnership with the Great Mother, and how each living thing offers a lesson of such partnership. In this holy remembrance, his connection to the forest stays strong. And from what the spirits whisper back to him during this meditation, he plans his day. He remembers where to visit, and why. He recalls what to gather, what to protect, what to examine in greater detail.”

Looking around the space, Cub's awestruck, fully open to it for the first time. This is a temple; a grand, holy edifice of natural outpouring, with vaulted ceilings protecting living shrines of every order, each shrine speaking its own spell.

“It’s our greatest practice of gratitude, connection and remembrance. It sets freshly in our minds the overflowing, overgrowing wealth of our Mother, and the countless ways in which she shows her love to us. It sets our minds in the right place, over our hearts. It warms us and cleanses our eyes so that we may remain aware of every form of being.”

She places her hand over his heart. Then, taking his hand, she places his hand over hers. They are of the same. Then standing behind and embracing him, she turns him and herself around like a compass as she relates the lesson.

“And, as we give thanks, and after moving from the sun to the forest in our minds, we stand and face the four corners of the world, remembering the Four Winds, the message-bearers and bringers of the seasons. This reminds us that the offspring of the Great Mother surround us, growing out in all directions, from the mountain, from which our forebearers descended in the first days of the people, and where my mother watches over us, to the valley and rivers and forests of the south, to the Great Giver, the sea, and its spirits of thunder and lightning who foretell the coming of the renewing rains, then north, towards the Great Bay, wherein the Great Giver meets the Great Mother, where the Mahwah most dwell, at the confluence of the waters.”

In his mind’s eye come the great forces of the land, air and sea, a commingling of currents colliding into spirited life.

“It reminds us to be as aware of as much as we possibly can, for to forget is not only to lose the wealth of our Mother, but to forget where we came from, and our inseparable ties to it all... Forgetting must be the worst thing that can happen to a Mahwahn. I can barely imagine it, the idea of forgetting, it so sickens my heart. For only through awareness, bolstered by remembrance, may we remain true Mahwah. Only by knowing and Thanksgiving may we truly partner with Mother and make the best use of

her gifts, each with their own special purpose. For how can the people receive and benefit and love Mother for her multitude of endowments if we forget, or, worse, if we never knew that they existed in the first place. Such sorrow that would be. And so we stretch our spirit in all directions.”

As she delivers this last line, still standing behind him, she gently raises his arms up, stretching them up and out. Lovingly, she places her hands on his head, tilting it.

“Then, after looking to the Four Winds, we look down, peering with our minds at the heart of Mother buried deep beneath the earth, where she sleeps at night before rising with the sun, our heads bowed in reverence. We finish by peering up, into the sky where the light of the night comes out to guide the lost, and where the Creator floats, who shall someday absorb us into Himself before letting us fall gently back to the earth, for Mother to reform in her wisdom. Only then may we proceed with our day. But, again, not everyone enacts the same Thanksgiving. Some take far more time than others. Makunah once told me that he saw my father perform the Thanksgiving for a full two days and nights, eating and drinking nothing throughout.”

She moves in front of him. She’s lovelier than ever. For now she’s not only the heavenly visage he first beheld, but the embodiment of the sanctuary’s divinity, as if all around her are adornments of her beauty, her spirit sprawled out and strung to everything, including his own heartstrings.

“As the head medicine man of the Mahwah, Wahuchu gave back to the land, of which I am as the skin, and my Great Mother is as the heart, in ways which the others didn’t. He, and my mother, knew the land better than all others, and thus loved and served it, binding it to the people. It’s impossible not to love those who add to you. And love itself is a form of understanding, an erasure of the ignorance that divides spirits and brings the illusion of

disconnection that leads to a sense of otherness and hate. *That's* what the best of my people do: destroy hate through the deepest knowing connection we call 'love.' And he had so many ways in which he demonstrated that love; that thanksgiving. He'd listen to the land like none other, and none before him, not even Xaxu, whom my mother told my father was a great lover, and who died immersed in love."

"I wish I'd known your father better..."

She tears up as he says this, for the heart recognizes truth, and in Yawe's words she hears not only the truth of her own lost love, but the sincerity of Yawe's love, the rising phoenix reborn of the ashes made by the clash of cultures.

"My father would spread seeds in the areas that called for specific plants, listening to the land as his kin, as if his heart had ears. And when the salmon spawned, and from the bones of all the creatures of the land and sea, he grew what the Mahwah still call the Giving Tree. He noticed that where the people buried the bones of the animal beings they'd eaten, the plant beings would burst forth with greater bounty, the spirits of both forms of being making one another stronger. So he planted a tree upon one such site, a Red Cedar, our holiest of trees, for nothing gives us more. And this tree grew great in a short time, and the people honored him, as they should, for he honored life."

"I think I remember passing that tree when I first came into your village. Some of your people stood under it, and leaned against it, as if they were absorbing something."

"Yes. They wish to be known by the tree, and to know it, and to share in its wisdom by mastering the art of observation. The Giving Tree is now a parable for the Mahwah, for it teaches that *this* is love: paying attention; observation; listening; and not just with one's ears, but with the heart, and every facet of the senses. Giving to that which gives by its nature is the same thing as worshipping

the spirits. He sensed the joy of the land in receiving the bones. And, thus, it was he that started the tradition of grinding the bones to dust after they'd been softened in the pits, and carrying them with him on our journeys into the forest, and spreading the dust wherever he felt that it was most needed by the beings there. And these places gave thanks to him in return, offering greater bounties of all things of value to the people in exchange for *his* offerings."

"Is there any way to better connect to these... *teachings*?"

Meandering back into the Spirit Cavern, Kylene returns to the cluster of nine remaining golden brown mushrooms from which she'd demonstrated inseparability earlier. Kneeling down, she puts her face near them, whispering:

"Great teachers of the forest, we ask that you reveal your interlacing tendrils, so that we may trace them towards oneness, and may find the strength to thwart those whom wish to divide it, and thereby shield the people from them."

Running the fingers of both hands along the top of the caps, she stops them on opposing sides of the cluster, atop the two largest mushrooms, then traces their stems to the mycelium network below before gently plucking them.

"You must let the teacher in. It'll feel uncomfortable at first, like your accepted reality is bubbling, begging to become effervescent and evaporate. Your skin may tingle. Your mind will be charged and fluid. Your senses will tie to your third eye, readying to manifest your mind, and may paint the world with whatever messages you receive. This is the pure force of the Creator mating with Great Mother. Don't fight it. Mount the crest of the wave and ride the current."

She holds one of the big, bulbous, golden-brown beauties up to his face. He opens his mouth and takes communion.

As they continue moving about the sacred space, passing within and without the Spirit Cavern, to the outer rim of the ancient sanctuary and back, more and more he feels the primordial pedigree of the place, and his connection to it. Touching the bark of a fur jutting its head hundreds of feet into the cloud-swirling sky above, Cub, becoming Yawe, momentarily feels his skin is the same as the bark; a protective coating against the vicissitudes of the world. Soon, he becomes lighter, his spirit loosening the cord tied between it and his body, hovering over it, no longer glued to the vessel, but slightly removed, yet still anchored to it.

Here, above the fray of the common day, he floats upon the first layer of the metaphysical firmament, finding that he's as much a part of it as of what it makes from matter, condensing itself into the limitless forms of the Mother of all mothers. As Kylan takes his hand, he soars higher still, up into the folds of the rootless plants whose near weightless wisps clutch to every crevice of the corrugated bark of behemoths whom live their lives in centuries, or millennia.

"Incredible..." he whispers. "When you touch me, something happens... like you're passing something..."

"Yes. Never have I sensed the power of the medicine as purely as I do now," Kylan concurs. "It's the two of us..."

Soon, every approached surface shimmers, then waves like liquid glass set loosely upon the skin of every plant and tree, all of which heaves in and out as if breathing, the entire sphere of their space inhaling and exhaling together, taking in and out the same air from the same shared lungs, each life an extension of the others, the trees like great appendages budding from the earthly body, the plants like hair follicles sprouting across its every expanding and collapsing inch, Kylan and Yawe, along with the birds and the bees and every insect and mobile form of life,

circulating through it, the blood pumping through Mother's meshed vascularity, nourishing the entirety of Her tissue.

Walking hand in hand back into the Spirit Cavern, he can barely feel his feet finding the floor, the springiness of the decomposing carpet of evergreen needles accentuated, as if the upwards bounce has been bolstered, and is now even with the gravitational pull towards the heart of Great Mother buried deep beneath the molten re-makings of Her form. He walks across the surface that now seems but a suggestion, as if he's floating on an invisible layer of ether.

Approaching the Tree of Life and Death, they sit cross-legged in front of it, contemplating its mysteries. The fairy flowers seem to sway in the wind, though no wind can be felt, with each flower emitting miniature sparkling particulates, as if forming stars released to compose the cosmos. And the hollow song the tree sings as it passes the air through it, into the bowels below and back, now carries with it the voice of a shadowy conclave of creatures, chattering a composite of nature's every sound, the dragonfly, the squirrel, the fox gossiping together, the calls of the wild reverberating throughout the sanctuary.

Without saying a word, Kylan and Yawe turn and lean their backs against one another, their torsos one trunk. And as he thinks 'one trunk,' he feels their backs merge into one, and their tailbones turn to roots that interlace with one another before burying themselves deeper and deeper into the earth, each twirling around and binding tighter to the other as they penetrate layer after layer of soil, feeling the rich supply of nutrients captured within its eons of churning and recycling everything fallen into everything springing up, ascending through them, bursting from their hearts in waves of wafting pollen and sown seeds seeking postings.

Time suspends itself, their hearts momentarily ceasing from beating, before setting itself a-spin around them, as if

time were a top set upon their shared center of gravity. A great celestial force with a tail of flame explodes through the upper atmosphere and slams itself at their feet, exploding and sending up a mushroom cloud before burrowing its way into the earth, so hot and dense that nothing can earthly withstand it, so it sinks, and sinks.

The forest is then young, emerging from little colonies of moss and lichen, breaking the rock and accumulating soil, fern finding diminutive footholds in the result of eons of incremental effort, the first trees coming only after thousands of generations of plant life, the earliest of them being the Tree of Life and Death. It sprouts up and around the crater in front of them, sealing the open wound and shooting its triumvirate of trunks into the sky. A great cataclysm then sets that sky ablaze, a wall of fire cleaving the Tree of Life and Death in half. It burns, but refuses to fall, the center of a stronger, healthier forest rising from the fertilizing ashes, before falling itself in a quake of heaven and earth, the overlording trees toppling, inviting hundreds of species to make use of their decomposing bodies, new shoots of themselves soon sent skyward, building evergreen towers upon their precedents, all built up and around them as the cavern finds its contemporary form.

And through it all, a truth enters into him; an undeniable truth. He himself has *been* all of these forms. He is but a fleeting embodiment of the one Creator making eternal love to the Great Mother, giving birth to an endless litany of forms forming for the function of life, set upon a balancing beam of spacetime, extending forward and backward simultaneously, but always seeking the sustainability of survival. Where the beam falters downwards, Mother pushes it back up, and when it rises too high, Creator gives weight to himself so as to bring the course of existence back to earth. The beam extends endlessly outwards, and backwards into his heart, and from it does every form of life

emerge, each like a vault of hidden truth awaiting the right key, he, Yawe, given access to all the wisdom of creation in this moment, having opened himself fully to everything.

Closing his eyes, a fractal rainbow explodes from his forehead, bursting forth in every conceivable shape, size and color, enfolding the full of his vision. The lines circumscribing those shapes, at first fixed, vibrate with increasing intensity until dissolution of the perceived boundaries of separation morphs every shape into every other, and they dance together in this perfect interplay of preset notions mating with total emergent suggestibility, moving with his mind, projected by his sight, expanding and collapsing, integrating and separating, until finally one shape begins to win out, and superimpose itself upon him.

It's a triangle, with a black dot in the center, out of which pours the entirety of existence, shooting out of it like rays of sun, the dot soon seen as a pupil in the center of the triangle, the rest of the eye fast forming around it. And when the eye looks upon him he's turned to putty, for in the eye he senses a being far greater than himself, an omniscient being of pure creative power, upon which he sits and depends for his own existence, like a barnacle upon a whale. It knows all, *is* all, and as Its sight moves about, the pupil pointing in every direction, the feeling evoked is of absolute equanimity, with equal regard for everything It emits, and that finds shape within Itself.

There's nothing that's not of It, born of the pure love of oneness encompassing everything that it manifests, all of creation being a finite remaking of Its infinite energy, every being born of it representing one of an endless litany of forms of Itself lived for the sake of life's inherent value; for the sake of endless possible experiences and perspectives of everything; existence made of the irreducible forever condensing and exploding into its fleeting forms. And, thus, there's nothing outside of it, nothing not inherent to it, and

nothing it doesn't know. And to this One he submits his questions, finding that the answers are obvious, and that he already knew them, he just had to *remember* them, for everything in and of and known by the One is within him.

Feeling as though he's tapped into the oracle he's long sought, his questions pour forth, the answers known before he can even finish forming the questions in his mind. Long does the exercise continue, until the One begins to playfully mock him by asking his questions back to him, and he soon understands the implication: *There's no end to the questions, for the mind is a perpetually flowing river careening its way through its unique time and space, bouncing off of and needing to know all that with which it collides, and yet only finding peace when it rests in the cool pools, not forcing its movement, not attempting to capture anything with which it collides, letting the current carry it towards the omniscience of the ocean subsuming every flowing river conveying every form of One existence.*

And while Kylen can feel Yawe floating in the etherium, his mind interacting with the Universal Mind, she's drawn along a different, albeit parallel course, into the forest itself. At the base of the Tree of Life and Death she notices a cluster of translucent white mushrooms looking to have only recently stuck their heads out from under the organic matter that, below the surface of the fruiting bodies, they've been busily remaking into food for the surrounding forms of life. In this moment, however, the shrooms seem unreal, like a group of gossamer beings from outside the cosmos. Both in their energy and in their form she can feel them reach out to her, a beckoning aura matched by the sense that they're waving her in, requesting her touch. She accepts, reaching out and gently stroking the top of each albino bulb before, spreading her fingers, slowly dropping her hand down towards the base, seeking the mycelium.

'The mycelium...' she whispers to herself, sensing an unfathomable unfolding coming out of her as her hand gently wriggles its way into the black soil, touching the upper-most layer of the mycelial network. And bam! She's connected. She's gained access to the world wide web. In an instant she knows the mushroom, its form, intention and purpose, pure and grand, an ancient being loving its niche within the recycling whole. And she knows the seven-petalled white Star Flower sprouting across a decomposing limb a body length away, and its evolved love for moist, decomposing remnants of its Great Mother, and the moss with which it competes, strewn across the disintegrating limb beneath the flowering plant, half-lovingly embracing, half-competitively fighting the elliptically-upwhirling leaves and dramatic yellow outreaching pistils of the plant that it's learning to share its food and space with, like a big brother semi-begrudgingly making room for a younger sister.

And out and out, and up and up, and far and wide, and deep into the endlessly mixing earth does the network reach, and none of it is silent, everything ready to whisper its secrets, some overly-eager to tell their tale, as if shouting: *Finally, someone that can hear us! Me first, me first!* And so she listens, and spreads herself out to merge with the body of the forests' endless being and becoming, wilting and rotting, reworking and fruiting litany of life. She comes into the bright-yellow-blooming Rectification Flower, with yellows pistils equally as vivid as those of the Star Flower lancing out from its center, as if too big for the flower, prized by medicine men and women for its ability to calm and fortify the nerves, and mitigate downheartedness. Nearby are the short-lived blooms of the Wakeful Flower, spreading out low to the ground with its stout, outcompeting rhizomes that many of the others complain about, saying: *It blooms for but a day, let some of the rest of us have some space, we give our nectar for weeks!*

And she feels the purpose every form of plant life plays for the sake of all other green beings, and for the animals who eat and make their homes through them, sometimes beneath them, sometimes hundreds of feet in the sky above, tucked into every conceivable concealed opening, the entire forest like one immense compound of living lodgings awarding those energetic and curious enough to find them, and industrious enough to pack them with stores, and pugnacious enough to assure that no one else settles into them while they're making their daily rounds. Each animal that eats of anything touched by the underground web, anything that trades moisture and nutrients between its roots and the mycelium that rules the realm beneath the perceivable surface, makes its body from those plants. And so this becomes her entryway into every being, the earth to root to fiber to leaf, flower and fruit, anything eaten carrying her into the consuming being.

As the sun begins to set, neither of them notices the descent of darkness. Becoming Yawe, Cub is unfixed, existing everywhere, space and time like fractured frames continually resetting themselves upon the canvas of existence. Nor does he take much notice when Kylen lays his body down, assuming that it's a part of the ritual of connecting with Great Mother. But when she removes his clothing, and presses her warm body against his, the feeling surpasses physicality, as if he's embraced by the entire universe. And as they align their energies a conduit opens between them and the Creator, and pours down like a heavenly shower upon the world made from His partnership with Mother's Matter, who cradles them in their physical reality. And from their shared sacral clefts a (w)hole is made, with the liquid of life seeping out in all directions in the interchange, an endless multitude and form of being riding it, and, on their heels, a most vital and magnificent humanity whose blood is as the confluence of

two ancient rivers finally finding the full of their force and potential together, a sum exponentially exceeding its parts.

And on into the afternoon and evening they remain entangled, moving and mixing as if by pure intuition, like the agents of the primordial stew used to brew life's first forms. Both when his own eyes are open and when they're closed Yawe sees the eye in the triangle pouring forth with all of existence, a force of pure crystalline creation painting the full scope of his perception, more abstract and geometrical with his eyes closed, better integrated into the whole of Its creation with his eyes open, as if all of reality is but an ongoing negotiation between beholder and beheld, between the eternal spring and Its infinitude of offspring.

But then, as the sun sets, something switches horribly. All that was pouring out of the eye suddenly stiffens, rigidly fixed in time and space, and begins to shake as though under tension, and the triangle set around the eye flips violently upside down before the creation process is reversed, everything now being unstoppably sucked into the pupil of the eye, as if a vortex extending a funnel over the whole of existence, the only thing coming out the eye the shrieking of millions of frenzied bats that he can feel crawling all over his skin, clawing at his eyes and ears.

"Invisible tethers tie you to me," he hears. "I'm the spider feeling for the inviting twinge to feed. You're my meal."

In a state of sheer agonizing panic Yawe screams out as he realizes that he's stuck in the sticky web, and that all his efforts to pull away only tighten its strings around him, as if he's being sucked in by an unstoppable current. With spasmodic fits he pulls away from Kylene and pins himself to a corner of the cavern, screaming as he's finally overcome and sucked into the center of the eye. Curling into the fetus position, holding his head, quaking, entirely

unresponsive, the endless litany of life that she'd felt
growing out from them in all directions withers on the vine.

14

In With
the New

Pointed in the right direction by Kezlan's spell, the bats rely upon their scent to narrow their search for the outsider. And whereas that scent was strong at first, as the colony crosses into ever older forest, it fast fades. The odor of the Arian prince is more and more confused with the aroma of the woods, a blend of fir and cedar, and of every plant and animal upon the forest floor, or burrowed beneath it, or clinging to the bark of the trees, or softly slumbering within the hollows of its fallen forms, forever muskily remade into the rich humus springing with new life. The broods' olfactory powers thus overwhelmed with an infinitude of targets, their ability to track any single scent is greatly compromised. In and around the edge of the elder forest the flighted minions of the dark queen cry out in frustration, mirroring the sentiments of their queen, who flies with them in mind from afar, sensing as they do, bound to them by her old blood fused with the changing blood of her chief, until their energy fades with the looming dawn, Kezlan releasing her attendants before the sun's imminent assault.

"We know the general direction they were heading. But something is protecting them. I can't tell what... *exactly*. Something old. Something that's loyal to my imperious mother; that stinks like her. Something clinging to every thread of life in this wretchedly overgrown land, and that's especially condensed where they are; like it's grown up and wrapped itself around and is concealing them. But no matter. He can't escape. I've penetrated his psyche, and he's running, but he can only run for so long. I'll catch him soon enough. In the meantime, we must make use of your people. We must prepare them. I'll tell you what to say."

As the first rays of the rising sun bring the cacophonous calls of countless birds resounding through the forest, the sweet song of wakefulness so loved by the people, the Mahwah are slow to meet this day. Near-blinded by even the early light, Zande takes up the natural attire of his

people and, skirting the forested edge of the village so as to avoid too much direct light, he lights a blaze in the council fire, then finds his place beneath the oldest of the cedars nearby, a position he associates with his father, having long fantasized and coveted it as his rightful place.

Finally, the day has come, though it's nothing like he'd imagined it. He's claimed the tribe, and yet, he knows it's unearned, with the sought, sacred partnership with Kylen now an altogether different quest to claim her heart. Deep within Zande feels empty, even as the fear that the cost of his rightful chieftdom was too high fast fades from him, with that fear, and the attacks of his conscience, being outweighed by the sweetly intoxicating taste of Kezlan yet lingering upon his tongue, and by the longing for and pride of leadership, and by the ongoing fantasy of gaining the respect of the people, such that Kylen might, in the moment before her sister tears out her heart, recognize in him even a modicum of what she saw in her father, and his father. And yet he also senses that all of those traditional concerns are a part of his past more than his future, having been traded for a connoisseurship of blood. Blood is all that matters now. It is the rank, meaning and value of life.

Gradually his people respond to someone standing at the council fire pulpit positioned beneath the tree that gives the greatest bounty of life, and they begin to gather round him. As they gather, his excitement escalates, his heart rate increasing in parallel to the proximity and number of gathering Mahwah, as if his heart is capturing and corralling every heart around him, the blood coursing through each of them now like a special signature telling the tale of their lives, and their value to the bloodletting.

His excitement is accentuated by the gratification of knowing that he stands exactly where his father had only days before, that gratification amplified by the fact that he'd been right all along: there's no way the Mahwah could

have persevered through pacificism. If there's one thing he's learned unequivocally from Kezlan, it's that those who don't develop strength invite weakness. And so he tells himself that desiring the people's respect is meaningless, and a remnant of the ways of weakness that he must leave behind, those from whom he once sought love ever more seen for what they are: pawns to be sacrificed for power, else made into the meals of those with the strength to lead.

"I've had a great vision, People of the Bay," he begins, remembering his recent tutelage. "I've been led by the spirit of my murdered teacher to a cave of reflection, looking out to sea as his teacher before him had, and there have performed the ceremonies of sight, and they, and my father and the elders, and our Mother, have shared the truth with me. Gather around, my Mahwahn, and listen."

Whereas speeches are rare in most Mahwahn mornings, it being a time for sacred commune and preparations for the day's endeavors, little activity is interrupted. Few perform the thanksgiving ceremonies as is their custom this time of day; mostly the older people, who are also the slowest to respond to his taking command, not seeing him as chief, something he immediately marks, one head at a time. If only they had the right smell and taste, he'd be compelled to respond to the insult with the setting of this day's sun.

Others react as if yanked out of a stupor, many stumbling towards him, some still holding gourds or pipes, several dirty and disheveled, having been roused from sleeping in the dirt. He watches a little boy tug at his mother's tunic, futilely trying to get her attention as her movement drags them both towards their new, unofficial head, for no election of elders has taken place. Tiring of the boy's weight, the woman slaps his hand away, and he falls to the dirt and begins to cry, pulling at the few uncut heartstrings of Zande's fast freezing heart, for he has a memory of this

same boy being shone by her how to mold a bentwood box a week before, the village rhythm now at a virtual standstill.

Wiping the weakness from his mind, he again thinks of his queen, recalling her instructions on the gathering of power, allowing the tension of his silent posturing to raise interest.

“I’ve been communing with our Great Mother, and she is displeased with us. She has taken our elders, and our chief, my own misguided father, away from us, for they stood in our ascendant path. They welcomed outsiders with open arms, foolishly forgetting that those from outside our lands see what we have, the wealth of our forest and seas, and hate us for it. They hate us for what we represent; hate us for our bounty and our freedom. It is this hatred that brought the wolf-wearers here. I’ve seen this.”

“The departed spirits, and the Great Mother herself, came to me in this vision. They showed me that my father, your chief, and his elder advisors, were poisoned to death by the young wolf-wearer. We let that snake into our paradise, trusting him, incautiously permitting him passage right into the heart of our lives, and he struck a deep blow at that heart. I have seen that his tribe planned it from the start. They knew from the visions of their own seer that we were soft and trusting, vulnerable to allowing that cowardly assassin into our camp without raising a club, the deceiver of the slippery tongue who has taken Kylen away from us.”

“And Wahuchu, my teacher, our worker of miracles, closest son of the Creator whom healed our most egregious wounds, gave his life for us. He saw that the wolf-wearers would prevail, and so he bared himself to them, drawing the jackals to him before they could strike us down, and, in his sacrifice, gave us the opportunity to prevail. Without his sacrifice we would’ve been overrun, and the fiery weapon that they’d developed, some horrible demonic force of destruction the likes of which we peaceful people could

never have imagined had we not seen its hell with our own eyes, some offspring of demonic incarnation, would've been unleashed upon this very village, finishing off our heart. Instead, as they cut Wahuchu down like a dog, we found its weakness and exploded it within *their* camp."

"Wahuchu died so that we may live. He is our savior, and we must remember and honor him as such. And we must dedicate our lives to living by his example, and assuring that his sacrifice shall not have been made in vain. We must expel all foreign pestilence, all non-believers in our Great Mother and the Creator, all the spiritless heathens who've come to conquer our lands, and consume all that Mother has bestowed upon us, the great chosen people."

Several of those whom he'd led before, the more exuberant, energetic young warriors, draw nearest to him, a couple of them brandishing weapons, as if ready to entertain any possible justification to paint them with blood. Were they not the perfect bloodhounds, their adrenaline and testosterone paired with suggestible minds easily swayed by the presentation of authority, ideal tools for the retrieval of what he's been made to sense as the sweetest blood of all, *her* blood, and the blood of he whom stole her away from him, it would be *their* blood that he'd want, as the vitality rifling through their veins, still on the surging upswing of life and, thus, nutritiously tasty, arouses him.

"Wahuchu's ghost has told me why this happened, my people. They heard about our natural wealth, and wanted it for themselves. They came here not for brotherhood, not to be a part of the council fire, but to conquer; to break the circle, taking the warming fire of our peace and spreading its destruction as the scorching fire of war. They murdered our leaders and our healer and took away Moon Face. They even killed the bear, our protective spirit, right before my eyes, demonstrating their intentions, but my father refused to see it. I and my men have now rid the land of

them, yet the cowardly, deceiving assassin and abductor of Kylen remains. He who means to convert her and use her power against us, the pure one whom he has tricked and seduced, and to mate with her and all of our women, and foul our blood with his own, and to murder me and any among you who resist, and to take the council fire for himself, the young, fake wolf who has fled like a coward from facing the justice owed to us after the murder and depredations of both he and his vile, vanquished people.”

The young men stamp their feet, grinning, their eyes wide, one beating his club against his chest as if rallying the others. Most, however, seem ambivalent, reacting as if confused, many moving slowly, the quick-wittedness and easy smiles he’s used to replaced by scowls and furrowed foreheads. They look around at their brethren as if gazing upon an alien herd, trying to make sense of a new world.

More and more Mahwahn gather until he recognizes most everyone from the village. It’s apparent that their reactions are based largely upon their ages, the men in their teens and twenties leaning in, riding a collective rush of adrenaline, as if hearing their alpha wolf howling for a hunt; the young women of similar ages eying this testosterone-soaked demonstration, grinning at the greatest shows of strength and fervor, smelling for the mates that might enable them to survive and best position themselves in the times to come; the middle ages farther back, watching him and the crowd like cautiously circling buzzards wondering if it’s safe to share in the kill; most of the keen-eyed older men and women keeping their distance, some showing fear, a few of the oldest women grabbing the hands of the youngest and pulling them away towards their wigwams.

“Our Mother tells me that we have brought this upon ourselves by our trustingness; that we have grown weak by failing to honor the individual; by foolishly thinking that all are equal, even as the past days have demonstrated that

equality is an illusion. We must *earn* our rightful positions in this life, People of the Bay. We must make the Mahwah great again, as we once were, before we became consumed with peace at all costs, before we forgot that so many have sacrificed themselves protecting what we have, before we failed to honor that sacrifice by being prepared to defend everything that we hold dear. And so, as your new chief, I am instituting changes; changes that will allow us to protect this land from further encroachments, and that honor not only those whom have already fallen, but each individual member of this tribe. No longer shall we be weak, and be forced to give up our freedom to think and act for ourselves, forced to pretend as though we're but one big, thoughtlessly-conforming community, with no differences between us, with no *dreams* of our own, with no *thoughts* of our own, no *belongings* of our own, with no right to pursue a better life for ourselves, as if all that matters is obedience to the so-called 'Mahwahn Way.'"

To one side of the gathering Zande recognizes Padam, the young warrior and once good friend whom he'd bitten the night before, in the fight for the wolf-wearer's blade. In the full light of the rising sun, he leans against a tree, looking as though it's supporting most of his weight, his arms wrapped around himself, his knees slowly buckling, his whole body trembling, shivering as though standing in snow, his head bobbing strangely, his glossy eyes having lost their light. Even from a distance his sense of him is far removed from the others, his fouled blood like the scent of mold in his nostrils. But the worst part isn't the malodor, but that Padam smells much as he himself had, much as his own detectable body odor during the interim between his first taste of Kezlan in her sea cave and when he bit into Padam and consumed the blood of his comrade last night.

"Our Great Mother has shown me that the wolf-wearer has dark magic at his disposal, and is turning the other hunters

of the mountain against us by his witchcraft, the foxes, mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and wolves, even the bears. He has infiltrated and befouled our holy land, and tricked those we once called brothers to go against us. They gather, even now, a possessed pack, a league of evil, hiding in the shadows of the woods, where they plot to take everything from us, where, by the dark spells he has brought with him from his land, from a land of shadows and cold and constant need, a land whose people know no honor, that pays no homage to our spirits, that covets everything that we have, where they live like uncivilized beasts, they now intend to call upon a spirit of destruction, and make a weapon that shall wipe us from this land. And so we must prove ourselves worthy of our Mahwahn blood by merit; by just reward. You must all show me and your Great Mother who is the *most* Mahwahn amongst you!”

On the periphery, Padam lingers in a cloud of stinking decay. The more that Zande senses him, the more that his excitement is diminished, like someone defecating on the meal of a man who’s been starving to death. It’s infuriating. He’s ruining his moment, his long dreamt of taking of center stage, requiring greater effort to maintain the show.

“So we shall, one individual at a time, now prove our worth. We shall make more weapons, and we shall form our own league to counter their own, to preemptively attack them before they can use their weapon; a League of Defense.”

“No longer shall we act as though everyone is entitled to everything without adding value to the people, taking whether deserving or not, and without defending this land, leaving it open to the evils of which I speak. We must evolve. We must accept the fact that not everyone is equal, and that it is okay, that it is good, that it is honorable to *want things for ourselves*; things that, as we evolve, we shall finally realize we *should* want; that bring value to our lives. For this I have learned, brothers and sisters: only

when the individual strives to be his best, to have what he wants, to realize the full of his worth, is the whole bettered. When we ignore the individual, the whole withers, like a tree that begins to die when the top that has risen above the rest, into the sun, is sheared away, the whole tree left in the shadows. Thus, those most deserving of credit shall receive it, and shall be gifted with the markers of credit.”

From his belt he unties and opens a raccoon fur, revealing a collection of polished granite tokens, each with a small hole drilled into the center and a triangle carved into it. Along with the smoke and drink and other elements of her grand design, his queen brought them with her from across the bay. Grabbing a handful, he holds his hand out into the sun, grimacing slightly at the discomfort of his skin absorbing the scathing light, tilting the tokens back and forth, their reflected glint acting like a hypnotic spell in the eyes of those around him, many of whom ooh and ahh.

“The more the League of Defense is served by the individual, by the makings of the weapons he or she harvests, and by the weapons made themselves, and by the furs taken from the predators enlisted by the hostiles, the more tokens the individual shall receive, which each of you shall wear around your necks, proving how much of a Mahwah you truly are. And with this justly earned status you shall receive just privileges; you shall receive better places for your dwellings, and better positions in our new tribe, and more of the food that we take from the land, and which we shall now seed upon the land, learning the ways of agriculture whose lessons were brought to us by more advanced people whom we arrogantly dismissed, their fields falling fallow; we shall regrow them, and expand them, allowing us to improve and direct Mother’s powers.”

“The most deserving of you shall be granted positions collecting and counting the tokens, and giving the proper rewards to the people who earn them, and to enforce our

new ways. For all of you are Mahwahn, but I say some are more Mahwahn than others, and shall prove it in service of your people, until the few, the proud, those best serving the Mahwah are known! And in this way, in proving our worthiness, we'll have strength and justice, and assure peace in this land, and defend it from all that weakens us."

Falling forward, Padam leaves his position against the tree and begins stumbling towards the council fire. Pushing through the people, he perches himself upon the fire's edge, leaning into it, as if desperate for its warmth, holding his hands so near to it that they begin to burn. A few take notice of him, and point, and whisper amongst themselves. Zande silently curses him, wishing he'd walk the other direction and drown himself in the bay like a man, rather than forcing his stink upon the sweet scent of the people.

"And the more tokens you have the more of the new gifts brought by a blessed provider, grown and prepared across the bay, shall you be entitled to. For we are being supported by a great spirit who saw the need to protect us from the evil befalling us. And so we shall build new structures to honor this provider, and in which to ask for the protection and wisdom of our Great Mother, and in these shall the new medicine men live, and interpret the intentions of our Mother, and speak them to the people. And we shall have games as well, great games for all to play, for what is the point of defending this land and the people if we can't also enjoy what we have! We should all have the right to the pleasures that we now only permit of our children, the pleasures of gameplay! Games galore!"

Padam leaning even more in, several Mahwah react to his odd behavior, but too late. He faceplants in the flames, immediately bursting into flames himself, as if doused in pitch. One older man tries to pull him out, but he thrashes about violently, knocking his would-be savior's hands away. Many scream, some draw near and peer into the

rising fire, as if disbelieving the spectacle, Padam's body akin to a large, perfectly dry log. Strange groans erupt from his burning body, deep and hollow, like a winter gale blasting through a canyon. Then, *nothing*. All are silent. Padam takes Zande's excitement with him, his cooked flesh and boiling blood turning his stomach, the smoke stinging his eyes. His excitement at taking command has been snuffed out, as if someone just opened the entryway to a perfectly warmed wigwam and let out all the heat.

To his people the horror upon his face makes him caring, as if he's aghast at the sudden, tragic loss of life, assuming the source of his sickened countenance is the same as theirs. Only Zande knows that it's the foul stench, and the feeling that Padam's end foretells his own, sensed to be, in his agonizing death, the closest to whatever life of his own he may yet still have to live. *That's* the true source of his horror. The thought chills him to the bone, his heart, rising and racing only minutes before, now verging upon implosion. Yet the people can only see what's evident, few amongst them possessing the insight to see through the show, those who were best able to do so having already been killed, or having fled, or having taken the most impressionable by the hand and led them to protective positions, fearing him the harbinger of days of darkness.

Head hung, silently attempting to prevent himself from puking, most of the Mahwah see a strongheaded boy embracing his empathy, capitulating to his compassion, taking up his bloodline and becoming chief. It takes him a few minutes to regain his composure, finding the angle.

One of his lieutenants whispers to a set of the onlookers:

"He was his best friend growing up, everyone knows that."

When he finally raises his head, all are rapt with attention.

“He was sick with guilt, People of the Bay! For last night he killed one of his brothers, in my own tent! They were fighting for my space! They each believed themselves worthy to be your new chief! I, too, saw this in my vision! Go, see for yourself, the body of the slain yet remains!”

As several of the younger warriors investigate, murmurs resound amongst the people, fast turning to gasps and raised voices of fear and speculation, for murder amongst the Mahwah is the rarest of acts, even rarer than the suicide that just occurred, with only a few homicides ever being recorded, each leading to a lesson for the youth. What might be learned from these particular events?

“This is what comes of a lack of leadership! From a lack of individual merit! From a lack of justice! Do you see? Neither of these men were fit to lead you, and they killed one another, directly and by Padam’s guilt, by thinking that they were entitled to it without earning it! Without vision, without strength, without the blood of the elders in them! By Padam’s sacrifice he has redeemed himself, he has shown that his honor demanded blood, his own, and so, too, will many of you sacrifice yourselves for our honor!”

With this, Zande turns to leave. Retreating to his father’s wigwam, he’s held upright by two of his acolytes and the sounds of approval by some of his people behind him, the hoots and hollers only heard before in his dreams, the sweet icing upon a putrid cake he’s trying not to puke up.

“What now, Chief?,” asks one his newly affirmed lieutenants as he helps lower him down to his father’s bearskin bed, the same he’d once soaked in urine as a child during a nightmare about... what, exactly, he can’t remember. Yet, somehow, he feels it has come to mind at this moment because it’s relevant, even prophetic... slowly it reenters his mind... He’d soared in the sky as an eagle, and saw the glint of a snow owl reflecting the sun from

afar, and chased it towards the mountain, through a hole, and down into the depths of an endless cavern, deeper and deeper, hotter and hotter, until he suddenly burst into flames. Shaking the memory from his mind, he grasps for saving strength, until all he can hear is Kezlan's coaching last night, her intoxicating blood on his breath, her words commingling with his pride, the succulence of supremacy.

"If we want to take charge of the people," her teaching had begun, "and to expand our power across the bay, we must change what the people *value*, converting it from the freely given into something that we can control. We must convince them that value can be assessed and reduced to an equivalency of exchange. For if we convince them that one thing can be exchanged for the equivalent value of another, as if all value is objective, and that possession isn't a communal concept, but a personal concept, that it can be embedded in a token that we create, and that position isn't an innate right, but something they earn through their amassment of our tokens, we can teach them ownership, so that we'll own *them* through what they own."

"I think I understand..."

"Not yet, but you will," she'd encouraged him. "You *must*, if you're to go from the chief of a tribe to a king of the world. For this place, my love, is but a stepping stone to the ruling summit of the world. You must prove that *you're* the greatest of the chiefs, worthy of the pinnacle of power. Because *here* loyalty runs only as deep as the bloodlines upon which we'll feed, and we must be able to feed upon more than the Mahwah. So we have to be able to buy and sell loyalty, and conceal it in ideas of justice *everyone* will buy, so as to conquer the world as if we're doing it a favor."

Intoxicated with elixir and herb, and her beguiling blood and beauty, Kezlan's words had reminded him of a story he'd once heard around the council fire, about a wily

coyote that convinced the ducks to give up ever more of their plumage, selling them something that sounds reasonable except to those who possess a greater capacity for reason and critical thought, which most ducks don't. A few will fly away, but you'll strip most bare. He knows that his father and former teacher were those few who'd fly away, and he'd long envied that, but one must eventually know one's own feathers. She's removed his last pretense of being the eagle. He's the vampire bat.

"Where did you learn this, anyway? You are *from* here, aren't you? Your ideas aren't like any that I've heard."

Kezlan smiles a sideways smile that makes him as uncomfortable and insecure as it makes her irresistible.

"You had visitors in your village once, perhaps you remember. It was years ago. They had strange ideas too. They wished to harvest select produce, so they directed growth. They grew the fields called the Three Sisters."

"Those yellow things covered with vines, with those stinky orange orbs that explode into sticky mash when you walk through them? The people laugh at that place..."

"Most people make fun of what they don't understand. It makes them feel better about themselves, like children who're jealous of another child and try to make him cry. If the ignorant fools didn't laugh at it, it wouldn't be the truth."

"You learned these ideas from those travelers?"

"No. They weren't travelers so much as *escapees*. I learned it from those they were escaping from. I have special powers, as you know. One of them is something that my mother taught me when I was young. I can go places in my mind; I can fly with my minions, and make my way from cave to cave, flying all night, controlling their

minds. The world is *vast*, my king. *Far* more vast than you can conceive, thousands upon thousands of these bays.”

“Really?”

“Yes, lover. And far east of here, across many mountains and deserts and rivers and forests, a commanding people arrived, with weapons even greater than the wolf-wearers. But they’re powerful not just because they can kill, but because they can take control of people’s minds without the people knowing. They can change the very ideas that people have in their minds, even the meaning of the words that people use to explore those ideas within their minds. They realized that conquering with weapons is the past, because it’s impermanent, and is too costly to maintain. Conquering with ideas is *far* more powerful, the most powerful conquering magic of all, because you can wrap invisible chains around the mind, binding it to your will. Such conquering lasts forever, because most people will never see the chains, and so won’t fight to remove them.”

“Wow... will you teach me?”

“I am. *Listen*. Violence has power, yes, as does fear, but the essence of power is control. And you can control people through the fear of violence, but when they can match your violence, you lose control of them. However, if you turn their *minds*, and condition the new minds coming into the world to hold the ideas that you want them to hold, to be led by and swear fealty to *before* they’ve developed the critical capacity to defend their minds, then you have them by the balls for life. You must train them to call doubt cynicism, and call questions a failure of faith, saying that the absence of obedience is the same as disloyalty to the people. And you must hide your deceits behind hypnotic shows of authority, and other such tricks. Once you get them to call black white, then you control them for life.”

“Hmmm...”

“It’s all about what people see; what they perceive and what they think. You hide your rattlesnakes in the guise of the gopher snake, teaching them *not* to rattle, and to only bare their fangs when absolutely necessary, such that the people let them slither into their hearth unresisted, and live within their minds unnoticed. You wrap enslavement in freedom, tyranny in democracy, religion in spirituality, aggression, invasion and control in fear-based defense, making all inconvenient facts into fictions, and all self-empowering fictions into facts, such that only a few can shed the snake skin and see the rattlesnake within it. And those few you label cynics so the many condemn them.”

“What’s a... *cynic*?”

“Cynicism is a word that the unaware use to make the aware feel guilty about their awareness, especially their awareness of uncomfortable, inconvenient truths, and especially still those truths that expose the extent of the lack of awareness of the unaware. The unaware are useful idiots, however, for nothing is more important in securing power than the ability to make those whom you’re stealing power from believe that you’re actually *empowering* them.”

“What’s *democracy*? What’s...”

“Don’t worry about the details right now. Let’s just focus on control in general. *Here*, the one you call the Great Mother is in control, as well as her acolytes, like my mother and your former teacher. The people feed, are clothed, are sheltered, and, indeed, are given everything that they need through the natural providence that they daily celebrate, reinforcing this celebration everyday through the way that they live, in communal cooperation and the solidarity it endows, and through their focus on appreciation and giving thanks. There’s no controlling people who have these values. Therefore, we must wrest control from Great

Mother, and my own mother who uses those values to protect her perch up on the mountain, by *changing* them.”

“How exactly do we...”

“There are many tactics. We’ve already begun by softening their bodies and brains, and building their dependency upon supplies that we control, so that we can control the people through their demand of them, you see? You just have to make sure that when you’re talking to your subjects that you refer to them in a way that *sounds* positive, because most people will believe you. The dried, caked, confectioned milk from the ovum flower one of my minions brought back from across the sea, seeded across the leeward side of my mother’s mountain, is a ‘peace promoter.’ Stuporous alcohol is a ‘relaxing elixir.’ And when they finally figure out that these things lead to disabling dependencies, we call them ‘diseases,’ and are ready to sell them the cure, the ‘medicine,’ tightening our grip, see?”

“I think so.”

“Right now everything is ‘of the people,’ whereas we need everything to be of the *person*. So you take the focus, the language and priorities and the entire value system, off of the whole and give it to the *individual*. Because the person can be controlled, the *people* cannot. And only united are they strong enough to resist you. So you get them to trade the idea of tribal belongings for *individual* belongings, such that they see one another as competitors rather than family, strangling solidarity in the crib and making resistance near impossible. And you retain the best of the belongings for yourself and those most loyal to you, because the manner in which you divvy out the benefits of those belongings force the people to bend to your will. And all of these strategies must, of course, be concealed, such that the truth of them is only determined by the few who’re inquisitive and suspicious, whereas most of the people will

regurgitate lessons made to reinforce your control of them, but which you make sound as if are actually empowering.”

“You teach the people that *not* to be an individual is to have no freedom, no voice, no ability to think and act for themselves, driving an invisible wedge between them until they see *persons* rather than the people; so that, holding this in mind, they compete rather than cooperate; so they compete for favoritism and advantage within systems that we control for our benefit, blind to the fact that, should they revert back to communalism, the benefits of that ‘outdated’ system would revert back to them, which we call ‘uncivilized.’ When divided and isolated in mind, when trapped in personal identities, and by personal positions and possessions, you create *otherness*, and can thereafter dictate how they see, relate and work for and against one another. Reduce, isolate and emphasize difference as if it’s a strength, hiding the fact that whatever differences exist, they pale in comparison to the essence held in common.”

“So individualism is a weakness?”

“Yes and no. In terms of pursuing love, passion and aptitude, no. My mother told me that we *all* must explore our hearts through the particulars of our mind; through what evokes our natural interest and abilities. But in terms of social systems, individualism is absolutely a weakness. And that’s why those overseas whom I’ve learned these lessons from, those whom rule effectively for a long period of time, casting their invisible chains which the people willingly put on, like to conflate these two very different forms of individualism in the minds of those they rule.”

“Conflation of two very different things in the minds of the masses is a critical element of effective rule, because most lack the critical capacity to separate them, and, in this case, are duped into believing that individualism in politics is the same as individualism in passionate pursuits. They’ll

think that what makes them individuals in the latter must be preserved in the former in order for their freedom to be preserved as well, when, in truth, it's the individualism of the former that weakens them, whereby they relinquish their strength in numbers; in combined capacity; they give up their ability to protect their freedom from being exploited by believing that the only freedom is *negative freedom*, the elimination of all obstacles in order to do what one wishes, which just happens to be the side of the sword the conquerors use to cleave the people apart and keep them subjugated, whereas, like most truths, freedom is a double-edged sword. There's both freedom *to* and freedom *from*."

She'd then walked over to the pile of tinder collected from the shoreline some hours before, grabbing a handful.

"It's much as these sticks. If I put all... what, seven of these together, testing for weakness, trying to break them, it takes *far* more force than if I try to snap just one, which is easy. So we must separate the Mahwah like these sticks. Because together they have freedom *from* our ability to exploit their individualized weaknesses, whereas independently they can be made to believe there's only freedom *to*, because the freedom *to* is what we as rulers want. So the freedom *from* must be hidden from them."

"Ah, I see. Focus on *distinction*, so that they perpetuate division by the way in which they think, and can thereafter be made to serve the will of we who place the pressure."

"Exactly. Good, you're learning. This is why all top-down, hierarchal forms of social control emphasize individualism as much as possible, across every realm of society. Even spiritually. My mother, for example, taught me that we're all an inseparable part of the same Great Spirit, and that this Spirit is imperishable, and forever recycles itself through infinitely remade formations of its energy, which is nature. She said that we don't 'go' anywhere when we die,

because *we're already there*, within the One thing that is everything, as indivisible aspects of that One thing. But if you can make the people believe that they have individual essences, individual spirits divided from the Great Spirit, what those across the seas are calling 'souls,' and that their individual spirit has its own journey separate from all others, and, even better, that there's an *after* this everything, and that what they do in life determines where they go and how they experience that afterwards, and, even better, that *you've* been vested with the special capacity to interpret the divine judgment by which that determination is made, you have them by the balls. You've transformed the most universal and empowering of all truths, spirituality, into the reduction and control of religion."

"So I should become a holy man..."

"Yes. That is how other kings have consolidated control of their people, by consolidating the positions of political and spiritual authority. Again, they're figuring it out in some of the kingdoms on the continent where the wolf-wearers are from. I've seen how their rulers trick their people into giving up their power. We need to adopt those same strategies so that we can compete with them when our civilizations run into one another on a larger scale, which they will, else we'll fall behind, or be enslaved, or simply be wiped out."

"In order to have more for yourself, as much as you can dream of and more, you must rid the people of the idea that anything is in service of life as a whole, or, worse, that those things are *beings* in and of themselves, accorded personhood and protection, as is the Mahwahn way. You must make everything into *objects*, and subject them to valuation, and attach that valuation to tokens, and create a market for those tokens, placing yourself at its center, so that everything passes through you, so that you can chip a piece off of everything in the process, such that eventually there isn't an object in the land that you can't claim a piece

of. These things are *resources*, not lifeforms, regardless of whether or not they're alive, like the people themselves. Everything can be owned by individuals; individuals whom, upon owning them, are owned by us *through* those things."

"Good Mother, I can see it..." he'd said, dazed, mesmerized by the idea of turning the world into a means of controlling everything he sets his eyes upon, staring out the entrance of the cave at the reflection of the moon bounding off of the water. "I can own that sea, being the shine of the moon that reaches across and claims every inch of it, the stars like the people, confusing their shine with mine. I can be the ocean into which every river runs."

"Indeed, my king. Hunger for the whole world, as if it were one big, inexhaustible platter. And teach that hunger to the people, controlling how it's sated, while never *actually* allowing a sense of fullness to occur; just enough tastes to push the people's hunger on into perpetuity, like an endless string of appetizers served before the promised main course that never comes; the mythical carrot held in front of every individual, freeing them to perpetually pursue it. Do this, and so too shall your own power be perpetual."



With Cub imperiled on his quest to become Yawe, accosted by some psychic force, Kylene attempts to understand the invisible enemy. While she's always adored this forest, that love has turned to sorrow absent an understanding of what afflicts her new mate, making misery of her ignorance. Still under the tutelage of the Golden Teachers, she seeks answers from the land, sensing that the enemy is hiding thereupon. With the golden guide empowering her spirit, she moves from the fruit of the Bursting Berry to the Chickadee, flying with it out of the ancient sanctuary in the direction of the village. Alas, her sense of soaring sadly falls flat from a competing sense that an affliction has befallen not just the young man laying lifeless beside her, but everything under her wings.

Dead animals spot the forest floor, a palpable shame and sorrow affixed to their unused, rotting flesh. She senses that they weren't hunted, but *murdered*, killed for their coats and canine teeth, made into trophies. And, nearer to the village, fields burn, and not the seasonal spaces of controlled burns for the sake of inviting the elk and deer, but for something else; something unworthy of the space. Within some of these spaces a listless band of Mahwahn lurk, many looking as though they can barely hold themselves up, all sowing the seeds of one particular plant.

And the young men of the village overlook all with a new aggressive air of authority, commanding even elders, running after anything with fur whilst cackling with glee, brandishing their weapons and flexing their muscles at anything that doesn't immediately recognize their supremacy. Children wander unattended, the oldest of them enforcing their will upon the younger and weaker, many of them looking as though they haven't bathed in a week, bands of them forming, setting themselves to building hierarchies, the timid obeisantly bowing their heads in shame, thinking horrible things about themselves.

The sun having set, Kylene can see it all, even as her own vision obscures. And where she once felt nothing but joy, much of that now turns to heartbreak. Out past the village she wanders, something drawing her in... a sound, like a scratching, and a great fluttering, and, as she approaches the cliffs near the point of the peninsula, a flurry of activity, and the shrill sound of thousands of creatures. But these animals are different, as if uncaring of their connection with all around them, and so uninviting of her cohesion, forswearing themselves to one vision that cares nothing for the results of its myopia. Still, something draws her towards the area, and *someone*... Someone who feels familiar, like family, yet also strange, as if once of her blood but now made into an embodiment of cold detachment. A chill creeps up her spine as she realizes that whatever, or *whomever*, is there, in the cave, is masking itself, enforcing a boundary against her, wanting only to steal everything that it can from the forest, the sanctity of life be damned.

Curled up in his corner of the Spirit Cavern, tremulous and fighting for his life, Cub, now Yawe, remains unconscious, despite Kylene's support. His facial expressions and body language tell the tale of an inner struggle against invading evil. She's taken to wandering their sanctuary seeking any herbal ally that she can find that might lend him strength, focusing on the antipathogenic, the fever-reducers and immunity boosters; anything that might aid in his fight against the darkness. As she removes them from their footholds, she asks the spirit of each plant to support him, telling them that he's here for the good of all, promising that she's felt it in their recently shared vision, and long before that in her dreams, and saw it in his eyes the moment he sat across from her around the council fire.

Mashing her herbal collection, some she spreads upon his lips and his brow, where his third eye sits, the opening into which the evil entered, and which she imagines helping

him close against anything wishing him harm. Some of the medicine she brews into a tea, giving him occasional sips, most of which he spits up, a little dripping down his throat. His skin burning to her touch, his outsides reflect the war he wages within, and that Kylen senses strongly, as if she, too, is in the fight. And she is, even if indirectly. Yet she senses that he needs every bit of strength and resilience that can be mustered both from within and without, and so does everything she can to reinforce his strength, and to purge the forces of evil he's facing. Yawe, meanwhile, knows nothing of her efforts. Nor does he know that the fairies have joined the effort to save him. The ghostly white glimmering creatures, the size of large dragonflies, with oversized wings supporting human forms, began emerging from the Tree of Life and Death the night that he fell ill.

Kylen knows that they're pure spirits, and have arrived from some sense of an ancient struggle, for only in dire circumstances mirroring the primeval war between good and evil do they intercede in the matters of men, and almost never do they show themselves. She avoids looking directly at them, knowing they're averse to attention, especially eye contact, and so is careful to restrict them to her peripheral vision. They buzz about and observe Yawe in his struggle, and sit upon Kylen's shoulders, and gather around her poultices and teas, making falsetto sounds as the medicines meld; sounds, she imagines, of approval.

Twice she sees them adding elements to her mixes, once adding Red Cedar foliage, once plucking the pistils of the Fairy Flower from where it grows upon the Tree of Life and Death and, out of the corner of her eye, seeming to perform a choreographed dance with them over Yawe's head before letting them fall on him, chattering inscrutably throughout. This makes Kylen think of her father's admonishment to steer clear of its use, as only the most gifted favorites of the Great Mother may make proper use

of it, and only then for transformative rituals which few human beings may experience and survive, for its unsanctioned administration means not just death, but a special kind of suffering, the most potent of herbal allies becoming enemies in the hands of unlearned practitioners.

As it appears he's losing his struggle, his fever becoming worse, the fairies begin circling the largest Red Cedar in the area. In a seam formed from where the bark of the tree has begun to peel away from the trunk after a portion of it was gathered for medicinal purposes in the past, perhaps by Wahuchu himself, the fairies begin to burrow beneath the bark, broadening the furrow between the bark and the first inner layer. Kylan realizes that they're attempting to pry loose a large section of the bark, and instinctively senses that the bark holds protective properties; not just *physiologically* protective properties, but spiritual protections. Peeling it away, she drags it over and lays it upon Yawe, thinking of it like a shield, speaking the spell:

"Great Spirit of Protection, keep the psychic parasite out."

Deep within himself, Yawe feels her efforts, experienced like the purifying force of water, sometimes coming in trickles, sometimes in great waves, cooling and cleansing, keeping the conflagration from completely consuming him.

He's a wolf cub, standing on the shores of a great bay. And yet, he isn't quite sure *where* he is, for the bay looks much as it had in the distance when he'd sat around the council fire of the Mahwahn, watching the canoes glide gracefully by, but also resembles the Great Bay of Aria. Longboats carved with familiar reliefs of battles and beasts and flying colorfully-died flags depicting legendary battles float further out in the bay. Even further out, as the bay becomes sea, a litany of native canoes shoot fiery arrows into the bowels of one longboat, its sails bursting into flame, his countrymen jumping ship to avoid being burned

alive, only to be gobbled up by black and white sharks, their drooping dorsal fins leaving streaking red wakes.

Even from a distance he can feel the fire consume their flesh and begins to panic, a great sweat breaking out beneath his fur, trying to counter the heat. Then a cool sensation on his forehead, the relief palpable. And as soon as the cooling sensation is felt a light rain sweeps in from the sea and quenches the fire consuming his comrades.

Then a sound, a familiar voice, filling him with love and longing, paired with immense sorrow. Turning towards it, he wanders through the village, seeing several natives collaborating harmoniously, many others arguing with Arians, debates becoming heated as to how and why a certain thing should be done, a metalsmith mockingly laughing at a Mahwahn warrior showing off his obsidian axe, a Mahwahn craftsman scratching his head as he watches a league of Arians hammering boards together to create a ship, looking at his own craft carved from the trunk of a single tree. Then the voice again, somewhere on the periphery of the village. He knows it deep within, an irreplaceable memory, his heart aching... *It's his mother.*

Picking up his pace, he thinks he sees her near the edge of the forest, walking towards it, and a great fright enters into him as he recalls how she died. 'The forest is filled with snakes!' he wants to scream. Alas, as a wolf, he can't speak. So he hurries to catch up. But the faster he runs, the more stealthy she becomes, slipping into and out of wigwams, and between ferns, and behind shrubs that could easily conceal a dozen snakes, playing hide and seek, seeming to have no concern for her own safety. And as his fear increases, the setting shifts, the light rain that he'd seen relieving the pain of his brethren burning at sea turning into a storm, the skies darkening, bats swirling and screeching, and snakes slithering out from everywhere, emitted from holes littering the ground in all directions.

“Save her!,” he hears a cry from the sky, cracking like thunder from the clouds. “Take her to your safe place!”

Coming around a corner, there she is, just as his mind made her from his father’s descriptions, cowering and quaking with fear, surrounded by snakes, Pouncing upon her encroaching assailants, he just barely manages to mash and bite the last one before it strikes, and she faints with fear, he rising to become a boy so as to catch her fall.

‘She’s come back to life! I need to get her someplace safe!’

But where? He thinks of his native land, and spins around in all directions, wondering if he’s in Aria, trying to remember how he got here, searching his mind for the places where he felt most safe when he was but a boy, not long after his mother had passed, when he was filled with a constant secret longing to know what she’d been like, as though something absolutely irreplaceable had been lost; something that his father and the men couldn’t provide, not even old Ketchum, whose job it was to explain the truth of the world, nor the women who would come into and out of his life afterwards, vying for his father’s attention, Harold’s eyes not staying fixed upon one woman for long following lovely Ella. He didn’t speak of her often, but when he did the scenes that his father described came to life within him, taking on a reality that seemed more real than life, for they were imbued with love and longing and irreplaceable loss.

‘The abandoned fort!’ he thinks, remembering all the play fights growing up, practicing strategy and sword fighting, bands of boys forming and reforming play armies, always looking for new ways to claim the prize of lords of the land.

His mother shaking in his arms, the only oddity about her is her eyes. He hadn’t imagined them that way. He’d imagined them to be blue, as it is with most Arian women, yet her eyes are deep and dark, blacker than black. The fort, however, is exactly as he remembers it, set near the

bay where the clans once settled, before moving uphill to the easier-defended fortifications in which he was raised. They walk through the remains of the old Arian settlement towards the beachside fort, with its two turreted towers and lines of narrow arrow apertures allowing for three-hundred-and-sixty-degree defense of the defunct settlement below, the sight of it all pleasing to him, for much fun was had bouncing back and forth between the encircling stone walls, and within the fort, and on the black pebbled beach around it. Indeed, it seemed one of the few refuges from the expectations of looming manhood, where he could play and dream of a world outside the clan, sailing away in his mind to places free of reality, where his mother still lived.

“Not here,” she says.

“Why? I thought you’d love this place.”

“Because this is a memory, son. We’re not here anymore.”

As she says it the fort goes up in flame, crumbling and turning to ash in a matter of seconds, inky plumes of smoke snaking into the sky, around which the bats circle, shrieking and threatening, yet curiously refusing to attack.

“Think, son. Where can we be safe here, in *this* place?”

He tries to remember where they are. Turning around and facing inland, the native village is now frantic, the central council fire stacked, flaming to twice the height of the villagers approaching it to light their torches. They begin burning what remains of the old Arian settlement, and tossing torches into longboats now set in rows upon the beach, and setting flame to anything that came from his land, then, his past put to flame in front of him, they turn towards he and his mother. ‘*They’re coming for us too.*’

Thinking of Kylen, he remembers that the two of them had been in danger, and that she’d led him to safety. But where

is she? Why isn't she here now? He'd love for her to meet his mother, and his father, and even old Ketchum; the crotchety diviner might even have something to teach her.

'Where did we go again?', he thinks, racking his brain, finding that it's hard to focus, as if the world opening up before him is unfixed, much as his vision practices with Ketchum and the priestesses back in Aria, when, with the right mix of rune readings and drunken and burned plants, he'd depart his body and enter a realm beyond perception.

Gazing uphill, eyeing the stream that flows through the village from the high ground above, cascading steeply downhill through the miniature waterfalls, he remembers walking down it with Mano's body carried beside him, then being pushed back up it by that young native warrior who looked at him with such enmity. And just as the memory begins to crystalize in his mind as to the direction up the hill, and the path the war party had taken towards his father's camp, where he'd been bound to the tree, and where Kylen had rescued him, and how they'd retreated from the spot and gone inland, a great wind descends from the uphill direction he's looking, rushing down the stream and into the village, blowing out the council fire and the torches held by the approaching, menacing natives. The wind holds a familiarity much as the destroyed old fort, smelling of the great pine forests of the Arian mountains.

"Keep going son, please!," his mother shouts over the wind, the natives slowed by its force, still approaching.

Moving slowly towards the stream, eyes still fixed uphill, he hears a great calamity crashing towards them, the plants moving aside for a force following on the heels of the wind shooting down from the highlands. His mother clutching at his arm, quivering, a pack of Arian Grey Wolves suddenly bursts free from the edge of the village and, running past them, sets upon the menacing men. The natives fight back

but are losing ground when the circling cloud of bats overhead suddenly dives down and attacks the wolves, the sound of their screeches and the wolves growling and tearing at the men and the fierce, continuous wind making it near impossible for Yawe to think of the proper path forward. Then, following the last of the wolves, a familiar figure steps out of the forest and into the village: *Ketchum*.

“Is that the way?,” his mother screams. “Up the hill?”

“I’m... I’m not sure...”

“Think, damnit! We’re going to die here otherwise!”

Still the young, frightened little boy, he looks up at his mother in dismay, hurt that she’s being so forceful.

“That’s not your mother, Cub,” *Ketchum* says, approaching. “That’s the witch that’s hunting you, son.”

Looking up into her face, she shakes her no, in disbelief, her eyes filled with tears, but also with something else... something behind the tears, in the pupils, a depth of darkness that seems to drop forever, carrying with it a gravitational force, sucking him in, deeper and deeper, much as he imagines it would feel like to be caught in the unstoppable pull of one of those whirlpools his father would always warn the men about before they’d set to sea, drawing men down to the drowning depths; or like being ensnared in the web of an immense spider... *a spider*... somehow that seems familiar, something very recent.

“She’s hunting you even now, boy,” *Ketchum* continues, creeping up more cautiously now, afraid of his mother.

He remembers that he once had an affection for *Ketchum*, despite his crassness, and despite the fact that he was often somewhere other than where he was in his own mind, and was more likely to be interpreting the shapes of clouds, or the way a pair of birds alights upon a branch,

than to be listening to whatever it was that *he* had to say. And remembering this affection, and looking back up at his mother and wondering why he doesn't feel as strongly for her, he begins to doubt, and in his doubt he grows into a young man, seeing that the peril has been upon him the entire time, in the form of someone he'd trusted. His mother sprouts black fur across her body, her eyes darkening further, their whites filling with the black pull of her pupils, her incisors tripling in size as she opens her mouth with a hiss, jumping backwards and up with great black sprouted, leathery wings as the council fire roars back to life, the torches of the natives reigniting with it.

His mother now some creature, like some cross between a bat and one of those poor people possessed by a demonic spirit that his own people cast into the pit of sorrow, she rises up above him and lets out a piercing scream of such force that it propels him forward onto his knees, launching Ketchum onto his back just moments before all the bats descend upon him in a great swarm and eat him alive, like he's a plant obliterated by a legion of locusts. His wolf defenders dead or in retreat, the natives turn back upon him, the flames of their combined torches like a wall of fire forcing him to move. 'Fire!,' he thinks. 'The burning fields!'

And within moments, not even sure how he's suddenly there, he's climbed the hill and come upon the fields, but whereas before he'd remembered them being on the verge of bearing fruit long after the fires, they're now aflame. On his heels, the natives reach the edge of the fields and expand the blaze, setting anything on fire that they can, the smoke and the heat and the ear piercing sound of the creature still threatening from behind pushing him forward. Then comes a shift in the wind, and from the east, deep within the forest, a great raincloud rises up, the image the opposite of what one sees of rain from afar, the grey rainy wisps rising up into the clouds rather than falling upon the

land, as if suddenly sucking up all the excess moisture of the wood, making it into one great mass of precipitation.

Moments later it falls upon him and the fields in torrents, the sky bursting into light, hurling great bolts of lightning at the creature hovering somewhere overhead and behind him, backing it off a bit, the warriors taking shelter as the oversaturated ground gives way to a flashflood, pushing him into a side channel, where he lays on his back in a shallow pool overgrown with a white-blossomed water plant. In response to his presence, the plant forms new sprouts, sprouting up again, and again, then faster and faster, all around him, until inches from his face, encasing his entire body so densely that the rain only enters in slow drips upon his forehead, cooling him. Despite surrounding him, he senses that it's not malicious, but a caring force, feeling safe in the green embrace, hugged by a loved one.

Outside his verdant shield he hears the bats swarming about, and knows that they're looking for him, the overlording screech of their queen in the distance, felt like a great black eye in the sky, searching the land for its prey. Then, a familiar sound erupts and starts approaching his position, a sound that takes him back to his training days, that of a sword pounding a shield, the sound that the men would make when rousing themselves for a fight, or when they'd encircling a pair of warriors about to engage in a contest. A moment later the sound is paired with a voice, one that he knows as well as any, but hasn't heard for some time. It confuses him, filling him with competing emotions, love and anger, obstinacy and openness.

"Where are you, Cub? Stop hiding, you coward!"

It's his father. He's alive!

"You call yourself an Arian? A member of the Wolf Clan?"

His reflex is to emerge from the enwrapping foliage and confront him, or embrace him, he's not sure which. But as he begins to move the plants grow thicker, and fold over his body in ever denser flowering weaves, holding him in place. The banging of the sword against the shield becomes louder and louder, his father's large, ponderous footsteps falling closer and closer, grunting and yelping, until he's beside him. Then, with one mighty swing, his father, king of the wolf-wearers, cleaves straight through his protective covering, revealing him lying on his back.

Terrified, Yawe just manages to get to his feet and avoid his father's down-swinging blade before it splashes into the pool he'd been laying in, and he thinks: 'That was a slow reaction. He should've killed me. Maybe he *let* me get up.'

"Dad, what're you doing?"

"Don't call me that!," he screams, pushing forward, Yawe backpedaling. "No son of mine hides! No son of mine mates with the enemy! You're weak, just like your mother!"

"But, Dad," he just barely manages, on the verge of tears, "you loved Mom. Why would you say that?"

"You're just like her. A dreamer. Always looking for something better and prettier. Always wandering off, never picking up a sword to fight for who and what you are! Always running from your destiny! I needed a man to take my place, an alpha wolf, and instead I get a man-cub!"

"How can you say that?," he asks, his cracking heart outpouring with wave of emotion that soon wets his eyes.

Harold swings at his son, just missing his face, but close enough to frighten him, for he never thought his father would threaten his life, not for all of Aria. His heart keeps crumbling as he turns to run, thinking that it's all too much, first his mother, now his father, all love lost... *love*.

'Who can I trust with my heart now?', he wonders, starting to sob, searching for a safe place. 'There's someone here, in this strange place, someone that I love, but... where?'

Scanning his surroundings, the now smoking burning fields lie on a natural terrace in the land, below a rise. Seeing this, he remembers having once fled through this space, propelled by the same urgent search for a sanctuary, moving uphill towards... what was it? Some story about outsiders... three of something... three... Three Sisters!

And there before his eyes it materializes. He stands upon the fringe of the Three Sisters Fields, remembering that someone that he cared for had related the history of the place to him. They were headed to someplace on the other side... so he begins to sprint through the fields, his father's enraged voice trailing somewhere behind him, jumping between towering stalks of corn with their proud tassels reaching up and out from their crowns, wrung by the vines of beans, underlaid by ground-reaching vines of squash.

And the faster that he runs, the more it seems that the field stretches on forever, the towers of corn becoming taller and denser, and he steps in one ripening squash that explodes with orange, stumbling, just barely keeping his forward movement until his ankle catches one stout vine, and he tumbles forward, face-planting into a massive specimen of the squash, its freshly pungent, slightly sweet scent and taste exploding in his face and into his nostrils. When he sits back up, wiping the sticky residue from his face, he sees that the space in front of him has opened up, a perfect circle of grass within the field. In the center of the circle is a wooden table, at which three women are seated.

Standing and approaching him with huge grins on their pleasant, flush, vibrant faces, the women are all beautiful, albeit in very different ways. One, apparently the eldest, is tall and lanky, with a freckled face and flaxen hair sticking

up and out in every direction. She has her arm around the second oldest, a bit shorter, whose own arms are wrapped around her elder sister's waist on one side, and her arm on the other side. He can't tell which sister is holding up the other, or perhaps neither us, and they're just lending one another support. Between their legs as they move towards him darts the third sister, the youngest, more a girl than a woman, playfully bouncing off of their legs, inhibiting their movement. They smile as they stride over and around her, and it seems that the more that the little one moves between them, the greener the grass grows at their feet.

Helping him to his feet, the sisters glance in the direction of his father's screams behind him, where it seems he's lost in the field. Looking around the space, the bats that had been tracking him fly perfectly parallel with the inner circle, high overhead, their screeches muffled, as though shouted through and partially blocked by an invisible barrier. The two older sisters cling to his two sides whilst the youngest holds onto one of his legs, he striding forward supporting her weight. She smiles up at him with apricot-colored eyes in a way that fills him with peace, and though he can feel her weight, the leg that bears her along simultaneously feels stronger, like he could carry her forward forever.

Seating him at one end of the square table, the eldest sister reaches out and removes the cover from a large platter loaded with steaming corn, squash and beans. Laughing giddily, the youngest jumps up on the table and begins mixing it all together with her hands, dropping one huge heap of the resultant combination onto a plate that the middle sister distributes, handing him the largest serving. Each of them seated on one side of the table, the eldest sister beckons everyone to come in close and hold hands, then closes her eyes and bows her head, saying:

"We thank you, Great Provider, for the gift of nourishment. We take your bounty into our bodies so as to borrow your

energy and know you better, taking You to be a part of ourselves, and we a part of You, thus that our flesh may be made of your flesh, and that we all may all live peacefully here, upon our Great Mother, as facets of the same form.”

“In Yawe we trust!” the youngest suddenly blurts out.

‘Yawe...’ the word sparks some deep inner sense, as though he already knows it, but he knows not why.

“It’s you,” he hears from somewhere on the periphery of the circle. Looking up, a young woman caked in mud passes through the inner ring of the three sisters field and begins to approach, the grass at her feet seeming to recoil at her step, as if retreating back down into the earth. At the same time the feeling of the two sisters’ praying grip upon his hands tightens, and they quiver, just slightly, and pull away. Standing, they come behind him to shield themselves from the approaching woman, whom Cub knows that he knows, but can’t quite remember how.

“Your place is with me, Yawe, don’t you remember?”

A vision flashes into his mind of a man bathing a young woman in a pool of mud. He remembers the feeling that struck him when he first beheld her, of instant adoration.

“Ky- Kylan?”

“Yes, my love. Come,” she reaches out her hand. “You can’t stay here anymore. I need you. Let’s go back.”

“Go back to where?”

“To where it’s safe. It’s not safe here. They’ll poison you.”

Glancing down at his plate and the central platter, everything upon it, before seeming as succulent as any food he’d ever before encountered, now rots, fly larvae crawling all over it, the maggots multiplying and feeding.

Standing and taking her hand, a chill shoots up his arm, into his spine, his heart momentarily ceasing from beating.

“Don’t go, please!,” one sister cries, then another, then in unison, the littlest just finding the courage to creep a little ways out from behind her sisters and stick her tongue out at Kylen, who shoots her a sudden sharp glance, upon which the girl begins to cry, her sisters comforting her.

And as Cub follows Kylen towards the edge of the circle, the scene outside of it suddenly becomes visible once more, and he can see the natural grade in the land that he remembers from before, and knows which way to go. But as he strides forward he sees something fly over his shoulder, coming from behind, something small... *seeds*. The women are tossing them in front of him, and as they hit the ground they sprout into vines and shoots of corn, slowing their movement. Kylen pulling him forward, everywhere the seeds strike the earth and sprout to instant life her steps counter them, the force of her footfalls forcing their retreat, her proximity equal to their retraction, such that, as they push forward, a battle is waged between life and death, between creation and destruction. Finally making their way to the edge of the circle, he can hear the Three Sisters shout from behind as they pass through:

“Don’t follow her! She’s of the forever black!,” then “We love you! We’ll miss you! Come back and grow with us!”

And above the fields they ascend, finding the ridgeline, then moving east, towards the great mountain beyond. Kylen slows, letting her take the lead, which he finds odd, as it was *she* who had led them into their hiding place.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if you led the way? I’m not entirely sure where we’re going, I just remember... what was it?”

“I’m not sure...” she responds. “I seem to have forgotten.”

“You must remember... we were walking along this ridge, and suddenly you wanted me to be quiet... because...”

As he says this something falls slowly from the sky, floating as it falls, almost like the snow of his native Aria, yet different somehow, even lighter, and dry, like little sparking white hairs of some animal, or the finest of threads from some magical glimmering material. Stopping, he feels it fall upon his flesh, and as it does so something strange happens to Kylen. She becomes ethereal to the point of translucence, and then seems to divide into two people, one form of her leaping out and making a clawing motion.

“Yes, that’s right!,” he remembers. “The bear den.”

No sooner does he recall Kylen warning him about the bear during their passage deeper into the forest when the bear cub runs out from beneath the brush and stands at his feet. Yawe is happy to see a familiar face, and bends down to pet the cub, whom nuzzles him. Standing back up, he looks over at Kylen, who’s frozen, staring at the cub as though afraid of it. When it approaches her she backs off.

“Get away!,” she commands.

But it keeps moving towards her.

“But... that’s *our* cub, Kylen, how could you be...”

Coming to Kylen’s feet, she kicks the cub away, as though it were a poisonous snake, at which point the little cub suddenly sprouts into a full-grown male, roaring at her. Startled, Yawe falls to his back as the massive brown bear burls towards Kylen. As soon as it makes contact with her she explodes into a great mass of bats, swarming the bear, whom swats them out of the sky, but seems to be losing the contest, before, from somewhere on high, Yawe hears the piercing call of the hawk, and one after the other they

dive down and attack the bats, taking pressure off of the bear, who, turning towards Yawe, now comes at him.

Jumping to his feet, Yawe turns to run along the ridge in the direction he thinks is correct, but it's too late. The bear seizes him from behind. And yet, it's only the wolf pelt that the bear grips in his powerful jaw and, in one motion, he swings to his side and tosses him back down the hill, towards the Three Sisters below. Rolling down the hill, his momentum finally stops, and he's about to stand back up when the bear, crashing down the hill, bulls into him, pushing him further down, again and again, until, rolling him like a log, they spill back into the Three Sisters Fields.

Finally allowing him to stand, Yawe backpedals whilst facing the thunderous behemoth, more and more, until the bear sees something behind Yawe and stops. Continuing to backpedal, Yawe soon hits something with his heels. Turning around to look, his heart almost implodes as he realizes that it's one of the Three Sisters, the eldest, dead at his feet, the other sisters dead as well, still clinging to her. Their skin is shock white, their eyes sunken into their sockets, their once wild, lustrous hair thinned to the point of sparse streaks clinging to their desiccated scalps, their mouths wide open, as though they'd died whilst screaming.

Looking up, the entire field has dropped into decay, little of it left alive. And in the middle of the field, beside the table at its center, he sees other bodies, so many that they cover the space surrounding the table. Several of them he recognizes as the elders he'd seen around the council fire the first day in the village, including Chief Makunah. And hunched over the dead chief, his sunken chest heaving, his emaciated torso framed by protruding ribs, looking much as the dead sisters, he barely recognizes the young wiry native who'd been in command of the village warriors.

Standing, the half-human being, its eyes glowing bluish-white, begins walking towards him, laughing maniacally, the sounds of its laugh much as the sound of the calving glaciers north of Aria, a resounding series of grating, earsplitting blasts. Hearing this, the bear behind him bolts, and Yawe follows, running back up the hill in the direction that he'd come, more frightened than ever, as this thing just *feels* wrong, the sound of its laugh like ice picks in his brain, and he thinks he smells... something rotten. No longer sure where he's going, he reaches the ridge and, fear overtaking him, gives up on retracing his memory of the path to where he'd found shelter, and instead drops down the ridge in the other direction, the creature sounding as though it's gaining on him, the terrain becoming thicker and thicker, until finally he falls through a cluster of lashing, thorned bushes and falls face first into the base of a tree.

Then, it's quiet. So quiet that, instead of calming him, it sets him even more on edge. That's when he notices that this isn't just *any* tree. It was once a colossal Red Cedar, and now appears to be just barely clinging to its life, most of the tree charred by some fire, a swatch of reddish-brown strips of bark still set upon the lower half of the giant, with a massive hollow set at its center. Climbing vines cover the behemoth. But the strangest thing about it is that it looks as though it's... *dripping*. Its scaly leaves are spotted with red, streaks of crimson barely visible on its living bark, but starkly evident the higher up he looks, where the tree is black, and up his eyes gaze, and up... and he screams as he sees bodies hanging from the tree, tied to the limbs, facing downwards, their necks punctured, dripping blood. And he realizes that the ground is wet, and he's lying in a pool of blood. 'What could do such a thing?,' he wonders, almost afraid to ask himself the question, when a flash of red comes from the inner hollow of the tree... they're eyes.

Seized by terror, Yawe releases the full of his fear through his voice as the beast drops from its den and falls upon him, its saliva spilling onto his face, the fetid stench of its breath reminding him of the smell of the bits of raw meat they'd toss to the dogs after a feast in Aria, the feeling of its embrace like being wrapped in the cold of fresh leather. Unable to withstand it, he retreats yet deeper into himself.



"I hope that you haven't grown tired of my tales yet, brave Arian, for I've another to tell you. One that you must hear."

Harold opens his eye to the oculus-overlording cavern lined with mineral-enriching, steadily dripping stalagmites feeling stronger than he has in years, even without the use of one eye. By the soft light just barely reflecting off of the clouds hanging above and bouncing through the cavern, he guesses that it's dawn. His mind still has a hard time accepting his surroundings, and recalling where he is.

His broken arm somehow feels near to healed, even as he knows this to be impossible, for even with the collaborating care of the greatest of all Arian healers and holy men such a break should take many months to mend. Yet, he moves it now as if the clean break were but a fracture, even a bad strain, rotating his shoulder in the warriors' warm-up ritual. It aches, but it's functional. Turning over in bed, the Wild Woman plays with the smoke she's exhaling, creating patterns that approximate familiar shapes, as an arrow flying through an opening, and an undulating current crossing the sea, and a procession of ant-like dots.

"Tell me," he says with a grin, wondering how it can be that such an oddity as this being can already feel so familiar, as if he knew her in his heart before meeting her. He guesses he'd be near to complete contentment, in fact, a sense that is as alien to him as this place, were it not for the fear he feels for his son, and the sense of the coming contest.

Smiling broadly, the Wild Woman of the Mountain blows one last mighty plume of smoke up into her dissipating forms of delicate, tongue-and-lip-designed artworks, the smoky exhale appearing to capture and subsume them, becoming one coherent shape before expanding and merging with the mist that commingles with everything in sight. Leaning over to face him, she kisses him, then says:

“You and your people are of the wolf, and have taken the wolf into yourselves, and worn its resemblance, for ages. But did you know that wolves were once solitary stalkers, and behaved more like large scavengers than hunters?”

“No... where did you get such an idea?”

Eyes sharpening at his disbelief, her look penetrates all the way into his heart, but she soon softens, and continues:

“My Mahwah say that the wolf was once bested by the larger, apex predators, the bears and the mountain lions, and that they fought amongst themselves, with the larger wolves not only refusing to share with the smaller, weaker or sick amongst their brethren, but often killing and eating their own, and, when food was scarce, as in and around the days of the Great Freeze, even killed and ate their own young. Then came Primera, the lost daughter of the chief Hechu, leader of the ancient Mahwah. She’d fallen and suffered a head injury whilst out on an exploration, and could scarcely remember who she was, much less how to get home. In her amnesia she was lost for years in the forest, and upon this mountain, where she communed with the spirits, and was welcomed by the purest of those spirits, and protected, for her affinity for the lives of the plants, trees and all animals was recognized by those spirits, who saw in her the greatest potential for humanity.”

“Something came into her on this mountain, in this very place, and she gave birth to me. And I was left here, in the care of the spirits of the forest and mountain, raised in the birthplace of humanity, set to be the bridge between the people and the powers of the Great Mother. My mother would return to her people years later, upon the death of her father, to lead the early Mahwah into a previously unknown prosperity through her natural affinity for and knowledge of the forest, which she connected the people to, teaching them wildcrafting and medicine making and

the spells and songs of the spirits hidden in all living things. But while she was lost, and before she gave birth to me, she had many encounters with the beings living here.”

“One day while she was walking the upper ridge of the forest, following the fairies who teach the purest people about the hidden magic, she was right at the tree line, at the point where it gives way to the rock of the upper slopes, and came upon a wolf cub who was so young that she had yet to be weaned from the milk of her mother, who was lying dead beside her. She was pawing at her, mourning her, left completely to the mercy of nature. Her mother looked to have been killed in an encounter with a larger wolf whilst attempting to scavenge part of the remains of an elk. My mother called the cub Lycene. Lycene would’ve died of starvation if left alone, or been eaten by the larger wolf upon its return. And so Primera took her and raised and loved Lycene as one of her own.”

“Years later, when Lycene had come of age, she couldn’t resist the urge to seek food for herself, and would leave Primera for longer and longer periods, sometimes coming back with evidence that she’d been in fights with other animals, sometimes even requiring Primera to utilize her healing prowess to save her life. One day, Lycene came back not mauled, but impregnated. She’d give birth to a litter of three cubs, two girls and a boy. And Primera couldn’t stand the idea of the four of them fighting amongst themselves, or the three cubs abandoning their mother, or anything that would heartbreakingly fracture the familial bond, for Lycene had learned to love Primera as a mother, and Primera had long loved Lycene like an only daughter, the incipient inkling of the pack mentality binding them together, which Primera decided that the wolves must be.”

“And so Primera sought the magic of unbreakable bonds, and, by listening to the fairies and the unspoken magic of the forest whom few have heard so clearly before or since,

she brewed a concoction combining the blood of all of the wolf siblings, and the Fairy Flower, and the needles of the Red Cedar, and of her own blood, for the primordial blood of my family is protean, and may fuse itself to any blood flowing through this realm, man or otherwise. She spread the mixture around the areas the wolves most loved to frequent, and dripped it throughout the paths of their daily descent down the mountain, and soon every place of the earth that had absorbed the mixture sprouted with a new plant imbued with the power of the pack: *Wolf's Vein*."

As she says this she motions to the one side of the bed, where a collection of big boldly blue flowers hangs, drying.

"It's said that the flowers are clustered in tightly along the stem as a signature of strength in numbers, and that the blooms hang their heads as a sign that, even now, Primera protectively watches over the wolves, and that the flowers are blue because that's the nature of blood whilst it remains within the body, unexposed to the vicissitudes of the divisive elements, whereas, when divided from its cohesive source, it turns from its natural color to the bloodshed red that comes when the wolf, when *any* life, is left alone to fend for itself in cutthroat competition with everything else. Her blood, like my blood, stays blue even when exposed to the air, being a manifestation of the inseparability we represent. And so, *Wolf's Vein* is how the pack was formed. Primera fed it to them. It's poisonous to all other creatures. Indeed, the Mahwah dip their spears and arrows in a mash made from it, their attacks made that much more deadly by its toxicity. But for the wolf, *Wolf's Vein* acts as a different kind of intoxicant, provoking an enchantment of binding built upon the blood of the premiere pack; an unforgettable sense of unity; an undeniable feeling of the irrevocable bond of brotherhood built between anyone ingesting the same brew of its blossoms and their shared blood, all blood becoming one."

“So... to be the wolf I must partake of this plant?”

“Yes.”

“And mix it with my blood, and the blood of the wolves?”

“Yes. And my blood, as well. For then shall some of my power be passed into you, as it is with my family’s blood.”

“And I don’t assume that you have wolf blood around?”

“You must be the one to retrieve it, brave warrior. For the wolves must smell you when you take the life of their leader, and when you skin him, and extract his heart.”

“That should be easy enough... assuming you have an extra sword laying around here. A good spear, perhaps.”

She smiles. That knowing smile, loaded with hidden meaning. To Harold it seems her face, and her movements, are like constantly repositioning pieces in a puzzle, continually suggesting concealed knowledge, offering it up like a prize to whomever may put it together.

“To you it likely seems as though you lost your sword in a random spot, but this is not so. It was, in fact, in a most auspicious location, you just couldn’t be aware of it at the time, being under siege, the location shrouded by storm and darkness. This, too, is instructive. Things only seem random when we’re under pressure, and can’t see through the occlusion of ignorance, and lack the ability to connect the dots into the lines that extend across and bind together the whole of life. For you ‘just happened’ to lose your sword in a great field of Wolf’s Vein, Harold of the Wolf, the greatest concentration in the entire peninsula, surrounding Wolf’s Rock, a sure sign of things to come. And there you must go to retrieve it, and to kill the alpha wolf who’s claimed the territory. And from his body and blood, and your blood, and my own, and from the flower imbued with the power of the pack, you’ll soon be wearing wolf for real.”

“What... what do you mean?”

Standing, the Wild Woman of the Mountain walks over to the back wall, where the furs of every animal of the forest are tied, hanging. She glides along the floor of the cavern as if her heels have wings. And as she lets her fingertips fall upon each animal skin, something happens which Harold has a hard time believing, continuing, as he has been, to find himself lost in the space between his common sense and his experience in this place and with this being, ever wondering at the difference between magic and reality. Are these spells, illusions, truths? Where is the line between them? For, with each pelt that her hand touches, her body starts to shimmer, her perfect white skin waving translucently before beginning to reflect the touched fur.

“I shall go with you, Harold of Aria. For you need my blood, and we may need more time than the pack will permit.”

At the end of the line of furs of increasing size, she lays her hand upon a grand tawny fur streaked along its fringes with greys, whites and blacks. Holding her hand upon it, the fur more and more becomes her own. Removing it from its tie to the wall, she gracefully swings it over her shoulders and binds it by a cord at the center of her throat, as though she's adorning a cloak. As she does so she falls forward upon her hands, which, in the next instant turn to paws, a tail growing out from her hind quarters. Turning around to face Harold, he falls over the opposite side of the bed in fright of the mountain lion made before his eyes.

Taking a few deep breaths, he stands and walks round the bed towards her. Excepting her icy eyes, she looks as any other mountain lion might look. And though he knows the creature to be the Wild Woman, he must summon all of his courage to approach a creature that can kill with one accurate swipe of its curved dagger claws, or a clamp of its mighty jaws around his neck. She circles him at first, he

turning about on the cold stone floor to face her as she moves, his heart pounding, his suddenly feverish insides and sweating body contrasting with the morning chill setting upon his skin, quickly evaporating his perspiration.

Soon she comes in closer, moving slowly. He reaches out and, laying his strong hand upon her back, feels her fine, soft fur, and, as she continues to move around him, he can feel every bit of the might buried beneath her soft exterior, every easy stride the mountain lion takes coming from a taught and twinging musculature that shifts and undulates as she moves around him, from her stout, heaving shoulders to her pouncing flanks. Finally, he finds the strength to crouch, and she comes all the way in and nuzzles him, her vibrating purr so powerful that it passes all the way through, into and down his spinal cord. Sitting down, she lays across his lap, and he strokes her stomach, her purr becoming all the more powerful, her breath slower and more expansive, slowing his breathing in turn.

Rolling off of him, she begins to circle him again, faster than before, pawing at him playfully, her claws remaining retracted. Thinking of the Arian warm up routine, he crouches low and swipes back at her, and soon they're play-fighting. She bounds with ease around him, and he tries to keep up, reaching out, but barely and infrequently makes contact, as her athleticism is astounding, even against one who's trained his body his entire life. They run around the cavern, part dance, part drill, until she suddenly turns and faces him, and lets out a menacing, shrill growl, stopping him in his tracks. She then crouches and moves towards him, and he thinks that maybe he's angered her by playing too rough, and that this may be his end, as he's no match for her. Nearing him, he falls backwards at the exact moment that she leaps and lands with all four paws around his supine form, just missing landing upon him. And though he has an instinct to fight back, somehow he

represses it, his instinct telling him that it's a test. So he closes his eyes instead. The cat's nostrils are inches from his own, the warmth of her breath upon his brow. And in the next instant a warm wet sensation moves from his chin over his lips and up the bridge of his nose, a big wet kiss.

Moving off of him, he sits up and watches the king of the cats move back over to the base of the bed, where she picks up his bloodied wolf pelt and woven britches in her mouth and carries them over to him, dropping them in his lap. Standing, he puts on his clothes and, turning, follows her across the cavern to a low opening on the far side.

Crouching into it, he follows her through a tunnel and down a steep grade where they weave between various sizes and shapes of rocky outcroppings, and he swears many of them look to be of animal and human form, though he can't be certain, in the very low light, whether this is his imagination, or if the formations are natural, or were perhaps carved into familiar forms by the cave dwellers who once resided here. Disconcertingly, their faces seem to follow him as he moves, as if they're alive. A few hundred yards of this steep downhill trajectory and he hears the sounds of trickling water, realizing it's coming from the rock walls around him, and dripping into a channel in the center of the tunnel, leading them down to a light that gets brighter and brighter, soon accompanied by the sound of falling water. Minutes later, the sound of the falling water increasing, he comes to the mouth of a cave over which the stream falls, seeing the cat there waiting for him in front of a wall of green that, as the wind gently parts the plants like a cluster of curtains, glimmers with piercing sunlight. Turning, she leaps through the emerald opening.

He soon swipes aside the same dense, concealing vegetation and emerges into the morning light, finding a place almost as fantastical as the cavern in which he's spent the previous nights. The small waterfall exuded by

the concealed grotto bounds its way off of numerous moss-encased boulders before pouring into a shallow, milky pool that looks like a miniature version of that which lies within. The pool itself is surrounded by stacks of smooth polished rocks that look to have been collected and purposefully stacked around it, and upon which grows a shimmering white moss that he immediately recognizes as that which the Wild Woman smokes, and used to induce his recuperative rest. This must be its source. It's as though she's farming it using these stones, specially selected and polished for the purpose. Clambering down the big slimy stones, he finds her lapping from the far side of the pool.

Moments later they're climbing back up the mountain on the top side of the tunnel which they'd descended minutes before. Then angling edgewise through a rocky field of scattered scree penetrated here and there by patches of earth sporting spring flowers of gold and violet, Harold soon sees a drop of blood, then a sprinkle, then a splash. He realizes that this is where those who'd accompanied him on the quest to recover his lost son lost their own lives. As they continue upwards, the blood takes on a forensic quality, the patterns and quantities of its contrasting paint across the neutral grey stones telling their tales of carnage.

Then, above them, they can see tucked into upright crevices, or laid across the stone, in a few places wedged beneath larger rocks, ever more frequent evidence, the blood marks broken here and there by dropped weapons, and shredded articles of clothing, and, finally, bodies and pieces of bodies. Most have been drug off by the wolves, with what they left behind disarticulated piece by gory piece by the scavengers and smaller predators who, as an alliance, assure that not an ounce of flesh goes to waste.

Even now a small pack of coyotes bolts away from the cratered remains of a corpse at the first sign of the albino-eyed mountain lion coming at them, with an unkindness of

ravens maneuvering against a wake of vultures over the mostly stripped femur of a fallen comrade. Feeling their presence, one of the vultures tries to make off with what remains of the leg before being forced to abandon it to their encroachment, but the unkindness falls upon and forces the small feast from his grip, and it falls back to earth before rattling down the angular rocks with macabre thuds. The sight induces rage in Harold. He quickly clutches and, in the same fierce motion, hurls a spear at the unkindness, just clipping the wing of one of the ravens, who, losing a few feathers and cawing his disapproval, rises up and away with his crew, bits of bloody flesh falling from their curved beaks as they echo their fading irritation.

Taking up a sword, recognizing it as Kraske's, with the wolf head etched at the base of the blade, near the hilt, Harold and the mountain lion continue up, mounting a rise and suddenly finding themselves in a more open area with exposed soil, facing a four-foot-high wall of blue blossoms. On the other side of the chest-high fence of flowers rises a raised stone platform, like a natural pediment. Passing through the Wolf's Vein, Harold is struck by the stateliness of the stone structure, pointed slightly up in his direction, as if a launchpad for flight, thinking it fit for a god, or to hold up a hero destined to ascend to Valhalla. A gust of wind shoots past, and as it wraps around the stone platform the rock seems to sing, then howl like a wolf. And, indeed, it has already been identified as the perfect throne for the leader of the pack. For, as the mountain lion strolls through the other side of the perfect ring of blue flowers that surround the stone stage, passing over Harold's glinting sword as she does so, he hears the growl of a predator nearby, and realizes that there's a wolf above.

Staying low, he creeps over and around the pediment on a line towards his sword, and, as his own eyeline finally rises above the top of the stone, he sees out of the corner of his

eye the wolf crouched and creeping along the pediment, on his own line, set to cut him off. Sensing him spring, Harold too springs, reaching for and securing his sword at the exact moment that the alpha wolf clamps onto the back of his leg. With a grunt and a grimace, he manages to lift himself up onto his knees and, lifting his sword up in front of him, points it downwards and plunges it backwards into the chest of the wolf, who lets out the briefest of whimpers before going lose in body, his jaw locking with his death.

Falling forward, the weight of the wolf's body falls atop him from behind. Pushing the pain from his mind, Harold holds himself up with his recently broken arm and, turning, inserts his sword into the bloody snout of the fallen alpha wolf with this other arm. It takes all of his strength and minutes of bone crunching, teeth grinding and leveraged prying to shatter the sockets of the wolf's jaw and free himself from its death grip. As he does so a series of bloodstreams leak down his leg and, on cue, he hears the sound of more growling from the other side of the flowers. The rest of the pack is here, and he can't fight them all.

Leaping over the flowers, the mountain lion seizes the dead wolf by the scruff of his neck and begins dragging him towards the pediment. Harold again steels himself against the pain and, rising to his feet, awkwardly assists in the struggle, using the full of his strength to help pull the dead wolf up onto the pediment along with the mountain lion, falling face first into the remains of a body set at the peak of the platform. He barely has time to realize that it's Kraske, based upon a wolf claw pendant buried in his sunken chest, dangling down between his exposed ribs, before the fur of the mountain lion falls beside him. Turning to look, the Wild Woman, her milky, radiant skin reflecting the morning light, pulls a mass of blue flowers from her mouth and, in a magnificently efficient, exacting series of movements, whisks it along and soaks up the blood of the

alpha wolf, and Harold's blood from the seeping wound on his hamstring, then cuts her hand on his blade where she clutches the bloody blue wad before stuffing the entire thing into a hollow in the stone and pounding upon it with the base of his sword handle, scooping it up and dripping it onto and across the dead wolf, and over her own head and shoulders, and lashing it at Harold, painting him with it.

The pack of wolves then begins parting the encircling curtains of Wolf's Vein at various points, covering all angles, converging in coordination. They then move side to side, as if uncertain, weaving up in their direction, a few growling softly. Harold's reflex is to back away and maybe drop over the side of the upwards-rising point of the pediment, thinking that the fall will hurt, but that he can then put his back against the base of the stone and defend himself. But the Wild Woman senses this and, reaching out, grabs him by the arm and calmly shakes her head 'no.'

Handing him the sword, she motions at the wolf corpse. Knowing the meaning of the instruction, he takes a few quick breaths then crawls the couple paces over to the body and, with a series of strokes of the blade, removes the heart of the alpha. Looking over his shoulder at the Wild Woman, who now sits cross-legged at the pinnacle of the pediment, a big smile on her face, looking savagely lovely, the mass of bloody, mashed flowers still clenched in one hand, dripping down her arm, she makes a motion with her hands, moving them towards her mouth: 'eat.'

There are now more than a dozen wolves, all of whom creep up towards them, their heads lowered and shifting side to side, as if sizing them up. Harold takes a bite of the heart, at which point the demeanor of the pack shifts. They suddenly seem more comfortable with their presence. And as he takes his second bite, one of the wolves approaches the dead body of the overthrown alpha and sticks its snout into its exposed chest cavity, taking a bite of its own. One

after another they come in, Harold backing away, up towards the Wild Woman, while continuing to tear pieces from the wolf heart with his own incisors. Leaning backwards, his head falls into the Wild Woman's lap. Looking up at her, she begins quietly saying something in the odd, terse, animalistic language he hears beneath his own Arian when she speaks in the cavern of the oculus.

"Et eti ous oug."

Opening his mouth, she holds the masticated flower mash over his face and squeezes a steady trickle of it into his mouth. Feeling faint, his body becomes cold and goes into convulsions. She whispers to him as he passes out, combing his hair back towards her with her bloody hand.

"Sem maug ut et."

She watches the wolves eat their fill of their fallen companion, well knowing that they wouldn't waste the meat, especially after scenting it with her spell. This goes on for hours, through the morning and afternoon, the Wild Woman remaining cross-legged holding Harold's head in her lap, sometimes with her eyes closed, sometimes opening them to observe the raucousness of the pack's ever-evolving internal competition for rank and privilege. As the pack finally loses interest in the meal and begins forming around the base of the pediment, she maneuvers out from under Harold and lays his head upon the stone.

Creeping over to the body of the wolf with Harold's sword, she skins him as only an expert can. Soon thereafter she creeps back over to Harold and, removing his clothes, and discarding his former hide, lays the new, bloody wolf hide over him, wrapping him in it. Kissing him on the forehead, she whispers to him once more, "De lyca en fel," before adorning her mountain lion skin, dropping off of the upper lip of the platform and ambling back down the mountain.

Hours later, as the sun just starts to set over the ocean thirty miles to the west, Harold awakens to the same voice that he heard when he and his men climbed the mountain.

“Wake, Wolf Blood. Night is upon you. It’s time to hunt with your new family, and seal the bond. Intruders are coming.”

Laying on his side, someone is licking the back of his leg, where he’d been bitten. Trying to sit up, his body doesn’t move as expected, his musculature and the points where his body bends having shifted. Looking at his bloody leg, two wolves are licking it, treating the wound. Yet he doesn’t recognize it as *his* leg. It’s covered in long greyish hair streaked with white, like theirs. Reaching out, his hand is a paw. Turning his head to the sky and finding it unusually rich with the scent of his surroundings, his nose is now a far keener snout, his eyes better suited to the diminishing light, his ears pointed up, gathering sounds from every nearby creature, and plant rustling in the wind. With equal parts terror and triumph he rises to his four feet as a wolf.

His fur is that of the pack surrounding him, standing or laying on the platform, else scattered around it in the middle of the ring of Wolf’s Vein, looking to him for direction, all on high alert, their eyes, noses and ears turning in all directions, taking everything in; every sound; every possible prey or predatorial threat. Despite his fur resembling theirs, he’s retained his relative size, that of an Arian Grey Wolf, the strongest of them despite one slashed and scarred eye, his front leg still not a hundred percent.

Gazing down the mountain, he’s suddenly struck by an overwhelming urge to hunt, and senses that those who wish to do he and his pack harm are drawing near, their torches lit and climbing, dots of flame dicing through the sylvan landscape below, here and there having been set upon the woods itself, creating fires from which all the creatures of the forest scatter. Harold realizes that they’re

looking for his son and the native girl, the offspring of the Wild Woman, and that they're willing to burn and butcher anything that gets in the their way. This knowledge acts upon him much as the feeling of the fires forming below, as though he's swallowed them all up, burning him from the inside out, his pride smoking. The sense of encroaching peril combined with love for his son and his fondness for the Wild Woman, and her honorable place in this forest, surges up through him, and he releases his barbaric cry, readying for battle, emitted as the howl of the alpha wolf.



As if the Spirit Cavern is the pupil of the all-seeing eye, with every river in the land now converging and flowing *not* out into the sea, but becoming one force of confluence sucking the whole of Greenwood Bay into their once silent sanctuary, Kylene and Yawe now seem the center of the universe. It's as though everyone and everything has been caught by the same source as Yawe as he continues to fall deeper into himself, their hidden sanctuary having become a beacon of protection for all the wild lives of the forest. Creatures that once hunted and killed one another appear to have called a silent truce, bobcats sharing the burrows of jackrabbits, several brown bears spread along the periphery of the sanctuary near to does and their fawns. And Kylene is connected to it all, trying to keep her new love and as many of her wild brethren alive as she can, the space that had been as a temple of solitude fast growing into a nexus of life retreating behind her shielding energy.

By her emerging powers the survivor of the Mahwahn Massacre partners with the whole of the forest, interceding in the destructive encroachments of her erstwhile brothers. Those with open hearts hear her inaudible words, even as she senses that all the tribes of the bay have been sucked into the same dastardly machinations as have befallen her own people, now threatening to remake the landscape in a manner suiting a devastating condensing of covetousness and control. Thankfully, her own mother, in league with the Great Mother, and, Kylene senses, with the spirit of Yawe's father, is somewhere nearby, silently supporting them.

Spring steadily giving way to Summer, the peninsula has burst forth with flurries of fruit of every conceivable size and shape, beckoning the beautiful and the bold to partake of the bevy, the activity of the paragons of grace, the pollinating hummingbirds and hovering butterflies, soon beckoning the brawny, lumbering bears to their ripening effects, the whole of Mother's offspring called to the long

table of treats. But where most years would place the Mahwah as primary contenders for the succoring sweetness, they now have new dictates, and excepting the outcast and a few bunches of deserters, led by elders who sense regress in the new 'progress,' the berries are unappreciated by the people. Instead, one clever animal uses the popularity of the natural confections as a different kind of dinner bell, recruiting the feeders as her defenders.

Not far from Kylan and Yawe's hiding place, an especially sly fox finds that the corrupted hunters, trappers and skimmers are all too easily fooled. Knowing where the great predators of the forest have themselves found refuge, drawing far nearer to one another than their typical territoriality will allow, the vixen finds a semi-sickening form of satisfaction in walking the line between their new dens.

Lying on a sunny rise a mile from sanctuary, the white, pink-tinged, bell-shaped flowers recently having transformed into berried fields where brown bear mothers love to take their cubs to feed on warm spring days are now frequented by far many more such defensive mothers than is typical, they of the spirit of protection, whom now sometimes threaten one another when one mother or father draws too near to the young of another, and yet are not oft to attack one another as they might be under usual conditions, being distracted by the invasions of a people who once respected them, and are now determined to take from them their very skins for the sake of tokens to tie around their necks in order to gain favor in the new order.

Knowing this, the clever-most vixen induces a hunting party that's drawing near to the sanctuary to follow her up Huckleberry Ridge instead, and though two of the half-dozen overly-armed, lumbering men halt halfway up the ridge in recognition of its significance, the old order ringing in the back of their minds, the other four hunters continue to fly up it, consumed by the desire to cash-in the full-

grown vixen's gorgeous hide so that it can be remade into a many-token-paying garment for a most deserving woman of Modern Mahwah, one of the hunters imagining bequeathing it to a particular woman in order to gain her special attention. But as the female fox conceals herself in the safety of the dense vegetation and its bounty of berries, three brown bear mothers, having smelled the intruders nearing their vulnerable cubs, suddenly reveal the fact that the misled foursome has unwittingly crashed their red-juice-dripping feast. The embodied spirits of protection tear the intruders to shreds within seconds, their blood commingling with the juice, the oldest of the cubs performing the coup de grace on the last of the four foolish skimmers with a clamp to the neck, each of the three mothers quickly pulling away one of the carcasses to a safe distance for the completion of their respective family feasts, leaving the fourth for a nearby pack of coyotes.

Sensing another set of invaders, her heart a tumult of conflict between loyalties to past and present, the vixen sprints as fast as she can to the east, where it seems this new sixsome shall soon circle back to the borders of the sanctuary. Half a mile from their current position lies the Elk Trail, where a herd of fifty of the great migratory feeders is now dropping down the foothills of her mountain, following the scent of fresh grass somewhere out ahead of them, mirrored in the densely vegetated woods by a pair of mountain lions. Having to draw nearer to the skinning party in order to garner their attention than she'd like, a flurry of arrows just misses the vixen, and the fastest of the hunters' speed and agility surprises even her, as he's half a body length from reaching out and snatching her big bushy tail when she spills into the Elk Trail and is forced to perform a pirouetting dance to avoid being stampeded.

The fleet-footed Mahwahn runner is immediately impaled by the alpha bull guarding his harem, whom trample him

underfoot in the following seconds, four of the remaining five in the skinning party, at first thinking it their lucky day, counting the tokens in their head as they fall upon the herd of elk, two each for every female elk, four for the lesser males, five for the alpha bull, drawing their bows and gripping their throwing spears, are fallen upon by the kings of the cats whom they'd just barely missed while crashing through the forest. It's a mistake that they'd never have made in the past, when they saw fellow subjects in communal lands rather than objects to claim and cash in. Only one of the six manages to escape, he who'd before then carried the shame of being slowest, his heavy feet becoming his salvation, running back towards Modern Mahwah with a scarring reminder of his evils, one of the light-footed felines cleaving some flesh from his calf.

And so goes the circuit run by the sanctuary-encircling vixen, at a speed, and covering a total distance, simply not possible for any other fox, for this one calls upon a deep wellspring of spiritual energy, harnessed at the behest, and with the sanctioning, of the Great Mother Spirit. The fox knows where the hunters dwell, those whose spirits have lived in this land longer than the people who've suddenly come to imperil them, the upright tribes of men being the youngest of the collective brood. And so she inscribes invisible patterns upon the inner peninsula, run relative to the proximity of the invaders to the hiding places of those whom she enlists, and to their natural sources of food.

There are the berries bursting forth from the vining shrub formerly covered with daintily, downwards-facing flowers, as if admiring its own growth; and the bush of bright yellow berries that are too tart for the taste of the people, but which the bears relish; and the small tree sporting blossoms much like those of the Fairy Flower whose dense clusters of deep red berries, set between dark green, sword-like leaves, produce a rather rank odor and are only

eaten by the people of the bay after being dried and preserved, but which many an animal feed upon raw, calling in those whom hunt those animals; or the other small tree with lobed leaves adorned with arrays of pungent little white flowers transforming into sour fruits with oversized seeds, those who consume it finding that their hearts function more efficiently for a time, and who, in their cardiovascular boost, give thanks by propagating its seeds from their beaks or back ends across a greater portion of the forest; and the whole family of bushes of white and pink, long-pistoled flowers leaving especially tasty dimpled fruits, often protected by thorns or naturally boggy habitats, sometimes set over and concealing zealously guarded hives of hornets; and the lofty plant with overgrown leaves terminating in towers of white flowers becoming clublike clusters of red berries that're toxic to the people but especially beloved by the bears, making the Bloody Club a particularly tempting trap for her to lead the skimmers to.

And when those whom would remake the skin of her brothers and sisters into tokens and tribal positions and purchased sex and better bets on games and higher hills upon which to set their wigwams happen to climb a bit too high up the mountain, sometimes seeking one of the most valuable prizes of all, the wolf hide, they find more of what they seek than they actually want. For the wolf clan of the mountain is led by a new leader, one whose purpose was found through the misleading fox, and who, recently, has produced many a carcass for his new, well-fed family. Twenty would-be skimmers have he and his brethren taken from the tribes thus far, with only two wolves killed in the contests, their skins remaining intact, the fledgling greed of the Mahwah being slow to catch-up to the growing legend of the great one-eyed wolf making the mountain his home.

Yet, even as his fearsome ferocity is second to none, it isn't *Harold* who's the deadliest of the Wild Woman's allies,

for that position belongs to a *former* lover: Kylen's father, Wahuchu. For the transformed medicine man is compelled by a force as old as creation, born of the shadow behind the light, what remains of his spirit, held just above evil by the meditations of the Wild Woman herself, compelling his ungodly instinct towards a more meaningful purpose. More creature than man, the great healer's heart and mind are so strong that he hasn't fully fallen into the darkness as would most any other man or woman, his spirit locked like a dimly-lit lamp within the frigid foundation of the deepest, darkest chasm, forever filled with the flutters and shrieks of flying bloodletters. He senses his daughter, and knows of the threat upon her *not* by his mind, obscured by shadow, but by the barely surviving honor buried deep within him.

And as Wendah, one of the oldest survivors of the Mahwah Massacre, leads the other elders and those youth that she's able to corral far from Modern Mahwah, they make camp deep within the enshrouding protection of the forest, seeking safety from those whom would forcefully remove them, or worse. The multicolored fractal light of dusk descending upon the party, she digs a pit into the rich earth, surrounding it with stones unearthed from the forest floor, setting within it a teepee of fallen limbs from the red cedars surrounding her carefully selected location. For it is not only refuge from the misled hunters that she seeks, those who, including her daughter and that intemperate mate of hers, are as desecrating parasites upon the flesh of Great Mother stretched around her, but an invocation of Mother to send forth the fallen to lead them back into light. And nowhere is the power of Mother greater than a place such as this, a grove of ancient cedars red with the blood of the protective spirits of both the bear and the deceased.

Mirroring the circle, itself a representation of the eternity of repeating cycles of life and death lived through the communion of the Creator and their Great Mother, the

elders space themselves around the fire pit, positioning the youth between them, many of whom shake with fear, for they know that they're in peril, for the elders, many of them their own grandparents, would not lead a ghost dance so far from the village were they not facing mortal threat, nor would they have left their own parents behind, those whom the youth *thought* that they could count on to lead them. Each of the rebel elders squats over a drum made of the trees that surround them, tightly overlaid with the skin of the brown bear, decorated with the feathers of eagles and hawks, those spirits whom scout for evil from the sky.

As the slow, rhythmic beat begins, the youth, whom know of the dance, begin their side to side shuffles, bending their knees in count with the cadence, and Shanda, holding her head high to the nighttime sky and opening her heart fully, raises her arms up in the humbling invocation of the Spirit:

“Great Mother, we ask that you return the spirits of our fallen elders and Medicine Man to us, so that we may benefit from their wisdom and guidance, and that they may defend us from the assaults upon our way of life, passed up from the Old Blood before you, as the roots up from your body, through the forever branching trunk of the Tree of Life and Death that daily rebirths your bodies. For today that tree has been poisoned by an unseen evil, and we fear that, without your leadership and protection, we may lose the Young Blood of our people, who may topple the tree and erect something ungodly in its place, such that your body may be raped, and the deep roots of the Old Blood may be buried and forever forgotten, and that whatever life remains may sicken into something inhuman without hearing your spirit and feeding on your medicine.”

Interspersed with the blazing blues, oranges and reds come little flashes of white light, and from them rise the faces of the fallen, the beloved countenance of Makunah, firm, yet at peace, a great grin balanced by eyes welling

with tears, and Holemna, his playful wife, said to be as different in temper from her mate as can be, but no less a love of the Creator, and Corseca, the once great explorer from the southern Salesh Tribe whom, upon sweeping into Greenwood Bay some three decades ago, so fell for its forests and teeming waters that he stayed, and was adopted by the Mahwah, and his wife, Konsheka, with whom he walked the shorelines for hours, she seeing divinations in the shapes of patterns in the sand, and collecting stones and shells with which she crafted not only jewelry, but built great artworks with which she conjured the spirits of the sea, asking that they share their bounty.

And as Diqche, he who was made into the captain of the League of Defense of Modern Mahwah owing to years of loyalty to Zande, approaches the party with his five cohorts, it is Wahuchu who rises from the flames. Wendah and the elders, having no sense of the approaching doom, are at first pleased by the spectral appearance of he whom not only healed their physical ills, but gave salving advice to their troubled minds, and put them back on their paths. Yet the group is soon troubled by the fact that the fallen medicine man is the only amongst the recently murdered who doesn't seem at peace after rising up through the summoning flames and, in fact, appears to be burning in the fire, screaming and writhing, his face becoming black.

Burning to ash, the ghost of Wahuchu is remade by the blaze into a great bat, his eyes seeming to feed on the force of the flames, his screech so loud that they all think that they can hear it, even the children, one of whom is so frightened by the phenomenon that she yells out and runs from the fire, breaking the circle, running straight into Diqche who, coming into the cedar grove, snatches her up.

"That's quite enough, Wendah!" he proclaims, holding the child by her shoulders, his knife blade held to her throat.

Everyone freezes. Everyone except Wendah herself, who urges the other elders to continue their drumming. But Diqche steps forward and, pushing the child near to falling into the flames, begins kicking over the drums, once again breaking the sacred circle and its invocations of the spirits, to which most everyone, including those in his own party, gasp at, shocked at the complete lack of respect shown to those whom have granted them so much in their lives. And as Diqche pulls the elder closest to him up into the standing position, his drum falls into the fire, and again they hear the screams of Wahuchu coming not only from the flames, but echoing all around them, as from the trees.

Then the trees begin to creak, and a great wind passes through them, the strongest gust of which seems unlike any wind they've ever experienced, for it passes not cleanly *through* the cedar grove as any of the four winds that they know, but seems to bounce between its trees. Everyone looking up into the sky, seeking to comprehend the meaning of the strange spectacle, the wind circles the fire, as if surrounding the stones that contain it, the conflagration suddenly rising up in a great burst of white light as, in the same moment, Diqche is snatched up into the air with a scream that is, in the next instant, silenced. Taking it as a protection, Wendah again urges everyone to continue their drumming and dancing, the young girl crawling back into position, weeping, the remaining five in the tracking party filled with wide-eyed terror, backing off, backpedaling, their eyes scanning the darkening skies.

But it's too late. The wind comes from outside the grove this time, as if blasting out from within the ferns, passing along the ground in a great gust that scatters the earth as it flies by, a shadow snatching the next closest of the men, the double-sided obsidian axe that he'd held flung from his hand with such force that it lodges into one of the cedars encircling them. The remaining four men turn to run, and,

sprinting, their screams are silenced one at a time, even as their sounds are gradually muffled by their movement away from the flames, the crackling red cedar tinder soon the only sound being made, the worshippers as quiet as can be, everyone terrified by the force that they've summoned.

Continuing the ceremony, the ceremonious soon hear other sounds, softer, moving slowly this time, at first stepping around their circle, just touching upon the orange light cast by the flames. Wendah is the only one amongst them with the courage to look in the direction of the sound, everyone else keeping their heads down, drumming or dancing, several of the children sobbing. In the briefest of glimmers she gets visages of what encircles them, unable to determine its nature, and the realm from which it has come, for it seems like a creature of death, its eyes like shining red dots in otherwise total darkness, its face something between a human and the type of creature once told of in the old stories, coming from the bowels of the mountain looming in the distance, its peak playing with the clouds reflecting the last of the light sinking into the sea. Soon the sound of the creature is of its scaling of the trees around them, like a squirrel scratching upon the bark, but louder, heavier, as it climbs into the canopy above them.

And as Wendah, steeling herself against her fear, certain in the protection of her Great Mother, follows the sounds with her eyes up and around her, she can see those whom had been hunting them strung up and lifted high above, jolted up in rhythm with the drum beats and the tentative, shuffling side-steps of the youth below, the upside-down bodies of the dead wrapped in vines, their faces smeared with blood, their mouths agape, eyes locked in terror, the dripping of their encircling corpses adding to the rhythm as if the macabre shaking of tambourines. While only catching fleeting glimpses of the creature of death itself, for it moves at a preternatural pace, more often seeing its shadows

shoot through the trees in reflection of the fire, or hearing the unnerving sound of it sucking the blood of its victims, she can nevertheless *feel* it when it draws near, its breath on her back so hot that it equals the heat cast by the fire in front of her, which also reacts to the presence of the beast, the smoke swirling in strange patterns of black and white, the wispy face of their medicine man set in the still white, the restive flights of a winged beast in the churning black.

The terror-tinged rendition of the ghost dance continues into the night, the movements of the beast gradually slowing, sometimes to the point where Wendah is sure that it's moved on, causing her to momentarily relax, only to be shaken back into adrenaline mode by an eerie sound, the scratching of a tree, the sense of something gliding over her, a shadow of a human form suddenly cast against the cedars before her, even as the beast itself stays invisible. She wonders at the connection between this creature and Wahuchu, if somehow it *is* Wahuchu, reborn into a being spiritually bound to an implacable protection of the tribe, as if he gave himself to evil as the cost of keeping them alive, or if, perhaps, Wahuchu summoned it from the underworld whilst his spirit passed through it, maybe making a pact with the ancient evil dwelling deep within the mountain, offering to serve it in exchange for bringing about this being of vengeance to counter the course of current evils.

Finally, with daybreak no more than an hour away, Wendah drifts off to sleep, the others having long given into slumber after many exhaustive hours of drumming and dancing whilst enduring the surrounding horror. She opens her eyes again a few hours later, shaken awake by the girl whom Diqche had threatened to kill. Little sign of the night's slaughter remains. The bodies that had been draped from the cedars are gone. Nearby she sees streaks of blood strewn atop drag marks through the loose dirt where the bodies of the slain were drug into the ferns and

absorbed by the forest, moving towards the ancient heart of Great Mother. She takes this as a sign that whatever it was that saw fit to save them last night, whether Ghost or beast, it must be of the Old Blood, and must work with the sanction of their immortal Mother, for the deep woods into which the drag marks lead is where Her acolytes dwell.



“Well, I know the direction they were heading at least. Tracking a spirit is rather tricky. If you break the mind that houses the spirit, they get lost, and tracking becomes impossible. Every mind breaks. The key is finding the level of fear that motivates *without* breaking them, otherwise they become unfixed, and the tracker can be lost as well.”

Zande can barely follow what Kezlan is saying, for his own spirit is slipping into the same infinite void that caught Cub.

“Damn! I had him. Damn meddling sister. And that old teacher of yours. Dear old Dad. You know that he’s my father, right? Did I tell you? And he’s not dead. But he’s not really *alive* either. Well, not in a way that the people would recognize. Finally, you two have something in common!”

The mention of Wahuchu momentarily engages Zande’s interest, his greying eyes rising to meet the obsidian eyes of his queen. As night falls, Zande is slumped against the back wall of the sandstone cave. While he normally feels energized by the descent of darkness, his own vitality piggybacking on the enlivening bats preparing for the hunt, it’s becoming ever more difficult to identify with his winged companions, or with anything else, for that matter.

Night brings with it the knowledge that he at least has a *chance* to uncover Kylen and the boy, and the hope that, upon his queen cracking open their chests and eating their hearts, he’ll thereby satisfy her spell and be released from his own descent into a darkness deeper than the absence of light. But where he’d felt quick-witted and powerful early in his ungodly alliance with Kezlan, the intoxication of her blood, smoke and elixirs making him feel potent, he’s relying more and more on his lieutenants busily employed in remaking the Mahwah to think and act for him, delegating ever more authority, spending most of his restless, sleepless existence roaming the landscape seeking the scent of those who might sate him, per

Kezlan's initiating spell, else submissively cowering in their shared cave, waiting and praying that she'll take pity upon him, cut herself and drip a few drops of blood his direction.

He needs it more and more, and she gives it less and less, using his dependency as a continually tightening leash, the life force flowing through her veins gaining so much power over him that all he can hear at times is her heartbeat, the scent of any drop of it leaving her body overwhelming him. Any sense of romanticism which he believed that he'd felt for her, when she'd seduced him in her sea cave, when he'd confused his feelings for Kylan with Kezlan herself, has long since melted away. The truth is that he'd kill her if he could, and drink the entirety of her blood, and, in his fantasy, be reborn. But he's no match for her. Especially now. And especially considering that she's likely reading his thoughts, and feeding on them as well. And as she withholds he continues to wither, all sense of pleasure, joy, and even coherent thought, receding from him, until now he can scarcely recall what it was like to be human, becoming a beast as insatiable as endlessly unsatisfied, as wanton in his want of flesh as his own flesh is wasting.

"Speaking of lost... My Creator, are you even listening to me, mighty Chief?," she mockingly, rhetorically asks.

"I'm going to have to invite one of your men here soon enough. You can't even satisfy me anymore. I thought you were supposed to be a king. You so-called big men are all the same. Big puffed up chests, heads held high, thinking you're all spirit, all power, but expose you to *real* power and you wilt like a flower fearing the full force of the sun."

The insults barely even sting anymore. Pride was one of the first things to fade, it being paired with self-loathing. The struggle is very different now. Now it's about trying to remember who and what he was, and determining whether or not he even cares, and contemplating killing himself

before he becomes... whatever it is that he's becoming. But she probably wouldn't even allow him to do *that*.

He knows that he's been enslaved. He knows that his covetousness of what he *thought* he wanted in life, the love and respect of his father, a position of power, Kylen at his side, was the weakness through which she entered him. Now her force is about the only thing that he feels, telling him that he *needs* the two escapees, and to keep his people on their current line of development, knowing that, when he pleases her, she might give him her blood. Blood is all that matters now. Kezlan's, Kylen's and that cursed boy's that brought his entire world crashing down.

Kezlan, meanwhile, paces the cave petting her minions, or patting the heads of the two new dead-eyed youths that she feeds, a young brother and sister Zande saw playing in the waterfall above the village only a week before; happy; entirely oblivious to the nefarious force now possessing them, twisting their hunger into traps. Every once in a while Kezlan will prick her finger with the point of Cub's sword, watching for Zande's reaction; loving to see him want it *so* badly that his whole body quivers with need, and to pretend as though he doesn't care, only to watch as she gives it to one of the bats or kids instead, a big smile on her face. For her, ego gratification is the best of drugs.

She's not there every day and night. Sometimes he returns to the cave just before dawn to find it empty. He used to wonder where she'd go, assuming she was seeking her prize, but has recently come to appreciate their time apart. When she *is* there, however, it seems everything is a cruel game. She plays with everyone and everything; with the bats, with him, with the people she controls *through* him, even with those beyond her physical reach. Cub's sword has, aside from Zande, become her favorite toy. One of her preferred activities is to decorate it, and, when she tires of the look, to redecorate it. Caked in blood from her spells

moving in and out of the psychic realm, from coating the blade with her blood, and his blood, and sometimes with the blood of the boy and girl, before searching for her pair of prizes, it's now impaled with the bodies of a pair of bats as well, their decapitated corpses pushed all the way down to the hilt, their heads affixed to both ends of the guard, their intestines wrapped around and tied to the handle.

"God you stink. Why don't you do us both a favor and go out there and take a bath? This place is squalid enough as it is. And to think that I thought you'd make a proper king."

He makes an attempt to stand but loses the strength, and drops back down to the ground. He can't tell if it's physical weakness or if he doesn't care enough to stand. Sweating profusely all the time, even his perspiration now feels strange, as if his head is covered in continuously melting ice, the resultant streams uncomfortably running down his overheated flesh. That flesh is not only turning grey and taught, pulling itself tightly around his skull and bones, but is beginning to exude a peculiar residue. Resting with one hand atop the other, he pulls the top hand away to reveal that a sticky, mucus-like film has formed between his two hands, thinning as he separates them. What's worse, she's right. He stinks. *Badly*. So badly, in fact, that his scent is beginning to attract carrion beetles; they stream into the cave at all hours of the day and night, affixing to his flesh, giving something for the bats to snack on during the day.

"The sun is low enough now. I need you to go check on your people's progress. There are grumbles that they've lost too many men in the search. Good 'ol mother. It seems she's learned some new tricks. So, I need you to encourage them. Make promises of great rewards should they discover any sign of either of them, and offer up positions of prominence and power and lots of personal possession should they find them. Chief? You listening?"

Zande's heart starts racing as he disguises his excitement. She has to give him a taste now. She *has* to. He knows it. There's no way he'll be able to see to such duties otherwise. His skin stands on edge. His fix is coming.

"*Fine*. I can't have you drifting all the way off just yet. Here, lay back, open your mouth, I'll give you what you need."

Complying ever so slowly, as if it's *not* the only thing in his head, he gradually slumps lower on the wall until laying on his back. Straddling him, Kezlan passes the blade of the sword back and forth beneath her wrist, just missing it over and over, watching his face, enjoying every ounce of effort he's pretending not to summon, every increase in pulse, every expansion and contraction of his pupils, every flinch of his face, and tensing of his entire body, and every other sign that she has complete control over him, getting herself excited, so excited that she drops her hips down, and grinds against his pelvis as she continues the cruel ritual.

But he can't react to her sexually. Not now. Until she finally *barely* lets the blade tear into her flesh, a few drops dripping into his mouth, and his grey face flashes with the first ruddy sign of life for hours. Drip... drip... Drip... then a longer interval, just before one more drip. It's more than he can take, and he reaches up to try to grab her wrist and pull it to her face, but she slams the pommel of the sword into his forehead, cracking his head back, and he hisses at her in response, eliciting a broad grin from her, and she begins chanting to him, much as she had in her sea cave:

"The beast paddles against his spiritual guide

Caught by the current of his conquering pride

Suckling at olden horrors, all of his humanity lost

The warmth of human blood now cooled into frost

Feasting upon festering flesh, his nightmare awaits

Ven-Dahl-Dooh ushers him past the spiritless gates.”

Cutting deeper, the drip turns into a trickle, both his pupils dilating until near filling each respective eye, nearly wiping out the white, the grey of his face bolstered by crimson, his sinking flesh rising just enough to imitate the vibrancy of health, the cross between the grey and red nearing the sun-kissed brown of his people, so that he may again walk amongst them without triggering an unsettling response. And as the blood flows into his mouth he gulps it down like a man diving into a mirage in the middle of the desert, and his body comes back to life, her grinding now undergirded by his sudden sense of desire for her, thrusting up to meet her. He barely notices the upside down black triangular pendant ever hung between her pearly-white breasts anymore, even as it sways in hypnotic parallel with her rhythm, its gravity having already sucked the life from him.

When finally Kezlan pulls her bleeding arm away, Zande snarls in aggravation, attempting to wrestle her for more, but she's stronger than him, even now with his resurgence of life, and keeps him pinned to the ground. At one point in his struggle for more blood he reaches up and brushes her pendant with his arm, triggering a wild vision to enter his mind, a rapid succession of her riding atop other men, a couple of whom he thinks he recognizes from his past dealings with other tribes of the bay. This momentarily confuses him, until, the vision falling away, all he feels again is hunger, and continues to fight for blood, Kezlan smirking and keeping him pinned, riding him to completion.

Satisfied, she stands, and he jumps to his feet, crouched, as though ready to pounce upon her. With a big, beaming smile she backs off while pointing the blade at him, as if

inviting him to attack, her smiling eyes telegraphing scorn, as if to say: 'We both know that you don't have the balls.'

"That's all you get for now. If you make some progress this evening you can have more tonight. Now go. Make sure our developments, especially the trackers, are on track."

Reluctantly emerging from the cave, it's eerily hushed in the evening air, nothing but the calmly lapping waves in his ears, evoking a memory he can't quite grasp onto with his addled mind, of songs and dances and stories around roaring fires. For countless generations the Mahwahn daily pervaded the entire peninsula in seeking the natural foods, medicines, materials and quests called up from their spirits in the course of their deeply affectionate relationship with the Great Mother. Now, however, their courses are becoming smaller and smaller, set upon the land in tighter, straighter, largely overlapping lines, no longer seeking, circumscribed by a new way of being. Where once it was as though the Mahwah were an expanding sphere of life and consciousness, that sphere is now a collapsing circle.

The central village has largely fallen into disrepair, only a minority carrying on the traditional ways, mostly the older Mahwahn, always looking over their shoulders, not so much out of fear as the expectation of support, conditioned by decades of coordinated effort to expect the younger generations to be there, watching, learning, listening, questioning, assisting. Now, however, the same older craftsmen usually look over their shoulders to see *nothing*; no new materials being delivered; no desire to learn; no communal consideration; no cohesion of past and present.

Education and assistance in the traditional ways is becoming an ever rarer occurrence, grandparents searching for and mostly futilely attempting to bring their children back into the fold, guiltily and retelling the litany of allegorical stories that're already fast fading from

the collective memory, often chasing down their grandchildren who, in a level of neglect entirely out of traditional character, have largely been left to their own devices. Bands of Mahwahn youth now roam the woods, watching the new ways unfold, imitating the activities of the emerging social order, creating their own pecking orders, preparing to take their place in the oddly unfurling present.

One older woman, Wendah, has taken it upon herself to corral as many of the wayward youths as she can, keeping them as engaged in the old ways as possible, even as her daughter, Madum, has come to play a central role in the new ways. Madum's mate, Diqche, heads Zande's all-powerful League of Defense, whose dictate it is to, as the foremost priority, find the traitor and her evil spellcasting lover, and, as a secondary objective, to bring back proof of having defended Modern Mahwah from the animals that they've bewitched, that proof taking the form of gathered pelts, each pelt valued differently depending upon the threat and exclusivity of the animal. These are, in turn, exchanged with 'The Counter' for the obsidian tokens carved with triangles, with holes punched in the center so that they can be worn as signs of wealth and prestige, so that everyone knows how valuable a Mahwahn one is.

Madum herself, meanwhile, ever the clever woman, has carved out a niche for herself in what many have come to call 'Modern Mahwah,' a new development set upon a ridge a couple miles southeast of the central village, where commerce and its off-springing interests have captured the bodies and minds of those fully invested in the new ways.

Surrounded by spikes set into the ground based upon some of the warriors' admiration for the defenses of the now fallen Camp Water Dragon of the wolf-wearers, Modern Mahwah comprises a set of developing districts. The space and structures of The League of Defense makes up the biggest district by far, itself connected to The

Makers, who focus on the production of weapons. Beside this is The Counter, headed by a shrewd aging Mahwahn, one of the few of the older generation that has taken to the new ways, a man named Boffet, who's begun developing theories as to the best ways to use the tokens, and is often overheard giving advice to others as to how and why to spend them, lamenting while intoxicated the fact that so few are learning 'how to make their tokens work for them.'

A few of the more clever, disciplined League members have taken heed, and are now hoarding their tokens, looking for the best way to spend them on increased advantage over others, plotting to use them to buy position, or better places for their wigwams, claiming the surrounding space, or shares in the coming harvests of the dreamy 'ovum flower,' or the next delivery of elixir, mysteriously arriving on shore once a week, or to buy their way out of their duties, or, in a few instances, even buying the permanent service of their favorite, usually younger, females, with Madum and Diqche always getting their cut.

Opposite The Counter is a large open space the people call The Games, where League members watch and place bets against one another over the contests of lesser Mahwah. Those seeking favor with the emerging hierarchy compete in games taught to Zande by Kezlan, and administered by a boisterous, slovenly middle-aged man they call The Game Master. Many a night The Games are overrun, and it seems the observers won't remain content staying on the sidelines, screaming approval and disapproval whilst smoking and sipping on elixirs and watching contests between those not considered strong or fast or smart enough for League business, but who, seeking their place, win a percentage of the bet if victorious, their brethren hurling explicatives at them when they turn in disappointing performances. Many contests begin as matches with bats and balls and goals, only to

devolve into outright clubbing battles as the drinking and smoking on the sidelines increases, with bloody noses, broken arms and concussions common. The most popular district by far, however, is the so-called Pleasure Camp.

Run by Madum, Pleasure Camp caters to the newfound wealth and power of League members, Madum leveraging her position as Diqche's mate to offer the company of young women in smoke-strewn, elixir-enriched wigwams, sometimes fighting with Diqche over the fact that his men will stay far too long, not uncommonly for days at a time. Like Madum, most of the younger Mahwahn now have priorities far different from maintaining the ways of their parents, said to be 'outdated.' Almost everyone of adult age, those set between the youth and the older generation, now frequent Modern Mahwah, vying for as much control of the unfolding society as possible, often screaming and sometimes fighting amongst one another, a rare scene in the outdated society, forcing Diqche's brother, a brute they call The Enforcer, and one of Madum's best customers, to step in and reinforce order, a duty he often sees to in such a state of intoxication that he ends up stumbling at the perpetrators, who laugh whilst fleeing. He even crushed a man to death with a stone, but was ultimately found innocent of any wrongdoing by Diqche, as the man he killed wasn't even a part of the League, but only a 'grower.'

By Zande's direction whole sections of the surrounding forest have been burned away and planted with two crops that, by his generosity, and in league with the spirits, their new chief has supplied the people: wheat and the ovum flower. It's said that, with these two plants, the people can steal away their pain and frustration whenever it strikes, instantly forgetting their troubles through smoke and elixirs, while also supplying a form of food that will allow them to stop using their time unproductively gathering foods and medicines in the forest. The 'dreamer smoke' of the ovum

flower is so effective, it's said, that most of the former medicines have become defunct, much like the old ways of life that advocated their use. Most of the younger people have bought into these facts, with a popular belief being that Zande is a type of visionary in touch with the spirits of a future people inviting the Mahwahn to join them on the next stage of existence. But not everyone believes this.

Many amongst the older generation have recently grown so frustrated with what they call 'the dishonor' that they openly defy the new ways, several even recently having rounded-up the unsupervised youth and disappeared into the forest to make new shelters and preserve the partnership with Great Mother, something that hasn't gone unnoticed by those cultivating power through their share in the new ways. Diqche, in fact, has come to call this action 'desertion,' and has begun circulating the idea through his men, who speak of it to all, that, should such desertion become acceptable, the result will be much as what one sees during the playing of a popular new game: dominoes.

Diqche says that, should rising desertion go unchecked, there'll be a 'domino effect,' with the deserters falling infectiously into more and more others, until all order is lost, and the new ways devolve back into the old. And so 'the domino effect' has become a buzz term in Modern Mahwah, used to pressure anyone who strays from the new ways of progress into falling back in line, shaming any resisters through the argument that the old ways are dangerous and imperil the people's freedom by making them susceptible to the attacks of the traitor and her pernicious paramour, who wish to keep them weak.

There's even an ever more popular rumor circulating that it's all part of a grand conspiracy; that more of the wolf-wearers are soon to arrive, and the boy that they'd foolishly let into their camp to poison their elders and seduce the traitorous Kylen is using her, and corrupting what she

learned through her honored father, to turn the animals of the forest against them in order to weaken them to the point where they can't defend themselves against the coming invasion. One of Diqche's men even ran into Modern Mahwah yesterday morning after having been 'scouting' by canoe for days and reported that he'd seen a pack of the longboats sailing their direction, after which The Makers, weapons suppliers to the League of Defense, already a bustle of activity, saw an even more rapid rise in membership, as well as a third of the League setting out north on weapon-laden canoes to meet the hostiles in a 'preemptive attack,' arguing that it would be better to kill them at sea *before* they could land on Mahwahn shore and do any damage to the people, which was inevitable, as they're obviously mindless, uncivilized savages bent on conquering, murdering, raping and enslaving the people.

As Zande passes through the quiet old village with its few traditional holdovers and climbs up to Modern Mahwah, he's met by a furor. Seeing Madum and Diqche arguing on the perimeter again, standing next to one of the vertical spikes, attempting to keep their squabble as private as possible, but failing, as this fight is more heated than the others he's witnessed in their jostling for power, Zande's reflex is to attack them both; to end all illusion of order right then and there, and be done with the whole affair of trying to manage Kezlan's vision of the future. He's grown weary of the role, and of the constant ups and downs, the euphoric bloody risings and the crashing, bloodless starvation, and being afraid of the sun, and hiding in his hole, all the while losing the capacity to reset his mind on a levelheaded plane so as to continue his titular role of chief.

Approaching the two of them, it takes all his remaining will to maintain the semblance of civility, as all he can think about is what their blood would taste like. Remembering what it was like to sink his fangs into Padam and his friend

as they looted his old dwelling, fighting over the sword of the young wolf-wearer, he recalls how strong and euphoric he felt for hours afterward. But he also remembers what it was like to crash down off of this high, feeling as though he was the walking dead, and how every time he's tasted blood since he's met with the same sensation, the gap between euphoria and misery continuously shrinking. It's only the memory of this horrible sensation, of crashing even further than he'd risen, and of being willing to do whatever it takes to taste more of Kezlan, she whose blood is the only blood that imparts a longer lasting effect, that restrains him at this very moment, the bickering couple gnawing at the fraying end of his gradually dying nerves.

"...she's making us look bad," he hears Diqche say as he approaches, the couple falling silent upon noticing him.

"Well, what's the issue this time?," he demands of them.

"My mother," Madum offers.

"She's gathered up some of the children, and a few of the remaining elders, and they've headed off into the forest," Diqche reports, hanging his head. "They've betrayed us."

"It's not *betrayal!*," Madum objects. "She's just... stubborn. She was raised on the old ways. She can't let them go."

"But she's creating problems by recruiting others to her... *rebellion*, or whatever we should call it. How can we build Modern Mahwah if we're warring with such atavists?"

"She means well, I swear it!," Madum attests, fearing for her mother's life. "She just keeps going on and on about how we've lost our medicine, and how the people are becoming sick, and how the spirits of the mountain, forest and sea have gone silent because we no longer give thanks or pay homage or care enough to heed the Great Mother... how we've forgotten that we're *Her* children first."

Please, just bring her back and I'll convince her. *Please*," her eyes well. "You know how she's been since Dad died."

"It looks like they left last night," Diqche adds. "Sorry Chief. I should've noticed. I've just been busy tracking the traitor."

"And? Have you made any progress?"

"Yes. But..."

"What?"

Diqche narrows his eyes at Madum, gesturing with his head towards the interior of Modern Mahwah.

"Fine. I'll go back to entertaining your men. But you better not hurt her! And you better come grab Pente. He won't leave. He just keeps smoking and drinking and demanding the company of every woman he sees. I'm sick of it!"

Madum heads off in a huff. Zande never takes his eyes off of Diqche, having lost the ability to pretend to care about Madum's worries, refusing to play caregiver or counselor.

"So? Kylen's trail?"

"Well, we've done as you said and found where they were on the ridge near the bear den. But we're having trouble narrowing our search from there. And the animals..."

"What? Stop stalling."

"Well, we can't find many anymore. It's like they're hiding, or they fled to someplace else. And... they seem to *know* they're being hunted. It's like they've become... *craftier*, somehow... some of my defenders say that they're afraid to follow the tracks of predators now, because they're... leading them into traps... like they're purposely leading them to larger predators. And the pack of wolves from the mountains has gotten more aggressive. One of my men

says it's being led by a new alpha... the largest wolf he's ever seen, his face slashed like he survived a fight with something bigger... like a mountain lion or a bear. And..."

"What? Spit it out, for Creator's sake!"

"There's something... *e/se* out there."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Bandu. He's one of our best trackers. He brings back more pelts than anyone. Well... he *used to*. Now he's useless. He just sits in his wigwam all day, rocking back and forth and mumbling about some demon in the forest."

"I don't have time for this, Diqche. You said you wanted to be the League leader. It's your issue now. Deal with it."

"Yes, Chief."

"And find Wendah and bring her and the children back. Kill them if you have to; if they refuse to return of their own volition. You're right about that, we can't accept desertion."

"Madum won't like that... she may..."

"Again, that's not my problem. Their disloyalty endangers us all. It makes others think that they don't have to contribute to progress, and that they can do anything with impunity. It makes us look weak. Speaking of which, I need you to keep circulating rumors of sightings of the invaders."

"Okay..."

"When your men return from the north sea have them bring proof... which you can collect from the old wolf-wearers' camp. Send some defenders there to collect some of their things, and as soon as the crew at sea returns have them carry those things around and show them to people and tell their harrowing tale of being out at sea... have them

say that they took those things from the wreck of one of their ships that they burned, but that the rest of their fleet escaped into the bay... or something like that. And make sure your men know *why* we're saying that... so that we're prepared when they *do* come... and tell them I had another vision of invasion last night. It'll be bigger than I thought."

Diqche furrows his brow.

"Got all that?"

"Yes, Chief."

"And while you're handling that, I have to do your job for you and find Kylen. The longer she's out there with that boy practicing their witchcraft, the more dangerous they become. Pick three men to come with me this evening."

"Yes, Chief."

Diqche is locked in place, contemplating.

"Now, Diqche."

Hurrying off to give his orders and collect his three groups, thinking of who's most trustworthy and thus best to collect the items from the burned camp without blabbing about their true provenance, and who's best trained so as to accompany Zande and ably perform the hunt without making him look like an ineffectual trainer and leader to the chief, who seems to be losing it, and is thus becoming even more dangerous than before, and who amongst the defenders is the most convincing, so as to bring back Wendah and company without having to kill them and provoke Madum's ire, Zande stops him in his tracks:

"Oh, and Diqche."

"Yes, Chief?"

“I better not return later and find out that you failed to bring that meddlesome woman back here. Trust me when I say that you don’t want to have to explain yourself to our benefactor. She’s *far* less patient and... *gentle* than I am.”

“Yes Chief,” he says, the mention of the mysterious, divine gift-giver giving him chills. ‘I’d better retrieve her myself.’

Minutes later Zande and three defenders march uphill towards the ridge leading into the heart of the forest. Close behind, Diqche and three more men follow them, finding that Wendah and the footsteps of the little ones mirror the same trajectory until, just past the bear den, peeling off and heading downhill, the two groups dividing, Diqche and company heading south downhill, Zande and his crew continuing along the ridge east, towards the mountain. As the vegetation grows denser, finding anything that looks like a fresh track becomes near impossible, the movement of the foursome becoming a crawl as they wade their way through the brush, Zande becoming ever more frustrated as his three helpers nervously look for nonexistent signs, fearing what may befall them should they fail in their duty, for amongst the rumors reinforcing his power are frightful stories of a new spirit from the sea bequeathing him power, and whom sucks the life from anyone disappointing her.

The quest continues through the night, the nerves of the men accompanying Zande becoming ever more agitated, he shooting them with occasional looks of doom to add to their impetus. As twilight finally climes up from behind the mountain, the sky strewn with pastel streaks of red, pink and orange, Zande hears the howl of a wolf from far off, high above them. His pride affronted by the territorial cry, and frustrated by the continual inability to find what he covets, Zande gives up on Kylen and Cub for the moment, thinking: ‘I’m sick of those animals controlling this land!’

“Come with me,” he commands, removing his double-sided obsidian axe from his belt. “I’m going to find out what you all are so afraid of. Let’s see this mighty alpha wolf!”

“But, Chief,” one of his three followers meekly resists, “they’re way up there, why disturb them?”

“They’re under the spell of the traitor. They’re in our way. Do you want to be under threat from their evil forever?”

“No, I just...”

“Fine. Go back and tell Diqche you’re a coward. And while you’re at it you can grab your stuff and head into the forest and be a deserter with the old people and the children.”

“No... I didn’t mean.”

But Zande isn’t listening. He’s going to bring something back to his queen tonight that will be rewarded with a luscious batch of bloody brew, one way or another. She’s spoken of the ‘new pack,’ and how they’re acolytes for her imperious mother, and knows that they’ll do just the trick. Marching straight at the peak jutting straight up into the dusky sky like a stone-carved knife stabbing the heavens, the climb is arduous. Having recently fed, he’s strong, even stronger than the men, despite the fact that they spend their days, and have spent most of their lives, actively exploring and climbing and rowing and constructing. The path steepens, but Zande hardly notices, and he realizes that he just needs to move through the night air, feeling its invigoration of his adulterated flesh, if even for the last time, moving away from everything that he’s controlled by.

Then, as they rise over a rocky escarpment and reach a level space about halfway up the mountain, his three accompanying warriors struggling to keep up, a strange odor suddenly invades his nostrils, both foul and familiar. He knows the smell... he’s been smelling it ever since the

insatiability came over him, when he was first going through blood withdrawals, not long after his first night with Kezlan in her spired obsidian fortress at sea. It smells like... *him*. It reeks as he does, and as the cave beneath the cliffs reeks, the stink accumulating and sitting on and in and around him everywhere he goes, unmistakable, unavoidable, like a deep-rooted rot that just won't complete its deconstruction, leaving behind a deep, lingering decay.

'Maybe *that's* why I'm up here,' he thinks. 'I just needed the mountain air for a while. I needed the stink to subside. I need it so badly that I'm willing to feed these fools to the wolves, and wouldn't much mind if they ate me as well.'

That's when, still moving forward, he realizes that he just crossed into something. Looking around him, his vision suited to the dark, the others stumbling into the space, he sees that he's stepped into a perfectly level, circular opening circumscribed with stacks of obsidian stones. And the ground upon which he treads, though level, seems irregular in the density of dirt beneath him, some of it well compacted and supporting him, while in other spots it seems as if it'll give way and swallow him into a hole.

Stooping down to examine one such sinking space, the dirt is loose, so he starts digging, until one of the others comes upon the outermost stack of stones and calls out to him:

"No, Chief! Don't! This is the Forbidden Graveyard!"

He holds the other two men back. One of whom asks:

"The what?"

"Did you *ever* listen to the elders' stories? The stacks of black stones set in a circle? No? This is where they buried the victims of the nightwalkers, to keep their infected flesh from spreading. They set fire to the victims, and buried

their remains high up on the mountain where no one would come upon the burned bodies and spread the contagion.”

“What? What do you mean?,” one tracker asks another.

“The Wendigo, you fool! The eaters of the dead!”

“C’mon... that’s just a story to keep kids from climbing the mountain and being eaten alive, like we’re about to be.”

As Zande listens to the three of them, thinking that the story sounds familiar, like something Wahuchu once told him, of one of the oldest stories, what he called ‘original evil,’ he keeps digging. Little scares him now. He senses that his own fate is far more wretched than anything this place could offer, granting a silver lining of fearlessness.

Then, his hand, itself a bony extension more and more resembling claws, touches something cold and coarse, *bone*, and his mind is overtaken. In an exploding flash that takes over his consciousness he sees a massive black cat, like an overgrown mountain lion, many times the size of the few mountain lions that he’s seen in his lifetime, its eyes jet black with glowing red dots for pupils, its enormous paws ending in razor sharp, obsidian claws. It’s in a steaming cave stacked with bodies in various states of disarticulation. And Zande can sense that the cave stretches into a seemingly interminable labyrinth of humid underground spaces; hallways connecting caverns of every conceivable shape and size. Then hearing the sound of voices far off, the beast roars, its incisors like Kezlan’s just before she sinks them into one of her bats, or into the neck of her young servants. And then the beast, its ears pointed towards the distant voices, creeps in that direction.

Then another flash, and the great black, cave-dwelling cat is surrounded by men wielding weapons and torches, and it fights back, slashing at several of its assailants, and attempts to jump over them, killing and maiming many in

the process. But the wall of attackers continues to push forward at it, and it's pushed back and back until it falls into a deep crevasse, and is wedged there, trapped, the opening into which it was forced then sealed by a stone three times the height of those pushing it into place.

Trapped in the crevasse, it tries to wriggle and claw itself free, but can't manage to pull itself up. And it's stuck there for a long, long time... Zande can *feel* the time, as though it's interminable. But the beast doesn't die, it only grows thinner and more frail, until finally a rumbling deep beneath it, shaking the entire space, further cracks the rocky wedge in which it's stuck, and it falls through. Weak, it tumbles and rolls, deeper and deeper, the heat slowly singeing its flesh. Unable to climb up, it follows an instinct further down, and down, Zande can feel the deep inner force pulling it down, until it enters a perfectly spherical space. Crawling into the trough of the sphere, it curls up and lays there, in the completely silent stillness, awaiting death.

Then another flash, and way back up where the great cat was first imprisoned, the stone sealing the opening of the endlessly-stretching catacombs is pushed aside. Screaming, a dozen men are pushed in, and the opening is sealed behind them. Time passes, and the men, unable to see and sensing little, grow weaker, until, driven mad by hunger and darkness, preventing death by dehydration by licking the drops condensing on the rock, they begin to fight amongst themselves, bashing one another with any loose stones that they can find, survival requiring the eating of the dead. Then the entrance is opened again, and more yelling, and more men are dropped in, and the evil struggle continues. Those who hide and refuse to fight are the first to fall and be eaten by the others. This goes on, for how long Zande can't be sure, but it feels like years, the trapped men in a constant fight to keep from being killed and eaten, many begging for mercy, a few killing

themselves by bashing their own heads against the rock, using their last ounce of control to prevent their murders.

Then another flash, and from deep beneath them the trapped men hear the most horrible of shrieks, so shrill and alien that it frightens them even more than the prospect of being consumed by the other survivors. And more sounds, like the purr of a feline, but deeper, more resonant, and a scratching sound so strident that, though the survivors cover their ears, it penetrates all the way through them, as if clawing at their eardrums. And they can feel something amongst them, and, for the first time in longer than they can remember, there's a slight light coming in fleeting streaks of red passing by like miniature shooting stars through the constantly dripping, dank darkness, always accompanied by the sound of something in the air, like leaves giving way to sudden, violent gusts of wind, an ungodly storm swirling through the space around them.

Then another flash, and Zande can feel a rising enmity so immense and ghastly that merely killing isn't nearly enough to quench its vitriol. Then a bolt of red light followed by the sound of screaming as one of the survivors, fighting over the flesh of a former comrade with a few of the others, is suddenly swept up off the stone floor and hurled high above them into the blackness. Again and again this happens, the invisible roof of the cavernous labyrinth seeming to bleed in response, the bodies suspended somewhere above them until, a short time later, falling back to the ground, their necks punctured, their bodies so cold to the touch that those who remain refuse to eat them.

The surviving prisoners are so terrified that they forget their fear of one another, and climb back up to the sealed entryway, pressing themselves against the sealing stone, the nightmare forcing them to forget their fight. Still the evil befalls them, one man at a time snatched up off the ground

with such speed and ferocity that their necks snap from the whiplash, and they're sucked into the air without a scream.

And another flash. Only a half-dozen half-insane men remain, huddled together, holding one another like children, when another deep rumble comes up from beneath them, and cracks open a small space above the large stone blocking their exit just enough that, through the escaping steam wafting through light barely making its way into their prison, but which is blinding to men who've grown accustomed to perpetual darkness, it appears that they can squeeze through, if only they can climb high enough to get to it. But just as they begin working together for the first time in longer than they can remember, standing upon one another's shoulders to give even one of them a chance to escape the horror, something flies past them and through the opening. They can all feel it. The evil has left them!

But the relief is short lived, as from down in the darkness into which they can now just barely see, another sound is heard, hollow and cold, like the calving of the glaciers that the oldest of them heard breaking up the land before they all retreated into the caves, with their parents and the rest of the tribe, to escape the cold. And up from the depths come those men whom had survived by feasting on the fallen before being lifted off the ground, soon to fall back down dead. *But they're not dead.* In the dim light they look like walking skeletons with skin as white and cold as snow.

Hunched over, with lifeless blue eyes, smelling of rotting decay, they come, one, and then another, until all that Zande can sense are their otherworldly sounds, and the screaming of the survivors in response. Then, *silence.* And with one more flash another earthquake comes, cracking the mountain open someplace else, and out seeps the undead curse, the drained cannibals dripping down into the emerging forest growing up from the melting icescape.

Coming to, Zande's back in the graveyard, his three men yelling to get his attention as they slowly back away downhill, pointing with their weapons at various points in the surrounding space at something that circles, but which refuses to enter past the stacked stones: *the wolves*. In the meager light of the stars and moon only Zande can tell how many of them there are, his men mostly left to defend themselves based upon the encroaching sound of the near silent stalkers. It's the biggest pack he's ever seen, as if numerous packs from around the peninsula have merged into one. All but one of the three-dozen wolves focuses on the men outside the stones who, knowing they're outmatched, turn to run towards the tree line so as to climb to momentary safety, but they're cut off and torn to pieces.

Hearing his men scream to the end of their dying breaths, Zande focuses on the alpha, the only one in the pack who's focused on him, a wolf almost twice the size of the others, as if having come from another bloodline entirely, with half its face slashed through a blind eye. That's when he remembers watching the large wolf-wearer above the alien camp being mauled by the mother bear seeking out her wailing cub, and he momentarily wonders if, perhaps, this wolf was made by his own karmic cause, set upon him to repay the wrong done to the invaders, as if they'd called upon their ancestors to summon a beast of recompense. Dismissing the thought, he thinks that he should stay within the stones, for, like his deceased men, the wolves refuse to enter. But looking above the mountain, he sees that the earliest signs of the rising sun have just begun to set the sky ablaze with magenta, and he can't afford to stay here.

While his fear of death is slight, being mauled to death isn't the way to go. So Zande treads downhill, cautiously crossing the ring of stacked stones, seeking the best route to run in retreat, hoping the pack will be satisfied enough with gorging themselves upon his men to leave him be. But

just as he's about to run the alpha wolf dashes and leaps in front of him, letting out a growl, and yet keeps his distance, sniffing the air. 'He's not going to attack me,' Zande realizes as, stepping towards the great, snarling wolf, it backs up in response. Continuing his watchful, downhill tread, he's soon surrounded by the pack, all of whom continually take in the air, keeping their separation.

'They don't like the smell of me,' he thinks, remembering that it was a familiar and foul scent that had drawn him to the graveyard, and that was on the air therein, and that surrounds him like a putrid cloud, clinging to his decaying flesh. 'My damnation is my salvation, for today at least.'

Now sprinting, fearing the rising sun more than the pack of predators, the wolves follow in parallel lines, running alongside him at a distance of a few body lengths, almost as though he's one of the pack, a strange feeling in itself for one whose heart has slowly sickened with his withdrawal from the tribe; a people whose fellowship that, until he betrayed them and their leaders, he took entirely for granted. The westerly downhill run, at first upon the stones of the upper elevation, gradually giving way to wildflowers and shrubs sporadically set in swatches of earth, then into denser and denser forest, continues with the wolves running beside him for over an hour, until, just south of the ridge that separates the southern river valley from the precipitous slopes leading down to the bay on the northern side, the sun soon to meet the horizon behind him, he turns to look at the wolves, and they're gone.

Surprised by this, Zande momentarily loses his focus on where he's going and, tripping over a rotting log, falls into a face first roll before slamming into a tree. Shaking his already pounding head, the feeling of a vice upon his brain being the first sign of losing the force of Kezlan's most recent gift of blood, he stands to see that he's beside the remnant of a once majestic tree, most of it charred, a great

hollow set in its center. Hearing something coming, he feels no fear at first, especially after seeing the way that the wolves reacted to him. But then he starts taking in his surroundings. In the first glimmers of morning light he realizes that the tree is streaked with red, painted with blood. A robust network of vines rise up from the earth to engulf the tree, climbing up to where... 'Good Creator, are those bodies hanging upside down from the branches?'

Diving into the dense brush forming a ring around the tree, the terrible exhilaration an almost welcome reminder that he's still alive, he just manages to conceal himself when someone, or *something*, emerges from the brush opposite him. It's a cross between one of Kezlan's bats and a man, its humanoid torso covered in black fur, its ears pointed up and rotating around, its arms great muscular appendages framed with black leather attached to its torso. It's dragging something in its two clawed hands, its elongated digits ending in piercing black claws that've punctured all the way through the lower portions of the jaws of two dead men, its thumbs set into the mouths of the men, dragging the dead by their jaws, their faces fixed in horror, their necks broken.

With a series of swift, precise movements Zande watches as the creature mounts and climbs backwards up the tree with its lower limbs while holding onto the two dead men, one of whom he recognizes as Diqche. Springing up the tree, leaping from one limb to the next, it soon has both of the bodies enmeshed in the vines, positioning them to hang upside down. The creature then jumps upon and wraps itself around Diqche, cocooning itself around him with its wings, hanging upside down upon him and biting into his neck, allowing gravity to facilitate the drinking of his blood, the sound of the sucking and spurts dripping down the charred wood filling Zande with dread, simultaneously sucking away the little life and spirit that he still had in him.

Then, perhaps because his heart is racing and is sensed, or perhaps because he takes too big of a breath, the creature raises its downward-pointing head and looks straight at him. Its eyes are like those of the creature he'd just seen in his flashes in the graveyard, yet also different. No white in them, stark black except for a glowing red orb in the center, as if a black hole grew so dense that it split in the center, opening a portal to Hell, Zande knows from something in the shape of the creature's face, and from something *behind* the eyes, deep down in whatever fraction of its former form remains in it: *it's his old teacher, Wahuchu!* The pure terror is too much for him, as his fear and the forceful revisiting of his treachery invade his breast and dislodge what remains of his heart, and with scarcely the strength and courage to wonder *how* it could be, he turns and sprints up the ridge, far more afraid of this thing than the rising light, or even the scorn of Kezlan in the cave that he now *has* to reach. Even if Wahuchu *hadn't* become this demonic beast, he can't face him, for, of all beings born of Mother, he most represents his own shame.

Climbing as fleetly as his waning strength will permit, he hopes that Wahuchu will regard him as the wolves had and decide not to pursue him, but this is not to be, for, refusing to turn and look, he yet hears it chasing him down. *But not from the ground.* It leaps from tree to tree, in between them sounding much as the sails of the ship of the wolf-wearers had as they approached land, when he and his men hid in in the fringe of the bayside tree line. It's directly above and behind him, then up and off to the right, then up to the left.

Even with his superhuman speed, Zande can feel the predator inching closer with every glide, knowing that it's angling to pounce upon him from above. Sprinting with everything he has, he runs a direct line towards the cliffs and the sandstone cave, running near to but not entering Modern Mahwah, then through the village, abandoned but

for a few of the elders, who watch him sprint by in amazement, the sounds of the arial hunter here fading, giving him the sense that, perhaps, he's lost the creature, and that it refuses to enter the village for some reason.

Refusing to slow his stride, thinking of the protection of the cave and his queen, Zande spills onto the beach with such speed that he nearly head-plants into the waves. The sun just now streaking through the drizzling morning clouds, he's closing in on the mouth of the cave when he notices that, above, the softly lit morning sky is teems with the whirlwind of bats. Glancing at the clifftop, he realizes that they're circling the creature climbing sideways along the soft sandstone just beneath the bluff a hundred or so feet above him, angling towards him, then letting go and, arms outstretched, dropping down alongside the brood of bats.

Zande dives into the cave just before the beast crashes into the edge of the wave-break behind him. Crawling forward, he sees his queen crouched in the back of the cave, twirling her sword, and he bear-crawls between her feet, clinging to them in shock, his entire body quaking with fear. Looking up at her, he sees that she isn't looking at him, but at the creature entering in behind him, his arrival heralded by the cacophonous cry of her countless cronies.



Upon the Four Winds whispers from every corner of the peninsula come into Kylen, the worrisome, angry and confused words sweeping in from her fractured tribe to the west, intermingling with the suddenly intelligible chattering of the assaulted animals seeking sanctuary due to her peoples' unnatural new ways. But not just the Mahwahn ways. For the creatures of the forest converge upon her in a mass retreat, and not only from the direction of her own derelict village and its nearby reorganization, but from all around her, as if all the tribes of the bay are caught by the same current collapsing in on them from every angle. Where once the inner forest was a quiet cathedral, it now harbors every form of life, predators and prey alike, called into safety by her spirit, in league with her mother, and the Great Mother, the feminine forces guiding life to safety.

Kylen's inner force is evolving into a form mirroring that of the Golden Teachers, for she's now one with its mycelium, reaching out to every form of plant life and, through them, and through their consumption, every form of animal life. By her own consumption, and by making them medicines, absorbing their knowledge through their rooted intertwine with the Spirit Cavern, Kylen can feel the wisdom of the rooted beings bound across every inch of the body of her Great Mother, sensing what they sense of those around them, communing with all the flora and fauna to which She gives birth, they who are as the hair follicles upon Her skin.

And echoing down from the mountain to the east, broadcast across its array of perfectly rebounding rocks, come the promises of protection of her mother, aided by Yawe's father, one who, once sensed to be an invader, as though a pathogen provoking the immune response of the land, now feels to her as much a part of Great Mother as any other being. Upon making the discovery of his father's survival and evolution, Kylen whispers to her comatose paramour that his father yet lives, and has become wilded

much as her own mother. And yet the loving, binding force of the land from which he, and her mother, are inseparable, faces the threat of her own corrupted family.

With equal parts horror and elation Kylen senses someone, or something, to the south that feels, on some level, like her own fallen father. The bear cub that she and Yawe have adopted shares her senses, and when those senses fall upon her lost father, the cub, who'd been laying between Yawe's legs, suddenly springs to life and runs from the Spirit Cavern and out of the ancient sanctuary, as if following this shared sense. Kylen barely notices him leave, for she's consumed by her heightened feelings, and her worry over Yawe, and doesn't know if she wants what she feels of her father to be true or not, even as she doesn't entirely trust it, thinking it may well be witchcraft.

For, whatever it is that she's sensing, if it *is* him then it both is and it isn't, and thereby exists on the bridge between the mortal and spirit realms in a form that she can't quite penetrate or fathom. She's long had the same muddled sense of Kezlan, the twin she's only recently come to sense more clearly, she whom, until recent transformative events and tapping deeper into the taproot of Great Mother, she sensed only in a nebulous manner, like a whisp of cloud floating on the periphery of her perception.

While no longer shaking or thrashing about, the man she now calls Yawe remains lost within himself. Feverish and perpetually sweating, she's stripped him down and done everything she can to reinforce his fight, employing the cornucopia of medicines bequeathed to the Mahwah by the Great Mother, their lessons learned and passed on over the ages by a successive series of medicine men and women. His head now supported by his wolf hide, she's become transfixed by the amulet that he wears around his neck, a perfect metallic circle etched with a strange symbol that she can't help but wonder at the meaning of, sensing

that, though it's from *his* land, it doesn't represent a threat, but an ally. It gleams even more brightly than had his lost sword, so much so that when the rare ray of light pierces the overlording canopy she's temporarily blinded by the light that reflects off of it, the amulet amplifying the light.

And so, with continued support from the fairies emerging from the Tree of Life and Death at various points in the day and night, as if responding to some invisible, inaudible series of signals, and listening to the inner voice that's gained clarity through her absorption of the forces of being surrounding her, Kylene does what she can to fortify Yawe in his internal struggle, cursing Kezlan for targeting him. She keeps a continuously brewing tea made of the yellow-blossomed, pistil-bursting Rectification Flower, the ruby red berries formed from the Heart Flower and the leaves of the Red Cedar, the last of which, the foliage of what the Mahwah call the Mother Tree, best enhances her connection to Great Mother, especially in league with the Golden Teachers that open the third eye to the realities buried beneath the realm of ready perception. The confluent forces of the flowers, berries and cedar leaves form a tonic of great fortitude. This she administers to both herself and Yawe, willing him to survive and become one with the Mahwah, urging him during her administrations:

“Do not fight back. Do not try to return. Do not paddle against the current. That's your fear. Let go, and let the current carry you through the eye, to be reborn as Yawe.”

And though he can't hear her words, he senses the spirit of them, like a warm, unintelligible whisper shining down from above as the spirit of the sun, as if the only source of warmth and light set between him and eternity. For within himself Yawe is now descending a narrow, mist-strewn circular staircase with no inner railing, the stairs half his body length in width. Pressed against the outer wall, the fear of heights that has haunted him since childhood, going

back to his fall from the Fable Tree that Ketchum told him never to climb, have set upon him here like a sinister force. He's been here for longer than he can remember, though he knows not where that is, and has only once managed to lean far enough to peer into the bottomless chasm in the center of the staircase. The endless pit is the pupil of the all-seeing eye, collecting the moisture constantly dropping down from within a great tree towering high above him, the staircase the hollow innards of its endlessly towering trunk.

Somewhere far below, echoing up to him, is the sound of rushing water. But it's not the sound of a single river. It's something *far* more powerful, as if every river in the world is down there collecting all the waters passing through and around the planet and combining them into one unstoppable force. He senses that at the innermost core of the pupil lies the foremost point of condensation, where all flowing currents of consciousness converge into one, the confluence of the creation of everything in existence squeezed out of a point of pure collapsing gravity bursting into the brainstem of Universal Mind, thence springing into spacetime and every individualization of mind and matter.

This is the upside-down underworld, the overturned hour glass, up from the bottom of which flows all the seas and rivers that shaped the world, surging up through the northernmost part of the planet, coursing through and around every continent, pouring endlessly forth from the center of the earth to make the currents that carry he and his brethren to every corner of the planet, but only should they demonstrate the skill and reverence to master those currents, and should they remain on the good side of their seafaring ancestors guiding them from above, nudging the winds just enough to keep them from crashing and capsizing, so as to avoid being swallowed up by the same force, and end up here, where one is both alive and dead.

He's not sure how he got here, or when, or *who* he is, or even *why* he's descending the staircase, only that a force beyond reckoning is sucking him into the pupil at its center. In the recesses of his memory he hears the voices of ghostly figures telling him of a place between worlds, and he thinks that that's where he's somehow been delivered.

Dropping ever further into the chasm, along the wall which he hugs, at times with desperation when great gusts of wind swirl up from below and threaten to peel him away from it, and suck him down into the great current collapsing into all of eternity, he regularly comes upon hallow niches set into the wall, each no more than half his height, and only a couple of feet deep, all with tiny windows punched into them, sometimes in the shape of a circle, sometimes a triangle, sometimes a square, through which he views scenes that seem familiar, though he knows not why. And there he tucks himself, shaking for fear of the fall, sometimes glancing through the hole at the odd events.

Peering through the first, circular window, the appearance is much as the pupil of the eye below. It's as dark as dark can be, the total absence of light and sound, of everything. Then down from above descends a swirl of icy wind, and, at the same time, up from below ascends a smoking swirl of flame, and they converge into a whirlwind, the two opposing forces spinning around one another until crashing together at the center and exploding with a horrible scream, around which a mouth is formed, and then a head, then a body, arms and legs, a giant thereby being born, filling the whole of Yawe's perception. A terrifying creature in voice and stature, with eyes projecting pure chaotic destructiveness, the massive being has icy skin, but a boiling, beating heart that soon begins melting the icesheets encasing his frigid façade, the water pooling more and more, out from which crawls an enormous cow.

Dripping with water, its utters immediately full to bursting, the cow straddles the colossus, whom suckles her milk, growing stronger, whilst from the flanks of the dripping cow another pool is formed, then two more smaller pools beside it. From each of these pools spring manlike beings, the greatest seeming familiar to Yawe, as though important to a history that he can't quite recall. Muscular, with keen grey eyes and a great flowing mane of hair, he whispers with the other two, whom must be his brothers, before the three of them converge upon the giant and, to earsplitting screams, tear him limb from limb. And as his body parts are thrown to the ground the whole world forms from them, his blood pooling into the oceans and rivers, his muscles becoming the land, his hair the trees and plants, his skull expanding into the sky, spotted with clouds from his brain.

Continuing his descent, skimming the outer wall before peering through the second, triangular window, Yawe sees four miniature men standing in a cross formation, together holding what remains of the massacred giants' skull above them whilst dancing in a circle, their feet splashing in the blood and guts of the dead giant. As they dance, around them sprouts and grows the first two trees, stately and gleaming with green, their first fallen branches becoming the rough forms of the first two people, whom the miniature men then carefully craft into completed forms, hammering, shaping and polishing them into the first man and woman.

The original couple then goes to work fencing-in the paradise in which they've found themselves. For from the giants' continuously outward-flowing blood intermingling with his earth-forming flesh sprout his progeny, other giants whom, though not of the same size or ferocity of their forebearer, are nevertheless fearsome creatures, the first human couple trembling upon hearing their shouts from the edge of their existence, tirelessly working to fence

and fortify their inner realm as the miniature men that fashioned them dig tunnels and retreat into the earth.

Through the third, square window Yawe sees a village set at the very center of the human realm. A black-cloaked woman with dark, enchanting eyes enters and wanders through the village. Visiting the saloons, shops and homes of a joyful people, all of whom appear to be connected to one another in a great spirit of community, she whispers to each of them, and compels them to tell her their deepest desires. She then casts spells that bring those dreams to life. Some are granted great riches, others are granted the affections of those that they desire, others gain fame through the reception of otherworldly charms and abilities. And soon their realized dreams reach the point where the advantages that they grant become disadvantages for others, and the communal spirit of the village is shattered.

In an uproar that almost turns into internecine warfare, the villagers eventually realize that it's the cloaked wanderer who's responsible for their recent divisions. Seizing her, they condemn her as a witch and burn her at the stake, only to find that she arises from the ashes and returns to the town, seeking out others whom would share with her their deepest desires. Three times they seize and burn her to ash, and three times she returns, until the villagers realize that they must seek the source from which she sprang, and they send armed envoys to her own village set far across the land, lying on the periphery of the human realm, the envoys demanding that the villagers change their ways, and not send the treacherous into their midst.

Refusing to constrain their vagabond customs, war erupts between the two peoples, the deception and magic innate to the outsiders used against the iron, shield and solidarity of the insiders. For years the war wages until, weary of a battle of even forces and losses, the two sides call a truce. In order to honor their mutual accord, each side gifts the

other with hostages captured from other lands, the leaders of each side then spitting into a cauldron to seal their pact.

Almost slipping and falling into the void as he approaches the fourth niche, Yawe steadies himself and, peering through the fourth window, he sees the same cauldron as before, used to seal the peace between the two warring tribes. The spittle from the two starkly different peoples is mixed with the berries of the summer harvest, coming together to reveal the magic of fermentation, the first brew becoming a new type of being, a man of immense mind. Embodying the knowledge and wisdom of both tribes, this man is yet wiser still than their combined comprehensions, for he deciphers what was missing from the gaps in the knowledge of each, and so yields great wisdom from the space between them, and thereby fills the gaps, forming the first compendium. So wise is he that his counsel is sought far and wide, even by those who dwell beneath the earth, the dwarves whom helped fashion the first people.

Emerging from beneath the earth, two of the dwarves sculpt a home from the side of a hill, knowing that the great counselor now wanders the land openly dispensing his wisdom to all whom seek it. Eventually coming to the home, the counselor heeds their call and dips his head into the home, happy to share with them all that he knows. But, for all his knowledge, the counselor knows not that these dwarves have grown envious of the advances of man, they whom they'd formed, and thereby feel entitled to the secrets of. Remembering the first giant, and that his blood burst forth into the rivers giving life to the whole of the land, and hearing of the fermentation from which the counselor came, they kill him and drain his blood into a series of vats, mixing it with the rich golden honey harvest to make mead.

Drinking of the sweet golden elixir, the inspirations of poetry enter into the dwarves, and where once they were craftsmen building in the dark, they become artists and

thinkers whose minds shine like the midday sun. And yet, despite their sudden advance and joy of light and creation, the dwarves can't fully conceal their dark, deceptive natures, either from themselves or others, and so they keep the secret of mead to themselves, burying the vats beneath their cellar, and also seek other demigods to murder, hoping to absorb further power from their blood.

Overpowering their prudence, these greedy acts bring more interest in them than is wise, attracting the attention of the gods, one of whom, he who's more fond of the first brewed fermentations of mankind than most, hears rumor that the dwarves had killed the wandering counselor and made from him the greatest ferment of all. Coming to their hillside home and seizing them, the god sweeps them out to sea and threatens to drown them until they agree to give up their secret and reveal the location of their hidden cache, thereafter banishing them back to the underworld from whence they came. And though this god too tries to keep the mead for himself, burying it beneath a great mountain, the first god whom sprung with his two younger brothers from the flanks of the cow who'd nursed the first, world-forming giant finds out about the secret and soon relieves the inebriated god of his treasure, believing it belongs to all, thus granting the gift of mead to everyone.

Continuing his descent down the steep, narrow steps, the sound of the rushing water below ringing a bit louder with every step that he takes, Yawe peers through another window, there seeing the witch of the outer clan that had been burned at the stake and returned to life three times. She wanders into the woods, the realm of the giants, and there removes her cloak, revealing herself to be a gorgeous goddess. One of the giants, the first beings striking fear into the hearts of all men, a great builder riding atop a massive black stallion, sees the goddess and is instantly bewitched by her beauty. Asking for her hand in

marriage, she's repulsed, and refuses. Knowing that those of the inner village are protected by the gods whom hold sway over all, the giant goes to the people of the inner village and offers to build them a wall that not even his own enormous brethren may penetrate, knowing that they've long lived in terror of his kind, but only if they'll appeal to their gods to give them the hand of the bewitching goddess in return. Wanting to protect their mortal children, the gods reluctantly agree, but give him an impossible task to prove himself first: he must build the entirety of the wall around the whole town, fast growing into a city, in a single winter, else be entitled to nothing, and suffer divine denunciation.

Knowing that the giant is certain to fail, the gods hover over and watch him construct the wall for what they assume will be zero reward, for no being can accomplish such a monumental task so quickly. Going to work erecting the wall, the gods are shocked to find that the giant's *stallion* possesses unearthly power and stamina, doing most of the work for the giant, hauling towering tree trunks and massive boulders over many miles for the giant to put in place. As the winter draws to a close, with but a few days remaining, the gods are shocked to see that the giant will soon accomplish his task in time, the promised goddess on the verge of rebellion. So another clever goddess amongst those reigning on high, sister to the first gods, developing cleverness in their shadows so as to be able to compete with them for man's favor, takes the giant and stallion into the forest on the pretense of renegotiation.

There, she transforms herself into a fabulous mare, arousing the passion of the giant's stallion, who leaves his giant master and chases the mare deep into the forest, depriving the giant of the means by which he worked so successfully. Finally catching her, the stallion impregnates the goddess in disguise, giving birth to an eight-legged horse who's bequeathed to the goddesses' oldest brother,

the first-born of the gods, who thus comes under her sway, while the giant, who finishes his task a day too late, is rewarded for his efforts by having his head bashed in by a colossal hammer fashioned by the dwarves, wielded by the sly brother of the first-born, and the bewitching goddess whose appeal to man's selfishness caused the first wars is spared from having to marry the lonely giant, and is permitted to continue roaming the mortal realm, looking for more lonely men to bewitch, and selfishness to corrupt.

Upon reaching the next window, Yawe observes the first-born god once again, finding that he's only momentarily pleased by gifts such as the eight-legged horse that comes upon the heels of the fortification of the inner human kingdom. For, above all things, he quests after knowledge and wisdom, and the revelation of the greatest forces of existence, those primordial powers from which he and all things sprang. This drive to understand the mysteries of creation compel him to enter into the tree at the center of the upper realm, where he and his brethren hold their daily counsel; a tree so tall it lives within the clouds, its canopy collecting the snow that falls upon the highest mountains. And into a hollow of the tree he creeps, looking down into a chasm, and an endless staircase... *this very staircase!*

Dropping deeper and deeper into the dripping hollow of the tree the first of the gods descends, with a courage that makes Yawe ashamed of himself. Passing slews of snakes, some of which appear to be eating at the inner trunk, as if gradually burrowing into and weakening the tree, many of which attack him, which he dispatches with swift strikes of his sword, and sneaking around a dragon lying in a deep recess near the base of the great tree, the heat of its breath instantly turning the dripping water to steam so thick that Yawe can scarcely see the god's movement, the god eventually, after many days' descent, reaches a cavern in the lowest reaches. There, the stone

and staircase which had lined the inside of the tree are no more, with only its ageless inner roots remaining, the rushing water below near to deafening, the lowly-lit chamber illuminated but by shimmering blues bounding up from the world-forming currents crashing together below.

Cautiously entering the chamber, for he knows the stories of what dwells there, of the shadowy creature born by the first concessions of the Nothing to the Everything, and whom is said to know all things, the first born god arrives at a well set in the center of the chamber, its waters bubbling up from the world-forming rivers coursing through the full of earthly existence below, and cycled around and above, dripping back down, giving life to all things. Long has the god heard that, if one drinks from the well, one will know all things, just as the spirit whom guards over it does, for it is the water of life; the forever changing, churning receptacle of all the waters of existence flowing into the heart of every human being, each of whom holds this omniscience locked away within them, and spends their lives seeking the key.

Standing over the surface of the well, the first born god attempts to dip his hand into it so as to scoop up and sip some of the water, but as his hand crosses the threshold its downward momentum is halted. And though, by putting all his strength into his attempt to dip his hand into the glimmering blue water bubbling up from below, he can penetrate the surface a few inches, he's unable to dip far enough to actually reach the waters, no matter how hard, or how many times, he tries. Eventually he hears the haunting voice of the creature of ceaseless shadow, the being guarding the foundation of the Tree of Life, whom hovers towards him carrying a horn. The being demands of the god a sacrifice in exchange for the waters of wisdom which he desires: *one of his eyes*. After much deliberation, the god complies, gouging out one of his eyes with his sword and dropping it into the well, upon which the force

field guarding the threshold disappears, and the being offers the god his horn, which the first born dips into the water, imbibing of and absorbing its ageless wisdom.

And upon coming to the next viewport the bravery of the first born god continues. For, from his drinking of the waters of wisdom he hears of a secret alphabet, the provenance of the premiere language, made not by man, but by the symbolization of the forces that formed all of existence, each letter of which is inseparable from the form of the interconnected characteristics of being. He also knows that, for those whom discover and pronounce and inscribe these primordial symbols correctly, the whole of the universe opens up to them, becoming a playground. From the same water he learned that *this* was what was carved up and down the trunk of the Tree of Life which he and his brethren daily gathered around, and which he'd descended within in order to drink of the waters of wisdom, the carvings a mystery which the gods had long wondered at, not least of which because they were only visible under the light of a full moon, and disappeared if and when anyone tried to study them, the first symbols only reappearing when their attention was pointed elsewhere.

The first born god also knows from the absorption of the wisdom of the deepest waters of life that it's only the three fates, three gorgeous maidens said to have hatched from the trunk of the Tree of Life, whom understand and know how to employ this language, using it to carve the destiny of every being, god and mortal, upon its sky-touching trunk. So, sitting at a distance, and shrouding himself with the help of the magic of the goddess whom had caused the first wars with her bewitchment and testing of mortal man, he waits for the light of the full moon, so that the fates shall reappear and reveal the mystery of their inscriptions.

And upon the descent of darkness on the night of the next full moon the three fates peel themselves from the bark of

the tree, and climb up and down it, hanging themselves upside down from its branches one length at a time, and cut themselves, and by their own blood dripping down the trunk its bark made pliable enough for them to carve into it with their daggers. Thinking that he's discovered the secret, the first born god waits for the next full moon, and, again showing his willingness to endure suffering for the sake of knowledge, suspends himself from the tree and cuts himself, his blood running down the tree, mingling with its sap, the symbols carved by the fates revealed a bit at a time, but not for long enough, or clearly enough, for him to decipher their meaning. And as he watches this through his viewport Yawe feels connected to the symbols, sensing that they're a part of past teachings that he's forgotten.

And though the first born god grows weary and thirsty, cutting himself again and again in the attempt to understand the inscriptions, and though his brethren come to his aid, wishing to relieve him of his suffering, he instinctively knows that sacrifice is required of any knowledge of great value, and so he refuses their help, and there he hangs, night after night, day after day, for nine full days and nights, until, at the end of the ninth night, admiring his resolve, the eldest of the three fates takes pity upon him, and peels herself from the tree in his presence. Lovingly embracing him, the oldest of the fates hangs upside down beside him, and stays his blade when he tries to cut himself, and, cutting herself instead, lets the magical symbols shine forth, and overnight teaches him the secrets of its alphabet. But for her betrayal of her oath to keep the meaning of the symbols secret, the ceaseless shadow deprives her of her power to use the first language to form the destinies of man and god, which is why, to this day, the gods, and through their sharing, mankind, possess some measure to alter their fate by demonstrating determination.

As the scene visible through the window dissolves into darkness, Yawe ponders what he's seen, and pensively wonders if he has anywhere near the courage displayed by the first born god whose fortitude he's observed therein, sensing him to be one of his oldest ancestors. He wonders if, in fact, that's why he's here? Is he being tested? Perhaps he's been trapped here for his cowardice, or lack of conviction, or for some other fault demonstrating his unworthiness to follow in the footsteps of such a forebear.

Looking up into the upper reaches of the tree, Yawe shudders at the sense of hanging himself from its limbs, and bleeding himself for nine days and nights. Looking down, the dread is even greater, the thought of plucking out one of his own eyes so as to see the mysteries of the universe. And while he draws nearer to the base of the inner tree, and can already see the rock walls giving way to the inside of its roots, the stone stairs turning to twisted knobs of ruddy brown, the sound of crashing water becoming ever louder, he's not certain if he's more or less afraid now that he has some sense of what's at the bottom, his fear of falling replaced by the idea of a shadow being that'll demand of him a sacrifice that he won't be able to give in order to grant him a way out. The fear and shame, the sense that he isn't nearly man enough to endure the pains of the deity that he's observed, brings to mind a man wearing a wolf hide, leading men into battle, and he finally remembers who he is: *the son of a great Arian clan leader.*

He isn't worthy. Sitting upon the final fringes of the inner stone staircase, his legs dangling over, leaning into the center and staring down into what he'd thought was an abyss, but now thinks is more like a mirror of his own inner disgracefulness, his sorrow soon overwhelms his fear, and he thinks: 'perhaps it would be better to fall to my death.'

At this very moment he hears a growl reverberating down from above, followed by a crashing sound even louder

than the sound echoing up from below, but different: not crashing water, but the sound of stone slamming against stone. Looking up, the largest wolf he's ever seen, with jet black hair, black eyes with pupils of fire, and smoke spilling from his snout, is running down the stairs towards him, a great chain wrapped around his body, tied on the other end to an immense boulder being drug behind him, bouncing down the final stretch of stone stairs with such force that each stair fractures with the weight of its falling mass. Standing, Yawe runs down to the cavernous recess where he'd recently watched the god sneaking his way around the dragon, and, peering into it, there he sees the one-eyed god pulling his sword from the dragon's corpse. *There he is! Not viewed far off through a port, but right in front of him!* Turning to look at Yawe, the god's eye is filled with such fury that it frightens him as much as the wolf.

And so Yawe turns from the cavernous recess pooling with dragon blood and drops down to where the stone gives way to the inner roots of the towering tree. They're far more slippery than the stone stairs, and unlevel, making his continued descent treacherous, slowing his progress. And just as the wolf is crossing the cavern no more than ten feet above him, and shall soon seize him, the first born god bursts through the opening to the cavern and lays siege to the mighty black beast, swinging his sword with such force that, just missing his target, it cracks the chain the wolf is dragging, the down-rolling boulder bouncing off of the wooden walls before dropping through the center of the now rooted stairs, just missing crushing Yawe's head.

Continuing his careful descent, Yawe periodically glances up at the war between god and beast, and as they strike at one another, the god with his sword, the now unbound wolf crashing into the walls and snapping with his snout, those walls begin to fracture, and the whole staircase quakes. And though the god fights the great beast with honor, he's

overmatched, and Yawe watches with horror as the wolf bites off the god's sword-hand, swallowing it whole, the god screaming and swinging with his other hand, futilely punching at the pitiless predator, who, the god's sword momentarily caught in the back of beasts' mouth, holding his jaw ajar, soon snaps it in half and finishes the god off with a quick series of bites, swallowing every bloody bit of the deity. As he does so the staircase shakes harder and, from above, there's a blast of white light, momentarily blinding Yawe, and the water that had been dripping down during his entire descent suddenly ceases dripping, and the mist that had surrounded him is swiftly sucked down towards the base of the staircase, and, a moment later, everything begins to dissolve, such that dissolution overtakes the whole of his perception, the roots below, and the inner bark of the tree, and even the great wolf, all of it melting before his eyes, pulling him into the watery pit.

Sliding down the remainder of the roots, and running to the center where the well sits, the sound of crashing water emanating up from it near to deafening, Yawe finds that it's been sealed with the boulder that had fallen from the once bound beast. Looking up one last time, the white light that had first been but a flash is now filling every inch of the upper reaches, dropping down to subsume the wolf, who disappears in a howling flash, the rest of his perception liquefying. Freezing, he knows that this is it. This is how he'll die, at the base of existence, a shame to himself, a disgrace to his father, and... *something else*... something undone, but calling to him... something warm and nearer to him than anything he's ever known... something that, surprisingly, isn't descending with the perfectly white, consuming light from above, but is rising up from the well.

And as the light drops down into the bottom cavern, with only seconds until it overtakes him, the ceaseless shadow emerges. Creeping towards him, it says nothing, only

places a barely perceivable hand over Yawe's heart. Then, *it smiles*. Yawe isn't sure how he *knows* that the being is smiling, because he can't really see it, but he *senses* it. Keeping one hand on Yawe's chest, in the final moments the being of ceaseless shadow reaches out at the stone covering the well and, touching it, the stone turns to a white marble, which hovers briefly over the well before falling in. Both the force which had sealed the well against the first born god in his vision, as well as the boulder which reinforced that seal, are gone in this, his final moment.

Yawe can feel the force of both of them fall away, and not just from the well, but from his very being, as though some invisible force which has always held him back, and the weight of every burden his existence has ever set upon his shoulders, is gone in an instant. And in this moment, feeling lighter than ever, and sensing true freedom for the first time, Yawe knows that he has a choice: *drop into the waters, or be enveloped by the light*. Taking a deep breath, he plunges into the well headfirst, merging with the water.

Inside the Spirit Cavern, something changes. Kylen can feel the spirit of her family members converge, threatening to destroy one another, fighting for control of Yawe's spirit, as if her twisted father, and sinister sister, and benevolent mother are flowing together into one fracturing force that's more than Yawe, or *anyone*, can take. His body suddenly goes from fiery to frigid, his skin near freezing to the touch, turning blue. And out from the Tree of Life and Death come the fairies, swirling rapidly around him, their movement generating a frictional force in the air, like a warming halo above his head, while Kylen herself flips from trying to cool him down to warm him up, taking his wolf hide out from behind his head and wrapping it around him, and stacking any foliage she can find atop this, and wrapping her own body around him, pulling the large piece of red cedar bark she'd used before over the both of them like a blanket.

He stops breathing. Panicking, Kylen hugs him tighter, then starts to shake him, refusing to let him go, when, as a white light blasts up through the top of the Tree of Life and Death, Yawe suddenly shoots up at the waist and takes a full breath of such magnitude that it's as though all the winds from the four corners of the peninsula enter into and expand his lungs at once. And as he looks into her eyes he sees every ounce of her internal and external beauty, and falls even more in love with her than before; as deeply as he'd fallen into the well he now feels flowing into his heart.



Wahuchu creeps into the cave, the blood red glow of the glittering new dawn fluttering like a cape behind him. Standing, Kezlan twirls her sword, grinning gorgeously.

“*Finally* some father-daughter time. I mean, I know that you don’t regard me as your *real* daughter. She who was given everything; love; community; all of your knowledge and wisdom; whilst I was left to rot, forced to glean my wisdom from afar thanks to my savior, the only father I’ve ever had, the manifestation of darkness, he whom your race buried, and whose love rescued me from annihilation. It only took your transformation into your shadow self, for you, the father of my blood, to resemble he, the father of my spirit, and the enslavement of your people, to get you to pay attention to me, huh? *Look now, father!* Look at what happens when one born of the old blood is abandoned by her parents, all their love heaped upon her sister, made to feel like the inferior sibling, dropped into the bowels of hell! See now the evil made by your supposed goodness! Your transformation is your just deserts, for one deserves to become what one has forced upon others, does one not?”

Wahuchu’s black, blood-pupiled eyes dart from Kezlan, who points the blade of the wolf-wearer at him, mirroring his encircling movements around the wall of the cave, to his former protégé, cowering at her feet. Raising his wings, Wahuchu flaps them a few times, his feet lifted inches off the ground, producing mighty gusts of air that push the bats from their clinging perches around and above them. At a time when the bats are normally settling into their daytime slumber they’re instead alive with agitation, crying out whilst speedily scurrying along the walls above and around them, the cave an undulating wave of distress.

“Tell me, oh wise one, were you left in the scalding pot to boil alive, would *you* have stayed there, and melted into oblivion? Or would you have turned the pot over, and seeped through the cracks, and wriggled into the cracks of

others, and so made an army of those like you? Those who wanted more than they were allowed, who were told that their desires were dishonorable, like your pupil here?"

Following her gesture, Wahuchu zeroes in on Zande as he crawls out from between her feet to set his back against the wall of the cave, his wide, horrified eyes staring at him.

"Worry not about this fool that acted as my vengeance, father, for his deserts are even more foul, and pure hell awaits him. He would've murdered the elders even without me. Nor should you worry about what *you* deserve, for, thanks to my love, and the love of the Father of Darkness abandoned by your so-called 'Great Mother,' you're finally alive, taking your full form, that which Ven-Dahl-Doooh demands. For it was *we* who saved you, don't you see?"

"It was *I* who sent my blood-bearers to share my blood with you, and snatch you from the jaws of death. It is *I*, and the Father of Darkness, to whom you owe allegiance, not your Great Mother. So give up the vestiges of your weak old self, and give-over to the darkness. For without me, and the dark lord, you'd have died in that disgraceful pit. Without me passing mother's old blood from my veins to yours through my sons and daughters here you would've met an end unworthy of you, thanks to the fake wolves and this pitiful excuse for a chief that has taken over your tribe."

Wahuchu lets out a scream so piercing that Zande turns away and, facing the cave wall, tries to burrow an escape passage through it, desperately trying to dig away from the horror. At the same time several of the bats fly from the cave on a line towards the island sanctuary they've left behind, the morning sun catching them like a net thrown from the east, their smoking bodies dropping into the sea. But Kezlan only smiles at Wahuchu's reaction, feeling the same fury within her own veins, having so long desired to

feel this kinship with anyone, *especially* him, and to provoke *any* emotional response from her fabled father.

"I see you've taken to the family blood nicely, father," she says with a beaming grin, her elongated canines reflecting the dawning light. "I mean, you can't freely move from your human shape to your shadow shape like me, because you weren't *born* of the blood like Mother and I, but you've become something quite beautiful nonetheless, don't you think, Chief?," she adds, turning towards Zande still desperately digging into the wall behind her, like a rat gnawing through a trap. "He's a far cry from Makunah, of course; he's the *new* type of chief, one whose authority is based upon power freed from ideas of honor. Soon *all* whom men are told are chiefs will find that honor only gets in the way, and that progress demands that they abandon it. He's the prototype of the new leader, you see? One who is praised for taking without asking. Constant coveting creates monstrous creatures, does it not? He was always hungry for things that never would have filled him. I just gave him what he wanted, like the rest of them. Now look at him... without our blood he's nothing but a hollowed-out shell. Soon he'll be hungry without knowing why... without thought, without feeling, without satisfaction of any kind."

Focused on his former apprentice, Wahuchu ducks down and darts towards him at inhuman speed, but with a series of equally rapid swings of her stolen sword Kezlan keeps him back, the razor sharp blade just missing slicing his face. Clutching her amulet, her touch of the black triangular stone sends a vibration through the cave, and both Wahuchu and Zande turn to look at it, drawn by its force.

"Tell me, father, do you have the visions too? Or do you lack that which focuses them? I can get you your own lens, if only you'll let go of what you think you should be. You're yet bound to your humanity like an anchor tied to a great ship that longs for the open ocean, free to sail to horizons

that the Mahwah cannot know without us. *This* has shown me that we shall take the mountain from Mother, that all the tribes of the bay shall fall in line behind us, just as it has shown me where your cowardly daughter hides with that boy who's perverting her heart and mind. I felt him fall through the eye. I know where they are. They're doomed."

What she *doesn't* say is that what she saw seems, for the first time, to see her as well, as though the vision is now bouncing off of a mirror, and that, just as she may see through the radar of her brood of blood-lusting nightbirds, it seems to her that, for the first time, *they* look upon *her* as well, and, indeed, it feels as though they're watching her even now. Cocking his head sideways, Kezlan's threat upon Kylan is absorbed by Wahuchu, who, harnessing a surge of fury, launches himself at Kezlan with such force that not even *she* can react in time to avoid the assault.

Propelled off her feet, Kezlan drops the sword and is slammed into the wall above Zande, crushing a slew of bats above him as he scurries out of the way. In the next instant his queen becomes her shadow self, and the two black-winged, fanged beasts hiss and hack at one another, bounding between the sides of the cave and crashing together with thunderous thuds of flesh upon flesh before momentarily separating again, screaming so loudly that Zande's eardrums bleed. Dodging their movements, doing anything he can to steer clear of the horror, his first instinct is to go for the sword, but in the next moment he notices that, in the struggle, his former teacher has cut the cord holding Kezlan's pendant, and that it's been dropped in the center of the cave, reflecting the low light like a beacon.

In his derangement, filled with dread, his thoughts losing coherency, his ability to resist the insatiable beast clawing at his heart fast fading, Zande suddenly sees the pendant in a new way, like maybe it *contains* her powers, and that it represents hope, his final, fleeting shred of sanity, and

might allow him to escape the hell into which he's slipping, for surely his old teacher has come to deliver him to the everlasting torment that he deserves. He must have it, else be burned away by the sun, the first rays of the morning just now streaking across the sand outside, inviting death. For what he's becoming shall soon devour the last of him.

But just as Zande prepares to run at the pendant shining invitingly in the center of the cave, Wahuchu bites down upon Kezlan's arm, and a spray of her blood is blasted into his face. And as it drips down into his mouth and he feels the sweet ecstasy and empowerment invading his twisted heart and mangled mind, and he must have more, and so he forgets the amulet, and as the fight continues all around him he scurries from splatter to splatter, drip to drip, lapping it up like a rabid dog desperate for water. The more of it that he drinks the greater the need of it, and he sees in the bloody beasts the gallons of liquid gold that they hold.

Rising up on the courage stimulated by the bloodlust, Zande seizes the sword and, as Kezlan, still locked into the even match, forces her father into a backpedal across the cave, the sword is suddenly plunged into his back, its point sticking out of his upper stomach, just beneath his misshapen breastplate. Shocked, she lets go of him as the sword is pulled from his back and he falls forward at her feet, Zande clinging to his backside, sucking at the open wound like a leech. With a shriek she swings her forearm at her father's attacker and hits Zande so hard that he spins up and off of him, and falls, unconscious, in the middle of the cave. In the next moment she resumes her human shape and, flipping her father over while grabbing the sword from the floor, slices open her wrist and, forcing her father's mouth open, streams the blood into his mouth.

"Drink father, drink. It is not your time to die. I shall not let that fool be the end of you. In my blood lies your salvation."

As Zande regains consciousness a few steps away, the force of Kezlan and Wahuchu's blood briefly vitalizing his rotting flesh, he's staring straight at her pendant. Turning momentarily to look at what he's done, he sees his queen giving his former teacher more blood than she's ever offered him. Wahuchu gulps it down reflexively, his eyes rolling around in his head, so much spilling into his mouth that Zande can see his queen weaken before backing off and clutching at her wound. Seeing the sword beside Wahuchu, he thinks to run at, seize it and finish his old master off. But it's as though Wahuchu hears the thought, for he immediately turns his head and looks at him, his blood red pupils borne by eyes of pure black filled with such malice that Zande's heart seizes and, overcome by fear once more, he grabs the pendant and flees the cave.

Spilling out onto the surf, the morning sun scathes his blanched skin, which hisses and softly smokes in response. And yet, this is preferable to facing what's chasing him, whom he hears exit the cave and scramble after him, though he's too frightened to turn and look, much less face him. Harnessing the strength of the old blood flowing through him, he sprints towards the former Mahwah village, Kezlan's pendant clutched tightly in his hand, intermittently breaking his concentration with strange visions of the other tribes of the bay, Kezlan's cries from the cave fading behind him as he strides through the surf:

"No father! Don't go! You won't survive! He's not worth it!"

The outskirts of the old village fast falling into disrepair now visible, a flash consumes Zande's consciousness, taking him to the mainland north of the Big Island, to the Nah-kah-nalt, the people whose language means 'putting your words in proper order;' those said to live where the realms of water, land, sky and spirit meet, where all of life revolves around the sea, and the warriors test their courage by riding sharks, and with perfect coordination of their crafts

they kill the migrating whales and pull hauls to shore that feed their villages for months, each family receiving an equal share. And there he sees Kezlan coming out of the sea, and presenting her nude form to their greatest sea hunter, and making love to him on the beach under the waning moon, and overturning her goblet with its upside down triangle into his mouth, and whispering into his ear:

“Why is it that the greatest of all the whale hunters of the land is forced to give up almost everything that he himself is responsible for pulling from the sea just because it’s ‘the way things are?’ He who brings the most to his people should have the most in return, and come to lead them.”

Regaining his presence, the village draws near up ahead, the sound of Wahuchu fighting through the wave break behind him, screaming in agony, a pain that he himself feels, lost to the feeling of burning flesh, until another flash:

He’s in the land of the Dohmo, the people of the gleaming midden made of heaps of shellfish upon which the great village of the Northern Big Island was built, so brilliantly reflecting the sun that it can be seen from miles away, the brightest of beacons forever assuring that none of their fishermen ever gets lost. They wear the shells woven with cord, their elders shining bright, their lands known for the greatest of feasts, all glory bound to the sea’s bounty. And as the sun sets his queen approaches their young chief, who walks the shores, inconsolable as to his wife’s inability to give him a son, and there she turns the goblet into his mouth while he suckles at her bosom, and she tells him:

“How can it be that a man whose people know no hunger, and only the fruitfulness of the ocean, can accept a life without children, and without a son to inherit his position, when all around him even the lowliest of people have more? What would you do to have a son of your own?”

And with a flash Zande regains consciousness, and nearly slams into one of the abandoned wigwams that he'd been sprinting towards, and, turning, ducks just in time to avoid Wahuchu's aerial assault, seeing his black smoking form glide over him and bounce off of the top of the wigwam, crashing and rolling to a stop somewhere behind it. So Zande changes direction, and runs back the direction he'd come from, not back down to the beach, but turning uphill towards the bluff, taking a few steps before another flash:

He's with the Cheshal just east of the Dohmo, those of the Great Four Settlements of the northern bay, the guardians of the inlet and setters of the great council fires of the hihewus, the elders known for their diplomatic shrewdness, to whom the tribes of the bay come to settle disputes, and arrange marriages, treaties and alliances best serving all. And in the recent past their chief squashed a dispute with the Dohmo by promising his daughter to the son of the Dohmo chief, a young man who had recently disgraced the son of the Cheshal chief, another young man who held a deep grudge for the embarrassment of being beaten up in front of his men, when the two had quarreled over a catch that each believed belonged to their own tribe. Into the tent of this young, brooding man his queen creeps at night, and reassures him as to his great destiny, and as she gyrates her hips on his, he drinks from her goblet, and she says:

"What if I told you that the Dohmo would be nothing without your people guarding the bay for them, and that you could kill this man of the shameful surprise attack upon you, and take over his tribe, and lead all four Great Settlements?"

Coming to once more, climbing the steep bluff, the sun like a fire upon his back, the smell of his burning, tainted flesh filling his nose like a noxious fume, he's not certain how his end will be, whether by fire or suffocation or caught from behind and torn to shreds in Wahuchu's vengeance. Fighting off the pain, he squeezes the pendant and sees:

The Yidiyaht of the south end of the Big Island, just across the bay from the Mahwah, their primary trading partners, known as being lake people at one with the protective spirit of the brown bears that fish and hunt the shores of the many lakes spotting their realm, and with whom the Yidiyaht are said to live in peaceful partnership, producing some of the greatest spirit guides the tribes have ever known. One such spirit guide is set upon the shore of the lake, huddled over a small fire, and into his vision Kezlan creeps, and there tells him of the fair-skinned invaders from a land far to the east, and that they pray to their own wolf spirit, and swear to kill every brown bear in this land so as to make way for endless roaming packs of wolves.

Returning to himself, sensing that his time is coming to an end, Zande turns to look behind him, seeing a flaming figure climbing slowly up the steep hillside, Wahuchu seemingly even more vulnerable to the sun than he, giving him the hope that he may outlast this demon of vengeance on his heels, and so he continues up, and another flash:

He's with the Skeemish of the east bay, all the way inside Greenwood Bay, those known for their courageous chiefs, the 'people of the clear salt water,' expert canoe craftsmen, fishermen and basket weavers, home of the great constellations of long houses, including six-hundred-foot-long 'Old Man House' built from the logs of full trees, in which several dozen families dwell together during the coldest months of the year. And Zande can hear one of their storytellers sing of a time before man, when everything, even the stones, were alive, and when all of it was like a shimmering liquid, and could take any form that it wished, until one day a woman called 'The Changer' came and forced the people, the youngest of the shimmering beings, to remain in the shape of man. And to one of the elders Kezlan comes at night, and under the

thinnest sliver of the disappearing moon she tells him that her own mother is The Changer, and that she wished to be the *only* changeling, and to keep the power for herself, and was the very spirit whom forced changelessness upon his people and all the people of the bay, so as to control them.

“Your people are the first, the limitless, the oldest of the people, and once were of magical blood, and The Changer robbed you of your power, and now reigns supreme from the mountain across the bay, and if you lead your warriors there and root her out I’ll give you back what she stole, and the Skeemish shall shimmer resplendently once more.”

Now halfway up the hill, his eyes burning so badly he can barely keep them open, Zande just barely sees the top of the hill high above, the clouds reflecting the morning light beyond, when, with another flash, he’s in the eastern forest with the Nooshack people, those said to be ‘as the ferns;’ the multitude of green beings growing from the headwaters of the river all the way up to the snow-capped mountains to the east, connecting all the streams and rivers descending from its melting heights all the way to the bay. Known for their generosity, the Nooshack are said to be of the spirit of the river that carries the bounty of the woodlands into the sea, just as their people bring every gift of the Great Mother to all people of the bay, their villages growing out along its banks as the ferns upon which all fruits of the forest fall. And into their central village Kezlan comes one evening, presenting herself as a traveler from the east, and telling the tale of light-skinned people wearing wolves and casting the magic of the forever freezing mountains, and that they come to freeze all the rivers until nothing flows.

Then he’s with the Salesh from the plateaus southeast of the Nooshack, they who’re said to spread like the seeds of grass, all the way over the great mountain ranges running north to south like the spine of the buffalo from their tribes’ furthest eastern reaches, in the great prairies. The Salesh

pride themselves on being the freest of the people, never locked to any one land, following the food and the favorable weather like the migrations of the birds, their endless string of villages woven together by complex social arrangements and intermarriages. And so, watching the festivities of one such marriage celebration come to a close, Kezlan enters the ebbing energy and tells a tale:

“From the great mountain in the middle of the bay across from your western-most village rules a witch who has long watched your movements with jealousy, and works with her evil daughter, whom she hides away deep in the forest, to assure that marriages between clans shall be cursed, and they foment jealousy amongst the other people of the bay, and together they’ve all decided that your ways are not to be permitted, for you roam too large a stretch of land, and must, like all, choose one place in which to stay.”

Wahuchu’s screams bring Zande back to where he is and, turning round, he sees that the grass upon the hill has been set aflame, and yet, rather than giving into it, his old teacher seems to be propelled by the fire, climbing faster. And so, eyes bubbling in his head, Zande climbs faster still, and his visions swing to the southeast, to the Chemawah. Said to originally be of the Quilette to the south, they were caught by the great floods of early history, following the melts of the Great Freeze, not long after the seeds of humanity exited the great mountain, and they were carried north around the foot of the great mountain, and deposited on the east side. They considered this to be where the Great Spirit wanted them, so they settled there, only to eventually find themselves on the verge of extinction after centuries of conflict with the nearby Skeemish, who greatly outnumbered them. And so Kezlan came to the leader of their dwindling people and promised:

“I have great powers; the power to restore your people to their rightful place. Yet, I am deprived of the love of my

own people by my treacherous sister, who tells lies about me and has taken my tribe as her own. Help me kill her and I will restore to you the southern lands from which you came, where they say only the weak ones were carried away by the waters, and those of deep roots remained by the blessing of the Great Spirit, which you didn't deserve."

And immediately Zande finds himself with that same southern tribe of the Quilette, those said to be such great seamen that they challenged even the primacy of the black and white sharks at sea, and who once guided the bayak, the first raven, on his quest to place the sun in the sky, before which all the tribes of the bay knew only darkness. The Quilette came down from the freeze in the form of wolves and settled the southern peninsula, until 'The Transformer' changed them into human form. Long have they buried their honored dead on the island off the coast, at Top of the Rock, howling their homage to them at night.

Coming to the Quilette, Kezlan tells of those other wolf-wearers from a faraway land, those who say that *they* are the true wolves, and are offended by the tale of these natives claiming to be of the wolf, and so have, in the concealment of night, landed upon their burial island, and desecrated the graves of Top of the Rock, and are working with the Chemawah once from their lands, who have taken Quilette children from the shore as slaves for letting their own children slip away with the ancient floods, furious that no grief was shown, and no attempts at reconciliation or compensation or reunification were ever made, even as they, their brethren, now face extinction in the east bay.

And in the next instant, sensing that every tribe visited by his queen has come into the forest of the Mahwah to do her bidding, all drawing near to somewhere in the deep woods, seeking the same woman whom his own hunger for brought him to his presently pathetic position, he senses that all of them are under attack by the predators of

the forest, especially the wolves, their encroachments offending Great Mother herself. At the same time Wahuchu has made up the distance between them, and as Zande reaches the top of the bluff, his eyes now little more than smoking holes in his head, his skin burnt to a crisp, the flaming death of his mentor upon him, with the last of his failing strength and final ounce of willpower Zande takes one more step, not seeing Xaxu's headstone before him.

Tripping, he opens his hands as if to stop his fall, the pendant dropping onto the burning grass, and yet there's no ground in front of him to catch him, and he instead plunges forward off of the cliff. And, tumbling forward in a somersault, just before his neck and back shatters upon the compacted sand hundreds of feet below, in the final thought of his life he thanks the Great Mother for letting him die this way, whilst he yet retains a sliver of humanity.

Wahuchu's own blood boiling, the entire bluff on fire, what's left of the man within him laughs at having fallen upon his old master, and takes it as a sign that he's where he's meant to be. Feeling the pendant of his daughter of darkness in his hand, he has a brief flash of his daughter of light bouncing twins on each of her knees, then his mind dissolves. His body turning to ash, the rising warmth of the morning air brings with it the wind from the four corners of Great Mother, and they meet upon the bluff, and sweep up the ashen remains of the fallen medicine man, and take them with them back to the four corners, broadcasting him across the land and sea as tiny particles of powdered rain.

From halfway inside the cave, just out of reach of the light, Kezlan peers out into the painful shine of the morning sun and senses the death of her father. Looking down at the surf, she's surprised at the sorrow she feels as her chief is gobbled up by the rising waves and swept out into the subsuming surf. Somehow, as pathetic as he was, she'll miss him. On the bluff high above, as the charred grass

finishes giving off its smoke, the bear cub arrives, at first having followed a signal sent from somewhere within, then following the malodorous Corpse Flower that sprung up from the trail of Wahuchu's blood. Standing upon the earth where his once rescuer met his final moments, the bear cub rubs himself against the headstone of his rescuer's teacher, once, twice, three times, then sees the pendant glimmering in the blackened earth. Seizing it in his mouth, he ambles downhill and disappears back into the forest.

21

Of Sulfur &
Sacrifice

As dusk descends upon the deep forest of the Mahwah, the torches of all the tribes of the bay are lit, and, drawing upon the sinister spell that binds their leaders to the queen of darkness, enacting her abilities of echolocation, they converge upon the sanctuary of Kylan and Yawe. The towering trees of the inner forest glow red as if from an invading forest fire, as high above a blood red moon is undergoing an eclipse framed by a flurry of shooting stars. Seeing this from the fern-carpeted forest floor far below, Yawe and Kylan are set cross-legged at the foot of the Tree of Life and Death, gazing up at the frightening spectacle, he gripping his sylfr amulet of protection, she calling to her father and mother, and *their* father and mother, the Creator and the Great Mother, to spare them, and to save the new lives that've been seeded inside her.

Sensing the impending doom, all the predators of the forest come fully to life, following their own magical binds, called upon to preserve the life of the young lovers. But there are simply too many native warriors prepared to kill for the promises made by their mob leaders; promises that long-sought treasures will finally be found, that ancient wrongs are soon to be corrected, and that the indignations of long-festering injustices shall finally find just resolution. And so Harold, as the alpha wolf, and the brown bears who embody the spirit of protection, and the cougars called away from the elk trails, and even the wily coyotes and the clever foxes all follow some strange force, not minding their proximity to one another, darting through the deep forest to attack the men that come to kill the Moon Child, and her mate, he whom has awakened to his spiritual self.

The people of the bay are all around them now. Here and there they hear nearby screams and sounds of violence as one tribe trades blows with a couple of cougars, the shrill cry of the king cats quickly silenced, and another tribe is mauled by a bear, listening to the resonating death groan

as it succumbs to their hacking war axes, jabbing spears and fast-flying arrows. Harold himself, as the alpha wolf, with the Wild Woman circling overhead, calling out positions with her piercing cries, sprints as fast and befalls the men more fiercely than all the others, for Cub, now Yawe, is all that is left of him, and shall not fall so long as he draws breath. And though it seems that, banded together, the predators of the forest may prevail against the collapsing onslaught of misguided man, the setting sun sways the battle in favor of the darkness, the sound of thousands of bats swooping in, so many that the red glow from above is clouded, and as the eclipse consumes the blood red moon the bloodletters rise to their fullest force.

Through the thick brush Yawe feels his father fighting one of the last groupings of the Mahwahn League of Defense, bloodily absorbing several penetrating strikes before crushing the throat of the last of them, then falling over. Feeling his father's pain, he whispers his reassurance:

"It's okay, father. Let them come. We're no longer afraid."

And just as he thinks to run towards his father, sensing that he's dying, Kylene grabs him by the wrist, and, with her head and eyes, tells him to stay, when, in the next instant, the sky a swirl of shrill cries and fluttering wings, the cloud descends upon the forest. The alpha wolf sucked dry by the cloud, Yawe feels his heart lurch and, rocking forward and back beside the tree, closes his eyes and calls upon the Creator, He whom he passed through in order to find himself back by Kylene's side, to give him the strength to honor his death, and to steel him against the forces fast falling upon them. Fires from the torches drawing close, like little hovering campfires surrounding the fringes of their sanctuary, hundreds of men speaking softly, a great swarm of bats darts at the white owl just visible in the dimly lit red sky, chasing her back towards the mountains, as countless others alight upon the branches of the towering trees high

above, none striking, all waiting. Then comes the sound of their matron, gliding to the ground at the Portal of the Spirits, the easiest entry into the typically silent sanctuary.

“Come, Sister, this charade has gone on long enough,” they hear as Kezlan passes through the arched portal.

“We’re here, demon, come claim your destiny,” she hears.

“Is that the young wolf-wearer? Aww, how cute. The baby wolf thinks he can defend his precious little Moon Face.”

Stepping into the hushed space, Kezlan looks up into the seemingly endlessly-rising canopy, her pride peaking at the sight and sound of the thousands of her offspring set upon the trees, awaiting her orders, and, surrounding them, the hundreds of torch-bearing men made to do her bidding, now set to bear witness to her glorious triumph.

“The cub wishes to become an alpha?,” she mocks. “Then show yourself, wolf-wearer. Let me see your sweet heart.”

“Here I am,” she hears. But she’s unable to pinpoint the sound, for it’s as though it comes from all directions. Above her the bats move about uneasily, and around her the men whisper to themselves, and Kezlan is shocked by the sudden sense that this boy may be more than she thought.

Creeping carefully deeper into the shadowy understory, the eclipsed moon releases its light above, waxing into new life, and where it had been blood red it now shines in brilliant white, as if the passing of the eclipse cleansed it of a pestilence. In this moment Kezlan can sense the pale moon peering down upon her, as the passing of the bloody veil feels like the lifting of an eyelid, and where once the night was her advantage, the perspective flips, the black eye blasted with bright white, as though the pupil with which she’d gleaned everything outside of her is now focused on *her* instead. And there before her sits the wolf-

wearer, cross legged on a low tree branch not far from the Tree of Life and Death, holding his amulet. Smiling, Kezlan takes a step towards him when, to her surprise, he, too, smiles, turning her contentment into fury. Transforming into her shadow shape, she lets out a blood-curdling scream and crouches to strike as, in the same instant, he removes his hand from his amulet, and the full white moon shining down from above strikes it, reflecting a blinding white light that's so painful that Kezlan is forced to cover her eyes with one of her wings, her legions of bats above shrieking in pain, lifting off the trees and preparing to flee the scene.

Then it's black again, and, timidly removing her wing from her face, her eyes burning, Kezlan tries to refocus. Moving towards where she'd seen Yawe, he's gone, and she hisses and hacks off the limb upon which he'd been, when, behind him, she again senses his presence. Turning, he's standing this time, closer to her than he had been the first time, and he lets his hand off his amulet, and she covers her face with both wings, and with a wrath she's never before felt she crouches and leaps blindly towards him, crashing so hard into the trunk of a tree that she almost knocks herself out. Coming to, her vision is compromised, bright white lights dropping over her sight like a starry veil.

Trying to focus, she finally hears the voice of her sister.

"Please, sister, let go of your hatred. It's destroying you."

Overcome by a bewilderment she's never before known, thinking of the young couple like lambs awaiting slaughter, the shock at finding them to be sheep in wolves clothing is unbearable, and she raises her wings and screams out in a barely intelligible voice that's more beast than human, an ancient underworld tongue intermixing with her Mahwahn:

"Stop this witchcraft. Fight me fairly!"

“We *aren’t* fighting you, covetous creature, don’t you see?”
It’s the wolf-wearer again. “You’re doing it to yourself.”

Hissing, she turns towards the voice and there finally sees her sister through an opening in the overgrown root cavern, holding the hand of the wolf-wearer in front of the Tree of Life and Death. Yawe kisses Kylene on her forehead, the act filled with such tenderness that it’s somehow even more infuriating to Kezlan that his trick of light. He then walks around and behind the tree, leaving Kylene defenseless. That’s when Kezlan notices that her sister is wearing her own pendant, but has rethread it with a light-colored-fur cord and strung it with its point facing up.

Steadying herself for a moment, her vision still beset by flashes of white at the periphery, she takes a step towards her sister, then another, and is soon full stride, and yet her sister stands still, and makes no motion, only, in the final moment before Kezlan crashes into her, closing her eyes, lowering her head and putting her hands together, as if in prayer. In this last instant, moving at her full, preternatural speed, Kezlan knows in her dark heart that she’s defeated, for Kylene stands with such perfect grace and peaceful self-assurance that there’s no way that she can be in the danger that she seems to be. Yet Kezlan can’t stop herself, and crashes through Kylene’s apparition, only then discovering that her pendant hadn’t actually been strung around her sister’s neck, but was hanging from a limb. Kylene is crouched off to the side, her hand just beneath the earth, clutching one of the roots of the great, hollow tree.

Kezlan’s head passes straight through the loop of the white cord and clean into the frontside hole of the hollow, her shoulders slamming into the sides of the hole with such force that the petrified wood cracks and gives way, and she finds herself falling forward. Terror seizing her, the bats that had thought to flee moments before now dart down from above, the hundreds of surrounding men

beginning to hack their way through the thick brambles surrounding sanctuary, all reacting to her fear, coming forward to rescue her. On her tip toes, flapping her wings in a forward motion to keep from falling into the heart of the tree, she's just beginning to gain her balance when the swarm of thousands of bats hit her like a wall from behind, and they all fall forward, sucked into its invisible depths.

A blinding blast of white light then shoots fourth from the top and all openings of the tree, and the earth lurches violently beneath their feet, knocking Kylene onto her back and propelling Yawe off his feet, and he crashes into the raised roots on the opposite side of the cavern that surrounds the tree. And in the next instant every bat that had poured into the Tree of Life and Death shoots up from the top of the cleaved-off upper tree, but now as fairies, all swirling around a central figure, a snow owl, and they spin up into the canopy, the fairies then alighting upon the upper branches of the towering trees as, continuing upward, the spiraling white owl is soon greeted by another snow owl sweeping in from the direction of the mountain to the east, and the two watchful spirits of the night sky spin around one another in a show of great joy for several seconds before flying away together towards the mountain.

Standing and stretching out the blow to his back, Yawe takes Kylene by the hand and, helping her to her feet, they emerge from the Spirit Cavern into the sanctuary. There, war parties from all the tribes of Greenwood Bay have entered, most presenting looks of puzzlement, reluctantly gripping their weapons, trying to remember why they're ready to fight. All those whom had led them there are on the ground, on all fours, their men turning to watch as each of them purges a steady stream of black from somewhere deep within, as if each has swallowed tar. And even in the soft light of the moon and stars the sun-kissed brown can be seen returning to pallid skin that had verged upon

transparency, and the healthy suppleness enters back into their frayed flesh, and the muscularity of their natural athleticism once more adheres to their previously skeletal frames, and roundness and vibrancy returns to eyes that had been sinking into their sockets, but which now gaze upon those of their tribe as if they haven't seen them in years, and upon all the other brothers of the bay surrounding them, some of them known, some not, the countenances of the recovering leaders conveying confusion and wonder, upwelling with tears of renewed life.

When those of their tribe remind them why they're there, and all that's transpired in the recent past, they stare at them in stupefied disbelief, and wonder at how such things can be so, even as they're assured of the persuasion with which they'd brought their parties to bear upon present circumstances, and that it had been explained, else assumed, that their changing appearances were wrought by the stress of their leadership, or as a sign of the cost required of their alignment with the mysterious spirit with whom they'd recently partnered in the summoning of their powers of persuasion. Helped to their feet, they hold their heads, suffering from splitting headaches, looking about bewilderingly, seeking their bearings, having awoken from a nightmare with but the slightest sense of where they are.

The torch-bearing natives stare at Yawe in wonder, for here is a man that simultaneously seems as native as he is alien, his silver amulet shining bright, his dirty, matted wolf hide a thicker, greyer pelt than those offered by the native wolf, and yet his eyes exuding the wisdom and empathy of legendary chiefs of the past, his easy smile reflecting the confidence of a seer, with stunning Kylan at his side, holding his hand, giving off the radiance of natural royalty. They've all heard the prophecies of Moon Face and her foreign mate, and though every effort has been made to paint the pair as the enemy, seeing them in person has the

opposite effect, especially taking place here, where the life of the forest is rich with reverence, the trees standing over them like ancient guardians, the Spirit Cavern at their backs, wherein they've just demonstrated the power of partnering with primordial forces in changing dark to light.

Beckoning some of the men to accompany him, Yawe pushes his way through the thickets and vines on the boundary of the sanctuary to where his father has fallen. He lies in a brook that encircles the sanctuary, his blood mixing with the waters, gradually merging with the surrounding life. Standing over the massive alpha wolf, eyes misting lightly, Yawe says nothing, but by his demeanor the men know that the dead being is more than it seems, and holds a special place in his heart. Hoisting him up, they carry the dead wolf back into the center of the sanctuary, and set him down next to a circle of stones that Kylan had previously gathered from the surrounding area. And as those from the disparate tribes of the bay gradually begin to let go of their enmity, the flames of division and hatred having been fanned by the false leadership that brought them here, a fire is built, lending warmth to another apparent miracle. For when Yawe bends down to examine the alpha, his amulet touches its blood-stained fur, and before their eyes the wolf becomes a man wearing wolf.

Removing his father's fur, he hands his own wolf hide to one of the men, adorns his father's larger, bloodied coat, and, to the shock of some, pulls his father's body onto the flames. As the leader of the Wolf Clan of Aria burns in the fire, the two white owls whom had circled overhead only minutes before, the one looking to have emerged from within the massive, burned, hollowed-out tree in the center of the stilted root cavern, drop down from somewhere above and alight on low limbs, observing the proceedings. Then something strange befalls the men, all of whom mourn his loss, even as they know nothing of him other

than that he seems to have sacrificed himself to some holy cause, and that his death has brought them all together.

Soon members of tribes that had been at odds for years, ever since the spirit of the last Great Council fire had gone out, are speaking openly, and walking around the grounds, some arm in arm, forgiving one another's transgressions. The Nah-kah-nalt agree with the Dohmo that it's impossible to know which tribe holds the greatest fishermen, and that more intertribal meals should be served at the gleaming colony built upon the midden of countless seashells. And the son of the Dohmo chief, recovering from his nightmarish enslavement, is embraced by the son of the Cheshal chief whom had so embarrassed him in front of his men, who now weeps from a sudden enlargement of empathy, having felt what he'd delivered upon the young man who now seems more brother than nemesis. And the Yidiyaht see that this foreign wolf-wearer is not at all as he'd been described, for he gives freely, having handed one of them his own wolf coat, and cannot be this demon whose people mean to murder all the brown bears of the region and give their lands to their wolves.

As the leader of the Skeemish of the east bay regains his head, crying openly at the release of pent up anger and sorrow, one of the white owls drops down from above, and lands upon his shoulder, and in this moment he is transported to the past, and sees The Changer, she who would become the Wild Woman of the Mountain, and knows that she *is* the owl upon his shoulder, and that she didn't take anything from his people, but, rather, that the Skeemish naturally evolved from their fluidic forms to take a human form of body and mind that would best allow them to reach out and touch and embrace and make medicine from and connect to the spirit of the green lives of the forest, and that the spirit of their people remains as freely flowing in their hearts as ever, and may pass into and

become any other creature upon the recycling of their life. It is *this* interconnection that has made their chiefs so wise, and made them to spread across the bay on the winds.

And the Nooshack know that their rivers shall not be made to freeze, for this man is not a dark wizard, and the life of the entire forest grows through he and his Mahwahn mate, such that he seems as much like them as any other. So too do the Salesh see that Kylene holds not the slightest sign of jealousy or the desire to control their natural rootlessness, and that her desire to curse intertribal marriages could not be more absurd, so warmly does she now play hostess to all the tribes of the bay whilst so lovingly dotting on her own outsider. In truth, she will bring peace to their homeland, such that their movements east to west, across the mountains and back, shall be made even less risky than before, for a home at peace needs less of defense, and will most welcome rift-sealing unions.

Perhaps most heartening of all, the tribes bear witness to the leader of the Quilette receiving the other of the two white owls upon his shoulder, and feeling the immense regret coming from the animal, she of the spirit of the witch that had driven all the tribes of the bay into discord for her self-serving purposes, and that it had been *she* who had desecrated the graves at Top of Rock, and *she* who had taken their children as slaves, whom, at this very moment, creep out from southern caves on their way back home. Soon thereafter the Quilette leader bows his head to the leader of the dwindling Chemawah, both acknowledging their shared bloodlines, the Quilette leader wishing that more had been done to retrieve them after the Great Floods, and promising to grant them the right to return and settle Quilette lands, and the Chemawah promising the same, and both leaders appealing to the Skeemish, the leader of whom, emboldened by the vision of a perpetually fluid spiritual identity, takes hold of them both as brothers,

and there and then swears that the Skeemish shall no longer be the cause of any Chemawah blood being shed.

From scraps of wood in the surrounding forest the music-loving people of the bay create a makeshift concert, the styles of each blending easily into a celebratory fusion.

Led by Yawe, all those animals whom gave their lives guarding the sanctuary are gathered, and brought towards the council fire, their spirits freed by the love, chanting and drumming, their hearts passed around the fire and consumed, their furs cut free and passed around, each person wishing to give a finer fur than he receives. And Yawe himself skins all the wolves whom had followed his father, and to each leader of the tribes he gives them as gifts, and embraces them as brothers, and kisses their third eyes, and lets it be known that so long as he and Kylene are considered stewards of the Mahwah, every last one of them is free to come and visit, trade and compete in gift-giving, and celebrate the sharing of their mutual lives.

The skinned bodies are then heaped upon the flames, and the people see that it is the way of the foreign chief to honor the dead through the flames, their ashen remains drifting up into the canopy to be spread by the four winds to every corner of the peninsula, blending with the land. And over the grand fire Kylene sets an immense stone that she'd spent the previous night carving into a cauldron, and into it she places the makings of magic, sensing her father, now freed from his twisted mortal shell, guiding her every movement. The libation is passed around the fire, and the celebration, and the telling of the stories of each of the tribes, and the embrace of old spirits bound to new forms imbues the sanctuary with the lasting spirit of brotherhood.

All through the night the fire is burned, the medicine is drunk, the makeshift drums are beat, words as old as the woods are sung, hurts are healed, and all the people of the

bay forget what it was that convinced them of their hatred. As the morning light arises, the owls, whom had bounced about the whole evening, landing upon the shoulders of the men, and Yawe, and Kylen, when something needed to be passed into them, finally depart, heading back towards the mountain. Most still sleeping, Yawe rises, and gathers the charred bones from the fire, and walks through the Portal of the Spirits, exiting the sanctuary. And when he comes to the encircling brook he sees that, overnight, the entire length of it has been festooned with big, boldly-blue flowers, their bulbs facing downwards, as though peering into the brook. He senses that the flower has his father in him, and gathers some to throw in with the bones.

As the others wake, they're soon on his heels, and though Yawe passes near to Modern Mahwah on his return to the old village, and though the remnants of the League of Defense which he encounters there make menacing moves towards him at first, the sense of his fearlessness stuns them, and any whom would want him harmed soon drop their weapons upon seeing the throng accompanying him out of the deep forest, including Kylen, whose obsidian black hair shines like a halo in the morning sun, a massive grin on her face, her hand upon her belly. And as Yawe continues down the hill toward the village, many of those from Modern Mahwah follow him as well, and old Wendah emerges from the forest nearby, and as the Mahwahn leave their recent base Wendah and her young wards begin lighting the settlement on fire, and none oppose her.

In the old village Yawe walks with the collection of burnt bones to where Chief Makunah and the murdered elders were recently buried. Near to them he digs a new hole, and drops the bones therein, the bones of his father, and the wolves, and the bears and mountain lions, upon which Kylen comes from the nearby grove of red cedar with two saplings pulled from the earth with permission, and atop

each of the large burials are the saplings planted. And around the two plantings the people of the bay gather, and remembrances are paid to the fallen, and to everyone there it is said that life felt full of more promise than ever. Long does the peace pervade, even when, that very night, the rift that had formed upon the dark queen passing between planes extends into the faultline, triggering a massive earthquake that makes them feel that something is yet unsettled, the crypt beneath the mountain cracking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, BY THE AUTHOR

Born in the redwoods of coastal Northern California in the former mill and fishing town of Fort Bragg, my early years were trouble-free times of youthful exuberance. I was very much a rural kid, playing sports with friends, catching critters, exploring the forest, shooting bb guns, swimming in the river and ocean and eating blackberries off the bush until my hands were stained purplish-black and my stomach ached. At the age of six my father was transferred to the rapidly urbanizing town of Santa Rosa, CA, in the heart of the Sonoma County Wine Country, an hour north of San Francisco. There, I gradually transformed into a video gamer with a strong creative streak.

In my adolescence I concocted elaborate games for friends that captured their attention for hours on end, often during school hours. Some of these games were centered around toys, but the more popular were produced on paper, which I called “paper games.”

As I matured I came to the same conclusion that most young, observant people come to: Money is the root of freedom, for freedom is *purchased*, not freely given. I knew that I had to do everything possible to accrue as much cash as possible, so that I could do what I wanted and *be* who I pleased. This culturally-pervasive mindset continued through most of college, during which I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara and studied Business Economics, afterwards entering the real estate business. I was highly motivated by the orthodox ambitions inculcated into western youth by way of our aristocratically-hailing conservative culture and, through them, decidedly driven to pursue what most consider the hallmarks of ‘success:’ a lucrative career, the socioeconomic rank and all the trappings. This was before I realized the *subjectivity* of ‘success,’ and the fact that the greater form is that which Einstein alluded to: “Try not to become a person of success, but, rather, a person of *value*.”

Thus, the doubts that I’d begun developing during my last couple collegiate years (coalescing during the 2008 financial market

implosion that penalized the many, especially the disadvantaged, for the evil of the privileged few) that following the traditional path was the best, most moral and progressive use of my abilities. Upon inspection, and in tracing the full causality, I realized that this path produces parasitism and suffering. The more you're said to 'make,' the more you *take*. Nothing materializes from nothing, and capitalism unbalanced by socialistic principles and equity-sharing is less about freedom and hard work than it is about exploiting disadvantage.

My heart and conscience thereby began to crystalize around the greater concept of success: defining it in terms of the *creation* rather than the *extraction* of value. Later, as my spiritual awareness grew and I began to sense that 'listening to your heart' is more than mere fleeting emotion, but a tapping into a truer, fuller form of universal Self, my earlier doubts converged with my contemplations to form the first seeds of my ideology, and everything changed.

Though I continued to struggle with some serious health issues at the time, much of which continues to plague me, on another level I came into myself and began to harness a deep sense of purpose. I realized that I'm meant to translate the spiritual messages being conducted through my heart, which, combined with my intellectual inspection of the world, have led me to some profound conclusions about the nature of existence and the greedy heart of western culture compromising our collective potential. I moved away from the business world and committed to exploring the realm of ideas and language, earning an MA in English from Arizona State University.

At the same time my innate creativity found a grander outlet in conjunction with my naturally-philosophical mindset, and I began practicing the ancient art of storytelling whilst simultaneously seeking the underlying nature of reality, formulating my own ideologies and envisioning the type of societal systems that might someday steer humankind away from a 'greed is good' attitude that minimizes total quality of life on earth, and towards systems serving *all* of humanity.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST, BY THE ARTIST

Lanna Ariel was born in 1995 in Brazil, where she worked for many years as a Gallerist Manager and Curator at Caixa Cultural Brasilia. She graduated in Visual Arts at the University of Brasilia – UNB in 2018. After that, she moved to Ireland, where she began to devote herself to her art.

This change had a great impact on her work. Lanna's artistic research explores the symbolism behind subjects, objects and figures, as well as its meanings and beliefs in different cultures. Her narratives are carefully gathered merging witchcraft, science, astrology & mythology while also inspired by different eras in art history including symbolism, Victorian, surrealism and contemporary. Lanna exhibits her work in Ireland, as well as internationally.

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