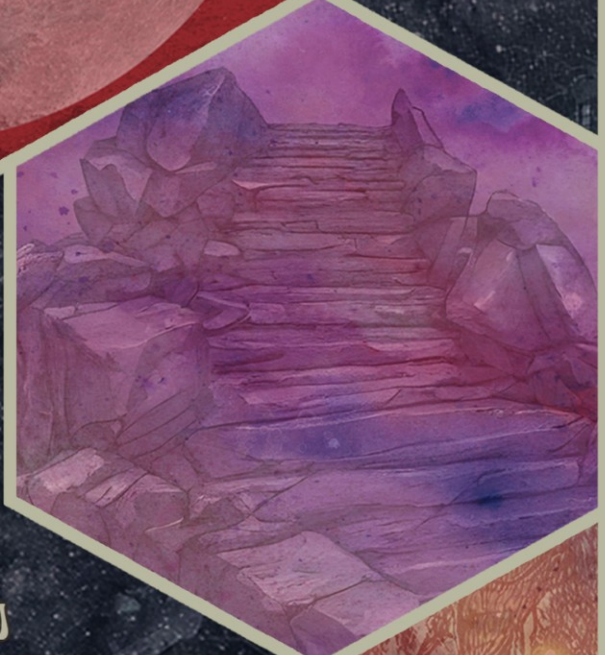




COOL
STORY
GUYS

BOOK TWO

BEYOND
THE
MIRROR



Cool Story Guys

Book Two: Beyond the Mirror

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Introduction

Chapter One: Blood Sacrifice

Chapter Two: Evils and Omens

Chapter Three: The Absence of Light

Chapter Four: Honor March

Chapter Five: Complex Problems and Simple Violence

Chapter Six: The Putrid Coast

Chapter Seven: Through the Eyes of the Oppressor

Chapter Eight: A Quiet Meal

Chapter Nine: The Harvester

Chapter Ten: A Noble Cause

Chapter Eleven: Untying the Knot

Chapter Twelve: Reality Collapses

Chapter Thirteen: The Fire on the Mountain

Chapter Fourteen: From Beyond

Introduction

As stated on the cover, this is Book Two of the Cool Story Guys Saga. You might have already read or listened to Book One, and if so, that's great! But if we're being honest here, it is not important *at all* to have read the first book to enjoy and understand this one. Sure, it would be lovely if you started with our humble beginnings, if only to fully appreciate how much better this book is than the first one. That said, the stories contained within these two books are completely unrelated, so you won't be confused if you start here. Both stories were plucked from our imaginations and shaped by the unusual constructs of this project, but otherwise they're not even really the same genre.

We learned a lot creating an entire high fantasy world from scratch in *The Shift*; we learned even more dismantling it and forcing all of our poor characters to crawl out of Armageddon for twenty laborious chapters. Both Ethan and I were extremely proud of what we made in our first attempt at collaborative storytelling, but when it came time to write a second book, we both hoped that the tone wouldn't be quite so dreary again.

Unfortunately, we don't really get to control those sorts of things in this project. Listeners of the podcast are familiar with the core concept of Cool Story Guys, but for those of you who have somehow stumbled upon this ebook blindly, let me help you see the way. At the beginning of each story, Ethan and I outline a set of parameters for what the book can be about. Then, we take turns rolling dice, and whatever we roll from those lists gives us the framework that we will work within for the rest of the story. In Book Two, we changed some of the

parameters from the first story, streamlining a couple of redundancies and adding a little more guidance in other areas.

In *The Shift*, the dice rolls demanded that we write a high fantasy story on a global scale in a water setting, with a level of technology somewhere around what we currently understand. We also originally included a roll for how closely we were forced to adhere to what we *had just rolled*. Thankfully, the dice kept us honest and told us that we were obligated to follow our own rules. It would seem Ethan and I are always looking for an escape hatch – enough so that we tried to install one into our story before we'd even started writing it.

We added this theoretical escape hatch because we truly had no clue what to expect at the beginning of the project, but we eventually fumbled our way into something cohesive and enjoyable. Admittedly, we were much more confident heading into Book Two. Writing and finishing a book is a big deal, and with one already under our belts, a lot of the trials and errors involved in long-form writing had been somewhat demystified. That's not to say it wasn't still difficult, though. Far from it. We might have been ready to write another story together, but until we rolled the dice, whatever story we were going to tell was entirely hypothetical. Committing to writing an entire book with no idea whatsoever as to what it will be about is genuinely nerve-racking. The most nervous we ever got throughout this entire project was right before those initial dice rolls.

I said in the introduction to Book One: *Only once in an entire multiverse of possibilities would the story that is in front of you now ever come out of our brains organically*. I think this is once again entirely true for Book Two, but for a different reason. There was some small chance we might have conceivably written a high fantasy story on a global scale in a water setting, with a level of technology somewhere around

what we currently understand. There is absolutely *zero chance* we would have ever freely chosen to write a story with the parameters thrust upon us at the beginning of Book Two.

First, we rolled for the Genre of the story. The bolded selection is the one we got.

Genre

1. High Fantasy
2. Low Fantasy
3. Magical Realism
4. Alternate Reality/Historical Fiction
5. Science Fiction
6. **Spooky/Supernatural**

In a way, this was a lovely counterbalance to the first novel, in which we rolled High Fantasy. Fantasy is my preferred creative playground, so I was thrilled to have that genre chosen for the first story. Ethan, though unpracticed in writing high fantasy, was already intimately familiar with countless pieces of fantasy media, so he wasn't too apprehensive about trying his hand at producing his own. Ethan's forte is Horror writing; virtually everything he had ever written before *Cool Story Guys* was about some small, rural town beset by a supernatural horror. I have stated multiple times on the podcast that I am not a fan of getting spooked. It would stand to reason then that I am also not particularly interested in spending my time spooking anybody else. Knowing this, I refused to even call the genre *Horror* when we compiled our lists. Instead, I insisted we call it *Spooky/Supernatural*, so that if the dice rolled that way, I had some sort of escape hatch built in, as is my wont. Indeed, this was the way the dice rolled.

Needless to say, I wasn't entirely thrilled about having to write a "spooky" story. I was chuffed that Ethan would get to

create inside of his wheelhouse this time around, but personally, I was hoping for a brighter tone. The first story begins with an apocalypse and then we spend the rest of the rather-long novel trying to pull everyone out of catastrophes. Horror writing is in its very nature anxiety-inducing and menacing. So, once again, we were going to be working primarily within a bummeR vibe. But even with a specific genre chosen, there's always wiggle room. I decided not to get mired in the "spooky" and instead to go hard on the "supernatural".

For this book, we decided to add a second roll for a Sub-Genre, hoping this would give us a little more structure at the start of the story and help us visualize what it was supposed to be about.

Sub-Genre

1. Romance
2. Coming-of-Age
3. **Self-Improvement**
4. Moral Imperative
5. Humorous Observation of the Human Condition (a la Vonnegut)
6. Technology vs. Nature

There were some real stinkers at the top of that list, and we both breathed a big sigh of relief when we didn't have to write a spooky/supernatural romance novel. Neither of us were especially elated at the prospect of writing a spooky self-help book instead, but we agreed that it wasn't too hard to imagine ways in which someone beset by supernatural horrors could improve their situation.

Before we rolled the Sub-Genre, we were both wary of the Coming-of-Age option, which is funny looking back now because in a weird way that's kind of what we ended up

writing. The driving force behind this was a stipulation that Ethan added at the end of the rolls: We would need to add and develop three child characters in our story. Ethan is a dad. I am not, and there is a long-running misconception in Cool Story Guys that I hate children. This is mostly untrue. I just don't want to have to write about them in my stories. Ethan hadn't even wanted to write a coming-of-age story, but then his stipulation guaranteed that *several children* were now going to be stuck inside of our imaginary hellworld. My stipulation was that there would be no romance in our story, and Ethan had no objection to this whatsoever. Somehow, my stipulation was collaborative and his was punitive.

Scale

1. Room/House
2. Neighborhood/Town
3. Country
4. Global
5. Interplanetary
6. **Multiple Realms/Realities**

This roll is when we really started to get an idea of what the story was going to be about. Once again, I rolled a six, giving us the most expansive scale we could imagine: the multiverse. By design, our story was going to need to be quite literally *all over the place*. In a way, this roll was both intimidating and strangely liberating. Don't like where your story is at? *Take it someplace else!* It's an obligation! Still, having every possible reality at your fingertips doesn't exactly give shape to a story. For that, we would need to know what *kind* of realities we would be dealing with.

Setting

1. **Rural**

2. Urban
3. Nature
4. Not on the Ground
5. Inside of Something Else
6. Ecumenopolis (planetwide city)

None of that high-falutin, big-city multiverse for us! Our infinite possibilities were going to be *rural*. Ethan rolled a one, which is a critical fail, so we got the most boring outcome for the setting of a book. But “rural” means something completely different depending on which time period the book is set in. Unsurprisingly, we got the exact option we were both most terrified of rolling.

Time Period

1. **Bone Hammers**
2. Ambiguous Middle Ages
3. Dystopian Near Future
4. Post-Apocalyptic Far Future
5. Intergalactic Spaceship
6. Several, Intertwined

Our book was going to be set in prehistory. Cavemen. Hunter-gatherers. *Bone Hammers*. And not only that, *Rural Bone Hammers*. I became instantly obsessed with my new task of distinguishing between rural and urban cavemen. What a fun, unexpected thought experiment! It wasn't until we put all of the rolls together that we fully realized what an insane thing we had tasked ourselves to write: A spooky/supernatural self-improvement book about multidimensional backcountry Neanderthals.

In all the infinite universes, there's only one where Ethan and I write this book. Turns out, it's this reality. Living in it

doesn't make writing an entire novel with those parameters seem any less strange.

Somehow, miraculously, this book turned out even better than the first. Working within these truly weird confines proved to be an exciting creative challenge. We never would have chosen to write this book, so in writing it, we forced ourselves to create something genuinely one-of-a-kind.

Having just played an extensive amount of the video game *Dark Souls*, my mind was primed to explore gruesome primordial magics in my own writing. From the onset, Ethan was champing at the bit to make readers feel unsettled; his unnaturally-high charisma is paired with an innate ability to weird people out. I was tasked with writing the first chapter, setting the scene for the sort of "spooky/supernatural" yarn we were going to weave. Ultimately, I was grateful for that bit of control. I needed to be able to set the rough course and boundaries of the horrific tale we would be telling for months on end if I was going to actually enjoy my time telling it. In the end, I had a blast torturing Ethan's stipulated child characters with arcane blood and darkness magic.

We're both thrilled with how this book turned out. In fact, there's very little about it that we would go back and change, given the chance. There are some little issues that will always bug me - problems we made in the first book and neglected to remedy the second time as well - like not naming the worlds until it felt too late to do so, or going for long stretches without mentioning plot devices that would be leaned upon heavily at the end of the book. Publishing episodes and chapters chronologically as we created them made it functionally impossible to go back and edit anything in earlier chapters. As someone who has taken the time to write a book the *regular* way, where you can change anything you want at any time, let

me tell you, not being able to do so is a significant obstruction to writing a good story.

We learned a lot of things *not to do* in the first book, and we put most of them to good use in this story. For one thing, the second book is six chapters shorter. It focuses on one group the entire time instead of bouncing around between different, complex plot lines. Instead of having to build an entire high fantasy world with its own fantastic rules, we could create smaller, tighter vignettes with any new world we imagined.

But our imaginations were never exactly free to go wherever they pleased. The dice tell us what we can and cannot do in this writing project, from start to finish. Every chapter, Ethan and I each roll a 20-sided die, and the corresponding listener-suggested plot point from our Fate Index is added into the story. This guaranteed randomness is why our first story began with an apocalypse, had completely different protagonists in the last $\frac{3}{4}$ of the book, and included an off-brand cameo from Shrek and Donkey. We honestly never know ahead of time how the story is going to progress from one chapter to the next. Because of this, Ethan and I have both added “improv” to our LinkedIn skills sections, and feel justified in doing so. You don’t get to judge (unless you judge improv).

The number one thing to remember when making a podcast is that *No One Wants to Hear About Your Podcast*. So, I am painfully aware that you don’t want or need me to tell you that there are *more* things to enjoy from this story in the audio version, but I’m going to anyway. I spent too much of my life making monster battle music for you to just ignore it outright. Mostly, there’s the whole *talking about the story* aspect of the podcast that is arguably the most endearing part of Cool Story Guys as a whole. The main reason we started this project was because of how much fun we had talking about stories together

at the bar, going over new ideas and fine-tuning our writing. Going back and listening to the conversations we had about this book on the podcast, I'm struck by how much fun I remember having with Ethan talking about our writing. I think the main reason our podcast "worked" is because we genuinely enjoyed collaborating with one other. It's nice to have a friend. It's even nicer to have a friend you can create multiverses with.

It may be a cliché to say that Cool Story Guys was a labor of love, but I'm hard-pressed to think of a better term for the hundreds of hours it took to create. It's difficult enough for two men in their late-30s to coordinate basic human interactions, let alone entire collaborative novels and audiobooks. My tasks for this project took up the majority of my time for the better part of a year. Yes, I was unemployed. I can't imagine anyone with a real job having the bandwidth to do both. Big thanks forever to my supportive wife and the eminently-affordable Berlin lifestyle. Against all odds, Ethan and I somehow pulled this thing together, and we think it's pretty darn good.

We're probably never making another one, though.

And if this is where the story ends, then I regret nothing. I don't even regret having to write a "horror" story; I like it better than the high fantasy one that came before it. If I do have a regret, it's that closing this chapter of Cool Story Guys means that I won't have an excuse to be creative with my friend Ethan anymore. I hope that the fun and excitement we shared with each other in creating this story is as unmistakable on the page as it is in our voices on the podcast. It was an incredible creative journey to share, both with Ethan and with everyone else who listened in and helped shape the story. Looking at the project as a whole, it feels like we succeeded in putting something authentic, distinctive, and wildly creative into the

world. What more could we ask for? We are thankful for the journey, and where it led.

Jeff Kirby

Berlin, Winter 2024

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Extended stream of consciousness
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. A weakness is discovered by accident
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Spirits of the dead begin to spill their secrets
12. Monotony is broken
13. Religious indoctrination
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Rules are disregarded
17. A tenuous bond is formed
18. Life is too good
19. Something is awakened
20. A new adventure begins

Outcomes Rolled for First Chapter:

Jeff: 6. A weakness is discovered by accident

Ethan: 16. Rules are disregarded

Chapter One: Blood Sacrifice

Written by Jeff

Thirteen stone slabs jutted from the ground concentrically like colossal, jagged fingers breaking upward through the soil. Each slab stood taller than a man, leaning slightly outward from a shared center where a bonfire illuminated the darkness of night. Against the thirteen slabs stood thirteen bodies, upright and still, awaiting the ritual with nervous anticipation. The night was already hot and thick with humidity, and the fire felt oppressively warm against their naked bodies, nearly singing their hair with its grasping tendrils. The moon sat full and round in the sky above, blotting out the stars with its luminescence.

A hooded figure moved into the circle of towering stones and made little effort to avoid the licking edge of the fire. The figure moved with an air of concision, taking slow, deliberate steps from one stone to the next, momentarily placing a red, faceted gem against each person's forehead. Once the stone had graced the flesh of all thirteen, the figure reached beneath its robes and pulled out a great fang the length of an entire arm. The base had been whittled into a handle that could be grasped by two hands, and one side of the fang was sharpened to an edge like a saber. The hooded figure purified the great fang in the flames for a long moment and then stepped towards a young man who stood with teeth clenched and neck muscles bulging. Again, the figure held out the red gem, hovering it over the man's chest and arms, honing in with the instrument until veins began to protrude from the right bicep. With swift precision, the hooded figure used the edge of the great fang to slice along the raised flesh, causing dark red blood to pour out

from beneath. The man made no sound as the fang separated his skin.

The hooded figure moved on to the next slab and the next body to the right, repeating the process with the stone and fang. This was a young woman, eyes brimming with an equal measure of fear and anger, and she growled at the figure as he slit her lengthwise beneath her left breast, sending streams of dark liquid down her navel. As the blood spread across her stomach, it did not drip to the ground but instead moved unnaturally towards the stone slab behind her, as if gravity pulled the liquid sideways instead of down. The blood pooled against the rough stone surface for only a moment and then was absorbed like water seeping through soil, the slab drinking deeply and greedily, as if it could not consume enough to quench its ancient thirst.

Once blood had been drawn from all thirteen bodies, the hooded figure held the bloody fang to the sky and emitted a piercing, shrieking tone that echoed through the silent night. The fang was purified in the flames once again, and the blood burned away from the blade in a cloud of red smoke, leaving the fang pristine and white beneath. The hooded figure sheathed the great fang beneath their robe and exited the circle of stones, replaced moments later by two men with long wooden spears with stone tips. The men wore simple hide wraps around their torsos and vests of mail made from tough reptilian scales that glistened in the firelight. Around each of their necks hung medallions, roughly round and fastened with ropes of tightly-woven reeds. The medallions refracted light from both the fire and the moon, reflecting it across the wary bodies propped up against the slabs as the men moved around the fire for inspection. Twelve of the thirteen bodies still stood upright and taut, but the woman who had been sliced across her midsection had crumpled to the ground with eyes closed

and arms slack. The two men placed their spears in the coals until the tips glowed red, then began to crudely cauterize any wounds that still bled aggressively. One of the spearmen picked up the woman from the ground and splayed her against the stone again, holding her in place with one hand as he brought his scorching spear against the incision on her stomach. The flesh singed, but she did not flinch or make a sound. The man shook her angrily and struck her across the face, shouting, but she still did not stir. With a huff of annoyance, he flipped her limp body forward and it fell into the fire. The other twelve still standing averted their eyes, looking up into the sky at the moon that hung above them, trying to ignore the intrusive sounds and smells. The moon, once white and opalescent, was now stained with a tinge of red.

The men with spears marched the remaining twelve through the dark night back to their compound, with one guard positioned at the front of the group and the other in the rear. The group walked single-file through a gap between stacked stone walls, and once everyone was inside, the men with spears remained stationed in the doorway. The stone barricade stretched in a wide semi-circle until it met with natural cliff walls, sealing in a roughshod courtyard and aboveground cave dwelling at its center. The barrier here served two purposes: To prevent dangerous animals from the dense jungle below from getting in, and to prevent those living inside from getting out.

Weak and exhausted, the twelve men and women lumbered up through the barren courtyard to the jutting white rock dome that stood at its highest point. They passed through natural archways into the exposed caves and crashed down into their individual sleeping areas, where sparse piles of palm leaves only slightly cushioned their bodies from the harshness

of the stone floor. Within moments of laying down, all twelve were deeply asleep.

In the compound, things moved even more slowly than usual in the days that followed a blood sacrifice. Some of the inhabitants slept for an entire day or more, and spirits were communally low, but aggression was usually abated during this time because of low energy. It would be a few days before the residents of the compound grew restless and agitated, revitalized enough to resume their endless and futile attempts at displaying dominance over one another.

These were the days that Ja preferred most, the days when his guard didn't need to be raised quite so thoroughly, and the next sacrifice was an entire moon away. These days never seemed to last long enough.

A few afternoons after the ritual, the guards brought in their daily armfuls of tamfruit, letting the rough-skinned spheres fall gracelessly and clunk against one another, rolling across the dusty ground. Several of the men from the compound rushed the pile of food and pushed at each other to grab the spheres at the center first, though they easily could have grabbed any of the fruit on the edge with no provocation. As always, Ja waited until last to take his portion, making sure that the others were already tearing away the husks and digging into the soft, flavorless flesh below before securing fruit of his own.

Whoever built this compound had gone to great effort to fashion a large table out of stone in the courtyard, carving away seats and a place for feet to rest beneath the long, flat surface. For all that work, few of the inhabitants here sat at the table; the majority of the men ate on their bottoms in the dirt, hunched protectively over their food even though there was more than enough to go around. Ja preferred to sit at the table with the two women in the group. There had been a third

woman, but she had fallen during the blood sacrifice. Ja did not know her name. She hadn't used one. Few in this group did.

Ja reached out for the shallow stone bowl of dried spice leaves that he kept at the edge of the table and found that it was empty. It had been nearly full the day before. He grimaced. Procuring the spice was a nuisance, as he had to convince one of the guards to go with him to gather it. The guards preferred adding flavor to their tamfruit as well, though, so one usually agreed to chaperone Ja as he foraged outside the wall of the compound for the plants. Instinctively, Ja knew what had happened here - knew he shouldn't take the bait - but finding the spice bowl empty agitated him, and so he stood and addressed the group without thinking it through.

"Where is the spice?" he asked using hand language, knowing well enough to keep his mouth closed.

The men hunched on the ground began to snicker and sneer, and one of them got up and walked towards Ja with shoulders squared in a sign of intimidation. The man held out his opened tamfruit to Ja's face and the flesh inside was more green than white, the entire supply of spice leaves mashed and mixed in with the fruit. The man took a heaping handful of the mixture and crammed it into his mouth, then chewed maniacally in Ja's face, green leaves and stems sticking between his broken, yellow teeth. That much spice at once must have tasted disgustingly bitter, inedible, but that didn't faze the antagonist, who put another messy handful in his mouth with wide eyes and an intimidating grin.

Ja stepped back and brought together his shoulders in submission, signaling an apology with his right hand. The man took one more menacing step forward and then belched out a laugh that sprayed white fruit and leaves against Ja's chest before turning and sitting back down in the dirt. Ja scolded himself silently. He was a fool to have spoken to the group like

that. There was little he could do to protect himself against any of the men here. Why would he risk provoking them like that? He was many seasons younger than all of them, just barely a man, slight and lean with no real muscular strength. He'd only recently gotten hair beneath his arms and on his upper lip; the others sported scraggly beards and were taller than Ja by a head, with thick arms that could overwhelm him in an instant. Ja kept his eyes downcast and stepped back to sit at the table for another bland, flavorless meal.

As he ran his fingers along the inside of the fruit husk, light refracted off of Ja's hands and he looked up at the entranceway in the stone wall, knowing the guards were approaching. The sun was shining off their medallions, sending skittering rays of light across the table as the guards drew closer. They were leading an unfamiliar woman by her arm. In stark contrast to the naked bodies in the courtyard, she wore hide clothing stretched across her torso and waist. Ja knew why she was here: A new castaway was being deposited in the compound to replace the body that had fallen during the blood sacrifice. There were always thirteen.

The woman looked around the encampment frantically, making no effort to hide the fear and confusion on her face, and the men who sat in the dirt ogled and grunted at her inelegantly. The guard leading her by the arm pushed the woman towards the remaining tamfruit that lay strewn across the ground and gave her the hand sign to eat, then turned and walked back to the entrance in the barricade. Ignoring the men wallowing in the dirt, the woman snatched one of the hairy, tan fruits from the ground and walked over to the table, taking a seat directly across from Ja.

She peered around the courtyard and at its inhabitants, and at first, it seemed as though emotion might get the better of the woman and that she would begin to weep, but she

steeled herself and swallowed hard, fighting back the impulse. Her face hardened and she looked over at the men sitting in the dirt, all of whom were still gawking at her, before turning her face down to the stone table.

“Savages,” she muttered under her breath. “Naked and eating in the dirt like *savages*.”

“Keep your voice down,” said Ja, barely above a whisper. “Don’t let them hear you speak.”

The response made the woman flinch back with a start.

“You speak?” she said in a quiet gasp. She looked him over curiously. “I was told no one here could use language.”

“None of *them* can,” said Ja, still not meeting her eyes. “And they dislike those who do. It would be safest for you to only use hand language while you are here.”

The woman looked pensive. “We rarely used hand language in Orn,” she whispered. “Everyone there speaks. I wouldn’t know how to communicate using only my hands.”

“You won’t do much ‘communicating’ here,” he said with a sigh. “You’ll only need hand signs to show deference and submission. These people do not have conversations.”

“You speak so well, but I never saw you in Orn. Where did you come from that you learned language...and how did you end up here?”

“I learned language here,” Ja said solemnly. “I was taught by a man named Pall, a castaway from your community, like you. I was brought here as a child. My parents died looking for community. I had not learned speech then - my parents barely knew it themselves - so I was brought here, same as every other non-speaker the community finds. Pall taught me language, raised me here, looked after me. I am only alive today because of him.”

“I remember Pall,” she said. “From when I was a girl. He was a tracker, but he was badly injured on a hunt, and then I

never heard of him again.”

“Yes, he was badly burned by the fire on the mountain,” said Ja. “Lost half of his arm and was never able to walk well again. When he could no longer hunt, they sent him here for the blood sacrifice, and he lived for many seasons after his injuries. He survived many rituals. Pall lived here longer than any other.”

“Where is Pall now?” she asked, looking around the courtyard. “He would remember me, I think. I could use a friend here.”

“Eventually, he fell,” said Ja somberly. “As will we all. Pall could not survive the ritual forever. He fell four moons ago.” Ja’s eyes finally raised to meet hers. “And you *could* use a friend here. Pall was my only friend. He protected me.” Ja’s eyes narrowed and peered at the men in the dirt, who had resumed wrestling with one another for the remaining tamfruit. “The blood sacrifice is not the only way one falls in this place.”

She nodded understandingly. “My name is Kaia. What is yours?”

“Ja.”

“I know I just arrived,” she said bashfully, “but maybe you could be my friend?” She slid her hand across the table and placed it discreetly on his, and Ja felt all of the hairs rise on his arms and legs. No one had touched him with kindness for as long as he could remember. He pulled his hand away and dropped his eyes forlornly back to his half-eaten fruit.

“I will try.”

Though he was sure an attack would happen that evening, Ja did not warn Kaia beforehand, as he would need the element of surprise if there was any chance of interceding. When the sun dipped below the cliff face and shadows stretched across the courtyard, Ja went around the edge of the caves to the back of the compound where a dying tree stood. He checked for

onlookers before plunging his arm into a hollowed-out branch. Hidden inside was the stone knife Pall had shown him how to fashion, with a sharp edge and tip and a grip of braided tamfruit husk. It had been hidden here since before Pall fell, and though Ja had considered using it several times to defend himself, he'd never had the courage - or the certainty that he needed it - until now.

Sure enough, as soon as night filled the interior of the cave, four dark bodies began slinking inelegantly towards the area Kaia chose to set up her sleeping palms, next to Ja and on the other side of the cave from everyone else. Kaia could sense the men approaching and froze with fear, and when their heavy breathing was nearly upon her and her heart began to seize, a whoosh of air came past her face from the opposite direction and a shriek filled the sleeping chamber. She jumped up to a crouch and could see the altercation playing out as dark figures silhouetted against the moon. Ja had cut one of the men, who had now drawn back, one hand pressed against his ribcage and the other shaking furiously in the air. A second man tried to slam down both hands against Ja's head, but he dashed away and stuck the blade into the man's side. This attacker also screamed and skittered off, and Ja waved the knife defensively in front of them, warding them away with its edge. The other two men made feigned attempts at further attacks but clearly did not want to be sliced themselves, backing away as soon as Ja pointed the knife in their direction. Kaia moved up to Ja's side from behind him, snarling furiously and ready to strike anyone who dared come close. This violent pantomime continued until sunrise, when the two bleeding men finally crashed back down into their palms exhausted, and the two uninjured men simply lost interest. Kaia and Ja sat awake with their backs against the wall, muscles aching and knife still extended, though the threat had subsided for now.

Ja had worried that defending himself with the knife would make him marked for death among the other men in the compound, but once they started wrestling with each over the daily pile of tamfruit, he realized that their aggression lacked any real focus and longevity. Their lives were filled with tiny battles that were constantly won and lost, and the end of one altercation only meant the promise of another. Still, they knew that Ja had a weapon now, knew that he posed a threat, and that would surely change the dynamic. He would need to keep the knife close to him at all times, but couldn't risk the guards seeing it. Tools of any kind - especially weapons - were strictly forbidden inside the compound.

Kaia spent that day weaving a skirt for Ja out of palm leaves, similar to the hide wrap she wore around her own waist. They were able to gather the leaves from one of the few living trees inside the courtyard and no one paid them much attention as they did, as everyone relied on the palms for bedding and wiping themselves, among other uses. The two sequestered themselves in an unpopulated corner of the compound, and surprisingly, no one bothered them once they were out of sight and thus out of mind. Kaia began the weaving, showing Ja how to stack and twist the strips of leaf, and soon he was contributing to the project as well. It took the majority of the day to complete the skirt, ensuring it stayed in place while Ja moved, didn't restrict his movement, and kept the knife tucked away from sight beneath. He inserted the blade between the overlapping pattern of braided palm leaves to keep it secure, and though you could barely see the gray of stone replacing certain squares of green on the outside of the skirt, both Ja and Kaia were confident that the guards wouldn't notice.

With the rest of the sunlight, the two took turns napping in their secluded corner of the courtyard with the other

keeping watch. This small bit of rest gave them enough energy to spend another entire night defending themselves, as the men predictably gathered in the moonlit cave to attack once again. But as their shadows crept to the other side of the cave a second time, they found Ja waiting with knife drawn and Kaia armed with a sizable stone, large enough to brain any one of them if it connected squarely. The four agitators beat their chests and lunged forward with machismo gesticulations, but it was clear they feared Ja's blade, and before the moon had even moved from one side of the cave entrance to the other, the weary attackers gave up and retreated to their palm leaves.

This was how the following days and then weeks passed, with Ja and Kaia doing their best to keep out of sight during the day, taking turns stealing sleep while the sun was up, and then keeping their guard up all throughout the night. One of them was always awake looking out for the other, catching the moonlight glint off of peering eyes in the dim cave and then brandishing the stone blade back in warning. In the hours when both of them were awake, the two spoke at length about their wildly different upbringings. Kaia was born into the community in Orn and had lived there her entire life until her recent exile. Ja asked her of her parents, and was surprised to learn that she did not have a mother and father in the same way that he did. In Orn, everyone had a specific job, and that included birthing the children of the community. Others had jobs of rearing those children. There were several mothers of Orn, and *many* fathers, and so communally they were everyone's mothers and fathers. Though Ja was very young when his parents died, he still remembered their faces clearly; remembered his anguish as they fell searching for community; remembered being pulled from their bodies and placed in the compound.

Kaia had been a life bringer in Orn and had birthed three children into the community. This surprised Ja, and it was only then that he realized she was several seasons older than him - an actual woman while he was barely a man. Kaia had been exiled because her body had stopped nurturing new life; she had not carried a new child to term for six seasons. She had pleaded with the elders of Orn to let her stay in the village, begged them to let her gather, or weave, or undertake any other task if she could not provide new children to the community, but they chose to cast her away. Ja could see a deep sadness in her as she told him of her exile, and he tried to comfort her with the knowledge that she was simply unlucky, not useless. The blood sacrifice demanded thirteen bodies, and before Kaia was sent to the compound, there were only twelve. Unless they happened to capture a savage in the jungle to fill the role, someone from the community was doomed to be cast away, doomed to stand against the stone slab beneath the full moon.

Despite her exile, Kaia reminisced about Orn fondly, and Ja was keen to learn what life was like in a real community, where people worked together for a common good. Here in the compound, the castaways all slept in the above-ground cave to escape the clouds of insects that rose up from the jungle when the sun set. Some of the bugs still made it through the archways into the area where they slept, but only a fraction compared to the swarms that lingered in the courtyard. It was hot at night here; scorching winds often came down with the darkness from the fire on the mountain, making the night even more unpleasant than standing in the unceasing sun. But in Orn, the community slept beneath the ground, in caves that descended deep down and remained cool day and night, no matter the temperature outside. The swarms of biting insects did not travel down those corridors, and the fiery winds from the mountain dissipated long before they ever reached the

gates of the community. There were streams of cool water nearby, and Kaia longed for a drink that was actually refreshing. The only drinking water in the compound was a trickle of hot, cloudy water that dripped down the rock face from the raging mountain above.

Everything about the compound was oppressive, and it gave Kaia new respect for not only how good life had been in Orn, but how things seemed to constantly be improving there. The community was regularly making new discoveries that made their everyday existence safer and more efficient. Or rather, *the Blood Summoner* was constantly making new discoveries and then sharing them with the rest of the community. He was the figurehead of Orn, its undisputed leader, equally revered and feared. He had no name other than his title, and though Kaia had lived under his dominion, she did not fully understand what a “Blood Summoner” actually entailed. He rarely showed himself to the citizens of Orn, his dealings conducted in the deepest caves beneath the community. But his genius was unquestioned. Orn’s advances in functional tools, weapon making, foraging, medicine, and more all came from his brilliant proclamations. Kaia herself had never really seen the man, at least not his face, which was perpetually covered by a drawn hood. Ja nodded at her vague description of the man, putting together in his mind that this was the terrifying figure who conducted the blood sacrifice. This Blood Summoner, this bringer of great advancement, was accomplishing these feats using the blood of those trapped at the compound. Using Ja’s blood. Overwhelmed, he berated Kaia with questions about the man: *Where did he come from? How did he draw his power? How did he harness the blood from the stones?* But Kaia had no satisfying answers for the wild-eyed adolescent, remarking only, “He is of the Great Serpent.”

In their long conversations, Ja struggled to communicate as freely as Kaia, as her language was significantly more developed than his. She had been raised in a community that primarily spoke with voices and he had not, but Ja had a natural aptitude for language and found his vocabulary growing steadily the more they talked. He worked with her on essential hand gestures she would need to communicate with the guards and with others who could not understand language. The gestures were surely useful for Kaia to know, but neither of them believed they would ever be put to use in communicating with the other members of the compound.

Though the men hadn't attacked during the night for several weeks now, they were always looking for an opportunity, their eyes searching in the darkness to see if Ja and Kaia's guard had been dropped. This prolonged negation of violence seemed to be visibly grating on the would-be attackers, and they now appeared less satisfied by spending their days simply beating on one another. They were wandering closer to Ja and Kaia's corner of the compound during the day now, creeping through the daylight as they did through the darkness of the cave. Still, day or night, a flash of the stone knife was enough to prevent them from pouncing. Ja wondered how much longer the threat of its edge would keep them at bay.

Surprisingly, it wasn't the constant, looming terror of the men in the compound that finally broke down Kaia's spirits, but the monotony of the tamfruit as the only source of food. She desperately missed meat, missed the celebration of the hunting parties returning victorious, the smell of smoke and the taste of charred flesh. Ja too missed the simple addition of flavor; in the weeks since Kaia had arrived and all of his spice had been pilfered to taunt him, he hadn't dared approach the

guards to try and get more. Now, he was willing to take the risk.

Even though he was afraid they might notice the stone blade woven beneath the latticework of his skirt, Ja approached the guards anyway and asked them to chaperone him and Kaia on a foraging trip. The guards were not savages like the other men in the compound, and they appreciated the addition of spice just as Ja did, so he was hopeful they would agree. With no argument whatsoever, the taller of the two guards nodded in acceptance. At first, he refused to let Kaia come along, until Ja lied and said that she had been a skilled gatherer in Orn and could find new food for them to eat. To that, the guard hesitatingly agreed and waved her over to come along. As Ja and Kaia were escorted through the stone entranceway and out of the compound, the rest of the men glared at them even more viciously than usual.

When they reached the area where Ja normally foraged, he found the plants had recently been munched away by some sort of creature, leaving behind nothing to gather. Ja showed the guard the barren stems and asked politely if they could press on further from the compound to continue searching, and the guard turned to Kaia. Using hand language, he said, "You will find the food they eat in the community," and seeing that she didn't fully understand, Ja translated the message using speech. Kaia flustered. She didn't know the first thing about gathering - she had been a life bringer. But after seeing the stony look on Ja's face she steadied her own expression and then bent down to examine the leaves by her feet. Looking up as if she were following a trail, Kaia met the gaze of the guard and using hand language proclaimed with confidence, "We go this way."

As the three trudged through thick brush, Ja kept his eyes open for any of the spice that he knew, hoping that if they at

least found that, it would excuse the fact that Kaia wasn't able to gather any new and exciting ingredients. But Ja found nothing he recognized, and soon he could feel impatience and agitation emanating from the guard. But before the spearman could raise an objection to their aimless wandering, the three emerged into a meadow filled with small blue flowers, and Ja gave Kaia a delicate nudge in the ribs at the discovery. She picked up on his hint without a pause and gestured to the guard, "This is what we have been looking for."

In preparation for the foraging trip, Kaia had woven together a basket from palm leaves that was several times larger than the stone bowl Ja used to store his spice. The three of them picked the flowers diligently, which had a subtly sweet aroma, but neither Ja nor Kaia had ever seen these flowers before, let alone eaten them. Ja popped one in his mouth as he picked, and it did have a pleasantly sweet flavor. He let it sit on his tongue for a moment and sucked on the leaves, wondering if it would improve the blandness of the tamfruit. He figured that it was better than nothing, but not as good as the spice he usually found. But after the flower sat for a while in his mouth, Ja found that his tongue was beginning to feel numb, and he spit the flower out without letting the guard see. Only a small corner of the meadow was needed to fill their basket to the brim with the small, fragrant flowers, and as soon as they were done the guard gestured that it was time to go back.

The other inhabitants of the compound were already digging into the piles of tamfruit when the three returned from their foraging trip, and the guard exclaimed to his partner and the rest of the people there with a wide gesture, proclaiming, "We have returned with the food of the community!" He jerked the palm basket from Kaia's hands abruptly and walked over to the pile of hairy spheres, peeling open the skin with his teeth and peppering the flesh inside with the blue flowers. The other

guard quickly joined, adding the flowers to a tamfruit of his own, and the two ate together heartily, placing the basket on the ground next to the pile of food. Ja looked down at the basket, then up at the eyes of the other men, and as soon as they realized that this was something Ja had worked for, they fought each other for the right to take it away from him. There were plenty of flowers for everyone, but that didn't stop the squabble, and soon the men weren't even trying to use them to season their fruit but instead shoving handfuls of the flowers into their mouths and elbowing one another away from the basket. This caused the guards to kick at the men and make sure they got another portion for themselves, but as soon as the guards stepped away again the squabbling continued.

The two women who ate seated at the table looked longingly at the basket of flowers, at this new delicacy enjoyed by those in the distant community, wondering if there would be any left over when the men had gotten their fill. Ja moved over to the table inconspicuously and made a soft whistling noise to get their attention. They looked at him inquisitively, confused when he gestured low by his waist, "Do not eat."

It only took a matter of minutes for the nine men of the compound and the two guards to consume the entire basket of blue flowers. Even before the final handfuls were eaten, it was clear that their movements were becoming leaden and sloppy, their aggressive grunts slurred and fangless. Their mouths were going slack and they could barely chew, with mashed-up wads of blue flowers spilling from their lips, but they still fought each other to eat more, looking back at Ja occasionally to ensure he was witnessing their act of dominance over him. The guards had moved back to the entranceway of the stone wall and they were swaying in the breeze, propping themselves up against the stone with elastic arms. Before long they toppled over, spears clattering in the dust, and the nine men of

the compound lay splayed around the empty basket, some convulsing, some utterly still.

Ja was terrified. He and Kaia would be blamed for this, and rightly so. This was entirely their fault, even if everyone in the compound had eaten the flowers with vengeful free will. When they woke - if they woke - no small stone blade was going to keep them safe any longer.

"We have to go," said Kaia aloud, snapping Ja from his stupor.

"Go where?"

Kaia looked at him as if he were the simplest man alive.

"Away from here. There is no one guarding the gate."

"We can't leave!" Ja exclaimed. "They will hunt us down and kill us. Leaving the compound is forbidden."

"And what do you think will happen if we stay?"

Ja looked at the men crumpled in the dirt. They were still breathing shallowly, but deeply asleep. His eyes returned to Kaia's, full of fear.

"We are marked for sacrifice," he said, barely above a whisper. "There is nothing these men could do to me that I fear more than the man in the hood. The Blood Summoner will find us."

Kaia gave Ja an indignant look. "Let him try."

With that, she strode briskly to the empty basket and refilled it with the few tamfruit that were uneaten. Kaia walked back to Ja and then past him, barking, "Come!" and he found himself following behind her obediently. Kaia approached the fallen guards with hesitation, but when it was clear they were unconscious, she set down the basket and patted them down to see if there was anything of use under their clothing. Ja stood over her and watched as she slid her hand beneath the scaled vest and around their thighs, but there was nothing concealed.

As Ja looked down on a lifeless body, he saw the glistening medallion around the guard's neck for the first time with real clarity. He never dared to look at the guards when he spoke to them, always keeping his eyes downcast, but now he could see that the necklace was something truly fantastic: At that moment, the medallion held the sky above trapped inside of it. Ja hesitantly drew closer, putting his face directly above the shining blue surface, and a face appeared in the medallion, causing him to jolt back and the face to disappear. Overwhelmed by curiosity, Ja drew close again and realized that it was merely a reflection; a perfect reflection of himself, infinitely clearer than he had ever seen his face reflected in water. His hand went down to take the medallion from around the guard's neck, but he hesitated and then stopped, deciding that taking it would only enrage the guards further if they caught him with it later. Not knowing exactly what it was, Ja stared into the mirror with deep fascination until Kaia forced a spear into his hand and gave a decisive order that it was time to go.

The image of Ja and Kaia jogging off into the jungle with spears in hand was reflected in the medallion of an unconscious guard splayed out on his side. The reflection of that image was seen in another mirror as well, held by a roughly-scarred hand in a dimly-lit cavern. This mirror was significantly larger than the one around the guard's neck and was encased in a rough frame of white volcanic stone. The hooded figure held the mirror in his right hand and studied it closely. His left hand was placed against a raised stone with fingers splayed. Blood flowed up and out of the stone, covering the hand completely in crimson and seeping up the wrist to the man's forearm, where it entered his body through a long vertical slit below his elbow. The hooded figure placed the mirror down onto a long stone table alongside dozens of

others, each with a unique material encasing the glass: wood, coral, onyx, hide, bone, ore. His eyes passed from one mirror to the next, examining the scenes, glass glistening in the dull red light.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Extended stream of consciousness
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. A weakness is discovered by accident
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Spirits of the dead begin to spill their secrets
12. Monotony is broken
13. Religious indoctrination
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Rules are disregarded
17. A tenuous bond is formed
18. Life is too good
19. Something is awakened
20. A new adventure begins

Outcomes Used:

6. A weakness is discovered by accident
16. Rules are disregarded

Added Outcomes:

Charismatic megafauna

(thanks to Kat)

Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes

(thanks to Aubrey)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 3. Extended stream of consciousness

Ethan: 11. Spirits of the dead begin to spill their secrets

Chapter Two: Evils and Omens

Written by Ethan

Ja and Kaia ran clumsily along the gnarled, overgrown trail that led away from the compound, legs pumping furiously as they tried to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their captors. The young man struggled to keep up with his new companion, as a lifetime of incarceration had left him with a low threshold for physical activity. Ja's lungs burned with every breath, but Kaia was unfazed, her eyes focused straight ahead as the two plunged headlong into the unknown.

As he ran, Ja's mind raced: *Where do I go, what do I do? The ground hurts, the air hurts. We're lost...we're dead. I should go back. I don't belong here. I belong to the Blood Summoner...to the community. No! I deserve to be free! I belong to no one. I am free! Free to die? The jungle killed everyone back there...it will kill me too...kill both of us. I don't know what to do! Follow her? Yes... follow her...she knows...does she? Should I trust Kaia? She's a friend...right? Stop thinking...just...RUN!*

A million disconnected thoughts rumbled through the young man's mind, unrelenting streams of doubt and hope waging a never-ending battle that would have frozen him in place if not for the survival instinct that forced him to move forward. He'd assumed that his first taste of freedom would be exhilarating, but as the two delved deeper and deeper into the jungle, Ja couldn't shake the sense of dread that hung over him.

He'd arrived at the compound when he was very young, so his memory of the outside world was marred with dreamlike details that he struggled to accept as reality. The compound may have been horrible, but it was tangible, and consistent. Any past he thought he remembered from before was a trick.

Still, Ja recalled a certain pleasantness from his childhood, sweet tastes and aromatic smells coupled with a warmth that came from being near his parents. The wild lands outside of civilization were so much less oppressive in his memories; the creatures and plants that inhabited the jungle sustaining life, not destroying it. He remembered many hardships, his family's quest for community consistently falling short, but they were together, and in those moments, that was enough.

He'd seen the scars across the bodies of his fellow prisoners, scars that existed long before those men and women had been captured for the blood sacrifice. Horrific cries from strange beasts were constant in the jungle that surrounded the compound. Terror was the apex predator amongst the fronds and vines that blotted out the sky. Ja didn't know if things had changed while he was inside the compound, or if the jungle had somehow gotten more terrible since he was a child, but it didn't matter. The jungle was simply not safe for their kind, especially for two people who had spent the majority of their lives tucked away safely behind stone walls.

Still, even being sheltered and fed, neither he nor Kaia had truly been safe amongst other humans, in the community or the compound. They merely toiled in periods of dull existence while awaiting their next torturous interaction with a society whose motivations were shrouded in secrets. Their betters wanted them to believe the needs of the many merited their treatment. The fear Ja felt as he ran away from everything he knew nearly drowned him, but at least it was a new sensation. Seeing Kaia chugging ahead, not once looking back, Ja finally accepted that anything was better than the places they were leaving behind.

The path began to dip into a sharp, craggy decline the further from the compound they moved. Jagged rocks and thick roots jutted up from the ground, finally forcing them to

slow their pace and step carefully as they made their way deeper into the jungle. Before long, the path all but disappeared, a sliver of sunlight snaking its way through a break in the thick canopy above them the only indication that it had ever existed.

Ja and Kaia continued to move forward, pushing through jagged tree branches on all sides that snagged at their coverings and scraped at their flesh. Before long, the jungle consumed the trail completely, with low-hanging vines and bushy undergrowth merging with trees to create a wall of foliage they'd be forced to cut through.

"Let's stop," Ja said through labored gasps. He placed his hands on his knees, grimacing as he sucked in stinging lungfuls of heavy, humid air.

"We shouldn't," Kaia said sternly.

"Why? I don't think the guards will awaken soon...if at all."

"Guards?" Kaia said as she turned to face him. "I am not worried about the guards."

She pointed up towards the sky, alerting Ja to the light growing dimmer above; the sun had already dipped beneath the canopy. Kaia knew that they were woefully unequipped to navigate the jungle in full light, let alone when darkness fell. Neither of them had any idea how to stay safe in the open jungle at night.

Before Kaia had been assigned her role in Orn and moved into the life givers' hut, she and a few other younglings would follow the hunting parties around when they returned from their multi-day treks, basking in the hunters' stories and dreaming of one day joining their ranks. Most who lived in Orn never left its walls, and Kaia yearned to see what the world was like outside. She imagined sleeping around the fire, surrounded by dense trees, protected from the dangers of the jungle and

the night by her fellow hunters. That life seemed so exhilarating, and made the safety of Orn's underground caves feel dreadfully dull by comparison.

Even as a small child, Kaia was inherently headstrong, and despite having her role in Orn defined for her early in life, she was vocal that she wanted to hunt, not procreate. The elders politely reminded Kaia of her place, explaining the importance of their traditions and how their roles were determined by the gods. Still, her defiance could not be quashed, so more direct methods were soon implemented.

One of the elder life givers, a woman named Tylu who'd birthed ten younglings, was tasked with reforming and educating Kaia. Stern and somewhat cold, Tylu didn't waste any time on her mission, and on their first day together she dragged Kaia by the hands to the gates of Orn to await a returning hunting party.

Kaia was confused at first. Had Tylu had a change of heart? She searched the older woman's face for a clue to her motivations, but her expression was locked as tightly as the stone statues that dotted the streets of Orn.

Before long, three haggard-looking hunters returned dragging a wooden sled heaped with bundles wrapped in the massive leaves of the *vecra* tree. Despite their best efforts, blood flowed through the coverings of the bundles, leaking off the back of the sled and leaving a dotted and smeared crimson trail behind them.

Kaia assumed they were relatively new hunters, as proper field dressings would have prevented the bloody mess they'd drug back. She knew this was important not only for the preservation of the meat, but also to prevent predators from following the party. And if they were new hunters, why weren't they accompanied by a *shikari* - an elder with exceptional skills

who could guide and train the fledglings? There was something off about the whole scene.

As the hunters neared, Tylu held up a hand to stop them and motioned to a middle-aged woman with a fresh claw-shaped wound across her abdomen. Tylu whispered something into the hunter's ear and then pointed in Kaia's direction. The hunter nodded, then hung her head as she waved Kaia over.

Kaia walked to her with clear trepidation. The return of a hunting party was usually a time of celebration; this was anything but.

As Kaia approached, the female hunter walked over to the stack of bundles, quickly working the edge of one of them loose and revealing its contents.

Kaia gasped when she saw the lifeless face of an Orn hunter staring back at her, eyes rolled inward, jaw agape. The hunter pulled back the canvas a bit further, revealing that the corpse's head was detached from its body.

"We were ten when we departed," the woman said solemnly as she reclosed the bundle. The three hunters laboriously dragged the sled into Orn and towards the pyre where their comrades would be set aflame and released back amongst the spirits. Kaia never questioned her place in the community after that. The idea of spending days and nights unprotected in the jungle didn't seem quite so enticing anymore.

Kaia and Ja had no choice now but to sleep in the wilderness, and though neither possessed particularly strong survival skills, they both had the common sense to know that they would need to find some sort of covering or shelter for safety. There was nothing of the sort where they currently stood, only dense jungle obstructing their way forward. Ja pulled the knife from his skirt and began to saw through stems and vines while Kaia hacked at them with her spear. Fueled by

desperation, they haphazardly cut their way deeper into the jungle, but no clear exit or stopping point revealed itself. The further they got, the thicker the jungle grew, until eventually their blades had no effect.

“What now?” asked Ja, drained and frustrated.

“We have to keep going.”

The path is gone and the jungle is too thick. We should turn back and find a different way.”

“There is no different way,” said Kaia, shaking her head. “If we had followed the path the other direction from the compound it would have led us to Orn. We cannot go there. We are exiles now; we will surely be killed if we go back, and I fear our deaths would not be quick.”

She looked back behind her, eyes scanning from the far distance to the dead end in front of them.

“This was a path,” she continued. “The path led here at some point. There should be something beyond.”

Kaia walked up to the obstruction, forcing her arms through vines and branches until her hands came out on the other side. She pressed her arms out with a grunt and it opened an area just wide enough to peer further down the trail. On the other side of the vine wall, she could barely make out the shape of an opening in a vast tree trunk, the entryway almost completely overgrown by the surrounding jungle but still barely visible in the dimming light.

“There,” she said pointing. “There is a shelter ahead. I remember the hunters speaking of them. Orn workmen carved out sleeping spaces in huge vecra trees to mark the trail and give travelers a place to sleep in areas that were otherwise unsafe to spend the night. We can rest there.”

“But there is no way to move forward,” said Ja, pushing against the wall.

“No,” Kaia replied, looking at the canopy above. “But we can climb up.”

Above the obstruction was a small break in the branches of the trees, just large enough for the two of them to crawl through. Not wanting to waste any more time, Kaia marched ahead and began ascending the vines that blocked their path. Ja followed hesitantly behind.

Once they were above the obstruction, they could see through the bottom of the canopy that there was a small clearing about twenty paces ahead, and in that clearing stood the hollowed-out tree. Kaia and Ja hurriedly drug themselves forward, ignoring the bark and finger-like twigs of the trees that scratched and drew blood from their skin.

Kaia crawled forward with renewed energy, but the feeling of Ja’s hand on her foot suddenly halted her progress.

“What?” she hissed, turning back to him.

Ja put his finger to his lips and pointed just above her head. She followed his gesture, realizing she was moments away from placing her hand directly into some kind of bulbous nest.

Kaia froze and tried to move her body as far away from the thing as possible, but there was barely enough room to navigate around it. As she inched away, the exterior of the nest began to pulse rhythmically as if something inside was trying to free itself. A muffled yelp came from within, but Kaia did not recognize the noise.

Suddenly, the nest pulled apart and a small, rat-like creature emerged, shrieking loudly as it struggled to pull itself free from the slimy material that coated the inside of the nest. The creature was a terrifying sight to behold, with fur and flesh sloughing off a partially-digested frame. It locked eyes with Kaia and suddenly drove towards her with all of its remaining strength, but the nest’s slimy tendrils held tight and

the bottom half of the rat was pulled apart from its torso, spilling innards out onto the ground right next to where Kaia was hunched.

Kaia hushed a scream as the creature's top half hung lifeless from the nest before slowly being dragged back inside by a force she could not see. She felt a desperate tug at her foot as Ja urged her to move forward. Kaia obliged, pulling herself away from the gruesome scene just as something out of her view pulled the open sides of the nest together and sealed it closed again.

After a bit more labored wriggling, the two made it down past the obstruction and into the clearing where the carved-out tree stood. Though the entrance was also covered with vines, this barrier parted with a firm push, allowing the two to crawl inside. Exhausted and bleeding from hundreds of tiny scrapes, Ja and Kaia collapsed into a pile on the floor.

Ja's body shook as he pushed himself up to a sitting position but Kaia was silent and unmoving, staring off into the distance.

"Kaia," Ja said softly as he placed a hand on her shoulder, "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," she said shortly, pushing his hand away.

Kaia stood up and took stock of the area. This tree was enormous, so big that carving out a space for twenty to sit comfortably had not killed it. The inside was barren, and any extra supplies, tools, or furniture that may have been stored here had long since been stripped away. The ground was covered in a thick, braided fibrous material that bulged in certain places, most likely where roots had begun to grow up from the dirt below. The material was soft and dry and offered a comfortable sleeping space, which neither had expected.

Along the back edge of the room in near darkness, they could barely make out a set of three statues formed from red

clay, about the size and shape of humans in a cross-legged position. The statues were roughly formed - nothing like the intricate stone carvings in the streets of Orn - but still defined enough to see the outlines of limbs and muted facial features. A necklace of thick, veiny leaves adorned each of their necks and small, black stones were placed vertically down their chests.

“Buru,” Kaia said softly.

“What is buru?”

“Protection. Orn medicine women would cover the bodies of the dead in clay and place them like this. It prevents their souls from being taken by evil spirits.”

“Is this how all of the dead are treated in Orn?” Ja asked.

“No. It is not common practice, only used in times of bad omens.”

“Are *we* safe here?” Ja asked nervously. He knew little of the customs and superstitions of the community. His parents never spoke of evils or omens when he was young, so he only learned of them during his time at the compound from Pall and through the guards' hushed chatter. Ja wasn't sure if the savage men even understood the concept, but he did recall certain sounds in the dark that would send them cowering into the corners, most often on full moons after the blood sacrifice or when the green mist settled atop the peaks of the distant mountains.

“We are safer in here than out there,” Kaia said pointing to the entryway. “Omens are Orn's way of explaining things they do not understand, but we've seen what the jungle can do.”

Ja nodded silently in agreement, and though he was unsure of how he felt sleeping in the same room as the dead, it wouldn't be the first time. He recalled when two of the men in the compound had ganged up on the largest, most dominant man in the dead of night, strangling him and then leaving his

lifeless body in the area where they all slept. Ja knew that something terrible had happened in the dark, and woke with the others to find the cold, purple body motionless on its palm leaves. These red statues couldn't be any worse than that.

Ja pulled out two pieces of tamfruit from the basket and handed them to Kaia as he settled down next to her. The two tore into the food with a gasping desperation before their hunger gave way to fatigue and they fell fast asleep in the middle of the room.

While Ja slept soundly, Kaia found herself waking up repeatedly throughout the night, her last few weeks in the compound leaving her with the constant feeling of being stalked. The darkness inside the tree was impenetrable, with no moonlight filtering through the vines to illuminate danger before it could strike. In their urgent escape from the compound, neither had thought to grab flint to make fire, which in that moment would have been far more useful to their survival than a knife or spear. She hoped the overgrowth covering was enough to keep them safely hidden away from the countless creatures echoing in the jungle outside.

Kaia brought her knees up to her chin and rocked back and forth, humming a lullaby she used to sing to the children she birthed before they were taken away to be raised by the community. In that moment, she recalled her first pregnancy, the feeling of intense connection to the child growing inside of her, knowing that she'd need to rid her mind of such emotions so as not to frustrate the elders.

"These are tricks of the underworld spirits," Tylu had told her. "We have learned them over countless births. The children are of Orn; not of you. The desperation to hold on to that which you create is the spirits preying on your weakness. We must all be strong *together* for Orn to survive."

But no “wisdom” from an elder could mend Kaia’s broken heart after her first birth, a girl with big brown eyes and a tuft of light, curly hair on the top of her head. They’d allowed her to hold the child, but not for long enough, then took her away forcefully, only returning for Kaia to feed her. She knew her desire to keep the child all to herself was wrong, but for some reason, the advice from Tylu and the elders seemed unnatural despite their wealth of knowledge. Still, like most things during her time in Orn, Kaia did not question, and the process never got easier.

A sound of soft scraping suddenly pulled Kaia away from the painful memory, her heartbeat quickening in turn. She turned to the entrance of the shelter, assuming an animal was trying to make its way through the vines, but the sound did not come from outside. It came from the dark corner where the buru sat.

Kaia squinted hard, hoping that her eyes would adjust to the darkness, but it was of no use. Her ears would be her only guide until dawn.

She reached down, feeling along the ground for Ja, fingers dancing across the strange braided material that covered the floor. Before long, she felt his outstretched hand and quickly grabbed at it, pulling gently so as not to awaken him too suddenly.

“Ja,” she whispered. “Get up.”

Ja grumbled but did not immediately wake. She shook him by the shoulder, gingerly at first but then harder when he didn’t stir. Finally, he responded, slapping at her hand before realizing what was happening.

“What?” he said groggily.

“There’s something in here with us...”

He started to protest his sudden awakening but the scratching sound repeated again, catching his attention and

forcing his tired body up into a sitting position.

The two listened silently in the dark as the sound of dead leaves crunching began to follow the scraping, then a low groan like an old man tossing in the night, though it was hollow and echoed strangely throughout the shelter. Neither Ja nor Kaia had ever heard such a terrible noise, and in that moment, were relieved that they could not see what was making it.

Terrified, Kaia and Ja huddled their bodies together and slowly scooted to the corner farthest from the buru. Ja reached into his grass skirt and pulled out the knife, and though it was dull and small, holding it made him feel a little more secure. Kaia silently berated herself for having left the spears against the wall where the buru sat.

Making themselves as small as possible, the two pressed their bodies into the corner, praying that whatever had gotten inside the tree hadn't noticed their presence. Kaia feared that the occupant of the terrible, slimy nest had followed them here and was building a new home in the darkness. Was this sound coming from something trapped inside of its nest, like the creature in the trees from before?

Despite the floor muffling much of the noise, Kaia and Ja could tell that something was moving away from the back of the shelter, as the fibrous material sunk in slightly with every bit of motion. When whatever was approaching was practically on top of them, Ja and Kaia held their breaths in suspense, but the entity seemed to languidly pass them by. They breathed in sharply, and the scent of earth and dead plants overwhelmed their senses.

The sound of snapping branches and tugging vines came from the shelter's opening as a struggle between the entity and the overgrowth barrier began, but it didn't last long before the

sound of footsteps stomping away could be heard outside. Then, all was silent again.

Ja and Kaia sat huddled until dawn, not daring to speak as they watched the interior of the shelter slowly take on a dim pink hue as sunlight leeches through the jungle canopy. Despite the vine covering having been torn away, no creatures had attempted to come inside in the night. In fact, an eerie calmness had settled as soon as the entity made its way out of the tree. The jungle surrounding them had ceased all activity, with only the call of distant birds signaling that the new day had begun.

Kaia pulled herself to her feet and reached out a hand to Ja, who still sat shaking and bewildered. Only one night of freedom and they had already faced a terror comparable to the Blood Summoner's ritual. He couldn't help but wonder if the compound was actually the safest place for them.

But before he could follow that thought to completion, a gasp from Kaia grabbed Ja's attention. He turned to look in the direction she was pointing and realized that one of the three buru was gone, and in its place a heap of broken clay pieces.

"We need to go," Kaia said, grabbing the spears and making her way to the front of the shelter.

"Was someone alive in the buru?" Ja asked, not daring to say the alternative scenario out loud.

"I don't want to find out."

Kaia stepped out into the jungle, startled by the unnatural stillness that had overtaken it. Her heart sank as soon as she took stock of their surroundings. Now that she could see it properly in the light, she found that the jungle on this side of the overgrown barrier was starkly different from what they had run through the day before. Like the tree they had camped inside, all of the trees on this side were enormous and thick, their canopies blotting out the sun with wide, wing-like leaves.

Their bark resembled scaled reptilian skin, with branches that moved subtly despite there being no wind, swaying like the limbs of a water-dwelling creature. The vines that ran along the ground were slimy and covered in tiny growths like barnacles, with translucent outer coverings that revealed pulsating objects moving about inside. Instead of growing around the trees, the vines here grew directly from large, yellow bulbs that covered the base of the tree trunks.

Looking back at the shelter, Kaia could make out a distinct line where the normal jungle stopped and the bizarre jungle began. The wall of trees and foliage they had climbed over to get to this side was a literal wall, seemingly created on purpose to hamper the encroachment of the horrifying plant life on this side.

“These trees are sick,” Kaia said as Ja came out of the tree to join her. “We must turn back.”

“We can’t,” said Ja, looking up the way they had come. “It’s impossible...the whole area we climbed through has closed up.”

“This can’t be,” said Kaia, jogging back to the living wall. But Ja was right, there was no way to get up into the canopy anymore, no room at all to move between the branches. The opening they’d made their way through was now completely swollen shut with fresh vines and slimy growth.

“We have to keep moving,” said Ja, pointing to the path that led forward from the shelter in the tree. Compared to the other side, the trail here was far less rugged, almost even maintained. In spite of this, the absence of obstruction through this monstrous jungle left them more unsettled than relieved. It appeared as though something had cleared the way recently, with freshly hewn branches and snapped vines littering either side of the soft ground.

With no other option, the two began to follow the trail again, still so shaken from the terror of the night before that it

dulled the fact that they were surrounded by monstrous, diseased trees. The further they walked, the closer the trees grew together, making the path feel smaller and smaller in its surroundings. But a way forward always remained: a sickly corridor of corrupted wood and detached vines that seemed to consistently part and let them through.

Eventually, they could make out an opening into a clearing, where sunlight reflecting off the unnatural bark created a glowing effect that gave Ja and Kaia equal parts relief and trepidation. As they neared the opening, a warm breeze blew through, filling their nostrils with an acrid odor that almost doubled them over. It was similar to what they smelled in the shelter when the entity passed by, but even more potent and sickly, like a perfume of rotting flesh sprayed over flowers.

Plugging their noses, they plunged through the opening, but stopped again in shock as the scene on the other side unfolded.

They stood at the entrance of an expansive city, far larger than Orn, but this city had undergone a gruesome transformation long ago. Outlines of stacked-stone buildings could be seen amongst groves of the sickly trees, with branches growing in through windows and breaking apart walls and thatched roofs as they expanded through abandoned streets.

A carefully-cleared promenade leading to the center of the town cut through the apocalyptic scene, seemingly impervious to the overgrowth that had destroyed everything around it. Upon this road stood a lone figure with a body caked in a familiar red clay. It turned glacially to face Kaia and Ja, revealing a skeletal face with a jaw that hung loosely from its skull. Its body was draped in tattered garments that were instantly recognizable to Kaia: the outfit of an Orn guard.

The figure hobbled towards them, beckoning with an outstretched hand that was missing all but two of its fingers.

As it approached, the body seemed to disintegrate, dry pieces of flesh and bone drifting off into the aether. By the time it reached them, it was nothing more than half a skull perched upon a spine and rib cage, a single arm pointing down the road, deeper into the city.

“This world is lost,” whispered the empty skull. “The time for migration is upon us...”

With that, what remained of the figure blew away into the warm breeze, leaving Ja and Kaia alone and silent in the hellish ruins.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Extended stream of consciousness
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. Charismatic megafauna
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Spirits of the dead begin to spill their secrets
12. Monotony is broken
13. Religious indoctrination
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. A tenuous bond is formed
18. Life is too good
19. Something is awakened

20. A new adventure begins

Outcomes Used:

3. Extended stream of consciousness

11. Spirits of the dead begin to spill their secrets

Added Outcomes:

Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection

(thanks to Shep)

Discovery of higher technology

(thanks to Matt)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 19. Something is awakened

Ethan: 13. Religious indoctrination

Chapter Three: The Absence of Light

Written by Jeff

The front of the skull seemed unnaturally bulbous, like there was a hardened notch right in the center of the forehead. The rear of the skull stretched back noticeably longer than it should have. The mouth was larger too, with huge teeth, and though he couldn't be sure, Ja swore the nose bone was significantly broader and more pronounced.

The young man had seen plenty of skulls in his short life, burnt black by the fire in the center of the stone circle or bleached white by the sun when the guards didn't bother to move the bodies away. Sometimes Ja had nothing else to do but stare at them, seeing what the bones looked like beneath someone he had lived with in the compound, imagining their face covering the skull once again.

But this skull wasn't like any Ja had seen before. If this was a person like him, Ja couldn't imagine what they must have looked like when they were alive. The roots and barnacle-covered vines that snaked throughout the crumbling ruins were littered with skeletons and not much else, and all of the skulls here looked like this one.

"Kaia," Ja called out. "Do these bones look strange to you?"

The woman was pulling at overgrowth draped all over what looked like an entranceway, but it didn't extend back into any structure. Past the threshold, the stacked stones simply tapered off to the ground. The entire thing was coated with unsettling flora and Kaia was busy prodding at it with her spear, wondering what the plants could possibly be.

"I haven't seen many bones before," she called back, not diverting her attention. "Not of people. Only animals. These just look like bones to me."

Ja looked up and saw her shove some of the vines away with her spear tip. As she did, the vines seemed to retract on their own, and the entranceway ahead was revealed. It was large enough for them to walk through upright with arms outstretched. This hole had clearly been widened with tools. Kaia looked up at the sun and saw that it was positioned well to illuminate the descending passageway, then began to walk inside.

“You’re going in there?” yelled Ja.

“You’d rather stay out here? With the skeletons and living vines?”

Ja gave her a confused look.

“We need to see if there is anything useful inside,” she explained. “All we have is a knife and a spear and an empty basket. We don’t want to eat any of the fruit from this part of the jungle, which means we’re going to have to hunt. I spent a lot of time with the hunters in Orn; I think I know what to do. What I really want to find down here is some flint so we can make a fire. I’d like to cook our food...if I can catch anything.”

There wasn’t any reason for Ja to disagree, and he was already pretty hungry, so he hesitantly walked behind her, bringing out the dull stone knife from under his skirt. He had to walk faster down the passageway than he wanted: Kaia was accustomed to going underground and moved through the tunnel swiftly. Every time it seemed like the light was gone completely, a slanted shaft would open up overhead, stretching through immense amounts of rock to let the sun into the underground lair. Still, it was tough for Ja to see much of anything. His feet regularly brushed against what he knew were bones, emitting a telltale clattering sound whenever he disturbed them. The ground was stone, cold and dry on the bottom of his feet. In the jungle, he rarely felt anything that was cold. They were far enough underground that the blazing

sun had no dominion here. He understood a little clearer now why people in the community would want to live underground, assuming they could see anything.

“Are the caves this dark in Orn?” Ja asked, his voice echoing softly down the corridor.

“No, not all of them,” said Kaia. “We used embers to bring light. There were many in the community who were tasked with keeping the fire. Once wood becomes an ember you can use it for light in the caverns without filling them up with smoke. The people of the community were very proud of their embers. There was always light if you needed it.” She sighed.

“Should we make some embers so we can see down here?” Ja asked. He couldn’t see the face she shot back at him in the dark.

“I don’t think the slimy vines here would make very good firewood.”

Almost as soon as she said it, the texture of the ground changed, and it was like they were walking around in the ruins again. They could feel the uniquely-squishy texture of the vines beneath their feet, pocked with hardened growths that still pinched through their calloused soles. Kaia went over the wall and felt around and it was covered in vines as well. They contracted at her touch and then relaxed a moment later. Ja and Kaia continued down the passageway, but slower now, more careful of where they stepped. Neither of them felt the need to verbalize the startling change in environment.

When they came upon a skylight in the ceiling that sent the sun beaming down a massive column through the earth, both felt the fundamental need to speak but simply didn’t have the words. They could see for certain now that the growth was covering everything down here, and individual, colossal vines stretched up through the gaping hole that had been blasted all the way to the surface. The vines swarmed completely around the opening, from the ceiling of the room in which they stood

to the very top, and it looked as if they were flexing open the hole in the stone with brute strength. Ja and Kaia shielded their sensitive eyes as they looked up and saw the sun and sky again.

Ja started walking forward while still looking up at the light and felt a sharp whip across his chest that stopped him in his tracks. He let out a gasp and looked around to see what had happened: Kaia had slapped him across his shoulders with her spear. He looked at her resentfully and she motioned down to him with her head. Ja was one step from walking directly into an enormous pit that descended into utter darkness. Like the skylight above, there was also a gaping hole that descended below, and the sun that came through wasn't bright enough to give them any clue how deep it went.

It was easy to see the vine-covered edge of the hole though, if you looked, so Ja and Kaia began to make their way around. Several corridors snaked away back into darkness in different directions, and the two chose one at random and went down. The first three paths ended in the same fashion, with a living wall blocking their way forward. The fourth continued in the same direction as the entrance to the cavern but descended much more quickly. Soon, this path was going down steeply and Ja and Kaia had to use their hands to make sure they didn't fall. As they went deeper, moving through darkness, the vines seemed to thin, and then Ja and Kaia could feel stone beneath their feet again.

The way forward now was flat, but there were no more shafts of light coming through the stone above. Eventually, Kaia felt the shape of the wall change and realized she had reached a doorway. As she stepped inside, an unexpected source of light sparsely illuminated the area. In the back of the room, around the corner from the doorway, sat a hulking, jagged mineral that appeared to be made of the night sky itself. The stone was black like onyx, but within it were points of light

that looked exactly like stars. They were actually emitting light; the room was softly brightened by the stars inside the stone, creating a glow like she was walking beneath a sea of constellations.

The star stone was perched like an egg in a nest, or perhaps a pedestal, carefully constructed from stacked femurs and tibia in a circular pattern. Ja entered the room behind Kaia and stared at the stone blankly. Aside from the pedestal, this room wasn't scattered in loose bones like the ruins outside, but Ja did notice a shelf in the rock wall that held five skulls. He picked one up and examined it. This skull was not strange and long like those he had seen among the vines before but looked exactly like the ones he had seen in the compound. He placed the skull back on the shelf and gave it a curious look.

While Kaia marveled at the stone and circled around it, Ja walked over to a carved stone table that wasn't so different from the one in the compound courtyard. On it lay dozens of shards of broken glass, some in large chunks and others splintered or ground into dust. He knew that this was the same material that the guards' pendants were made of, so he was ready to see his reflection when he picked up a piece and held the glass to his face. But he wasn't ready for the sharp edges of the broken shard and sliced his hand in two places as soon as he grabbed it. Ja winced and the glass went clinking down back onto the stone table, breaking off another edge in the process. Blood began to well on Ja's hand and he sucked at it with a frown.

In the center of the table, Ja noticed several shards that were unlike the other pieces. These were surrounded on one side by material like a frame. As Ja much-more-carefully picked up those pieces and examined them, he realized that the material was one of the barnacle-covered vines, dried out and hard to the touch. The frame had snapped when the mirror was broken

and Ja could intuitively see how a few of the pieces had originally fit together. He held the piece in his hand back down by the table with the others, adjusting its curve and broken edge so that it matched up with its mate. Without realizing it, Ja was solving his first visual puzzle. Next, he started re-positioning the other pieces so that the vine frame was whole again and he could see the mirror as it had once been before being destroyed. There was still a small piece missing though, and as his eyes searched the stone tabletop to find it, Ja noticed a bit of the frame. The glass it once held had been completely broken away and all that remained was a small stump of vine, thick in the middle like the severed base had devoured its own tip and then broken away on either side of the protrusion.

Ja set the final piece of frame in its place and examined the shape made by the missing shard of glass. As he searched for it among the detritus on the table, the vine frame began to pulsate lightly as color and texture gradually returned to its form. Each severed end became wet and then re-joined with the pieces around it until the vine was whole again. Ja finally spotted the final missing piece of the mirror and picked it up for inspection, grabbing it gingerly between the fingertips of his sliced, bloodied hand. As he did, the shattered glass inside of the frame began to liquefy and pool, emitting a dull purple light. He caught the glare in his periphery and glanced over, flinching away from the table when he saw the vine rejuvenated with a puddle of shiny liquid at its center. He would have dropped the glass shard he held back onto the table; his hand opened instinctively to let it go. But Ja heard no clink of glass hitting rock, and looked down in horror to see the glass dripping down his fingers and onto his palm, liquid and shimmering like a pool of mercury.

The yelp that he let out was loud and desperate enough to break Kaia's concentration on the stone and she went to see

what was the matter. But she hadn't made it halfway across the room before an immense rumbling filled the cavern and everything began to violently shake. Ja saw the shards of glass on the stone table begin to dance with movement, accenting the thunderous growl of stone with a thousand high-pitched clinks.

"It's an earthquake!" shouted Kaia. "We have to get out of the cave!"

The two of them bolted for the door and began to frantically ascend the steep stone path back to the surface. Ja was afraid to place the hand covered in liquid glass against anything as he climbed and ascended awkwardly without the use of all of his limbs. Soon, they could feel the vines beneath their feet again, but something was different. It was as if the vines were moving now in the opposite direction, forcing them to run three steps to move a single step forward. Light from the massive skylight eventually began to illuminate their path again, but it was dimmer, and they could see that there were either more vines clogging the passageway now, or the ones that were there had gotten bigger. The earth continued to shake and they could hear chunks of rock breaking away and connecting with a wet thud as they crushed the living vines.

When they reached the main chamber, there was no chance for Ja to accidentally fall into the massive hole a second time; there was no hole now. The chasm had been filled with a colossal beak, flat and fat and jagged, so big it could devour both of them in a single gulp. Ja and Kaia slid to a halt in the entranceway, and as they came into the light the creature spotted them with an enormous side-facing eye and let out an ear-splitting shriek. The tree trunk-sized vines that climbed up the skylight began to speedily retract. As they were sucked back down into the main chamber, the light source from above was snuffed out, and Ja and Kaia could see nothing at all. The beak

emitted another terrifying scream. Wordlessly, Ja and Kaia turned around and started right back down the passageway they had just come.

The vines extended all the way down to the bottom of the corridor now, which surprisingly made it easier to descend the steep grade. Some of the growths reached up and brushed at Ja and Kaia's legs as they ran, but it didn't seem as if the vines were trying to grab them. It felt more like they were stretching after a long, deep sleep. But the writhing tentacles all stopped at the same point, unwilling or unable to proceed into the room with the star stone. When the two made it back inside, Ja was nearly hyperventilating, then he saw his hand again in the light and couldn't breathe at all. He began flapping it in the air as if a huge insect was biting him and he was frantically trying to shake it away. Kaia approached with caution, holding her hands down and out, and Ja let her sidle up to him and see what was the problem.

"It's my fault," Ja whimpered. The creature let out another horrible wail in the distance. "I shouldn't have been touching things in here. I don't know *anything*. I woke it up."

Kaia walked over to the table and saw the strange, glowing pool in the center surrounded by a circular vine. There were shards all over the table, and as she hovered over them, she noticed that while some were reflective, others seemed like windows into completely different rooms. Her eyes flitted across the scenes, then stopped when she saw a face and let out a gasp that brought Ja's attention to the table as well. They both leaned over the shard, too terrified to touch it, and as they did the person on the other side began to shout in unmistakable anger. The top of the face was covered by a hood that obscured the eyes, but the teeth were visible and unsettling, each sharpened to an unnatural point. No sound accompanied the

image, but they could see the man screaming with unhinged fury. He was screaming directly at them.

“Is that the Blood Summoner?” squeaked Ja, pulling his head away.

Kaia gave him a look that expressed a dozen emotions all at once, then replied matter-of-factly: “We need to get that thing off your hand.”

She took his hand into her own and looked at it inquisitively, seeing that the liquified glass was fused to his skin. A closer look revealed her own reflection staring back, wavy and warped by ripples on the surface. Everything was vibrating in the cavern and it was too dark to see properly how the thing was attached to Ja’s hand, so Kaia led him delicately over to the starlight for a better look. With their backs to the bone pedestal, she held his hand up above their heads, getting a look at the pool of glass from beneath and seeing if it would drip down like regular liquid. Ja looked off to the side with teeth and eyes clenched as Kaia inspected his hand, like a child having a thorn removed. Ja could feel the strangeness of the starlight coming from the stone and was amazed to spot the faintest outline of a shadow stretching out on the floor in front of him.

“Tilt your hand like this,” instructed Kaia, pressing at his wrist. “I’m going to see if I can use the spear to pry it off.”

Ja looked up to see what she meant, and Kaia saw his eyes reflected in the mirror pool on his palm. She tilted his hand down slowly, bringing the star stone into the reflection as well. The instant their eyes met the stone in the reflection, everything around Ja and Kaia shifted in a dark flash. The room was no longer illuminated with starlight but with a soft yellow glow. The crashing and rumbling of stone and the scream of the creature in the distance had ceased. It took several long,

confused breaths before either realized they were no longer in the same room they had stood moments before.

Ja's body tried to throw up, but there was nothing in his stomach so he simply coughed and retched. Kaia dropped her spear and did a slow 360, taking in her new surroundings. In general, this room was not so different from the last: they were still in a cave. There was a stone table with mirrors on it, but they weren't smashed. There were no skulls adorning the walls as decoration, but there was a pedestal made of bones that looked similar to the last one. This pedestal held no stone. There was a place where something of a similar size should sit, but nothing was there.

"What do we do?" asked Ja, gasping and wiping his mouth with his forearm. "I don't think we're in the ruins anymore."

"I don't either. I don't know if we're still in the same caves, but we're definitely in a different room. This one has a pedestal like the last one, but no stone. That has to mean something."

"There are reflections on the table," said Ja, holding out his palm. "Do you think one of them would take this reflection off of my hand?"

Kaia gave him an uneasy look.

"I don't think we should touch those anymore. But if we are in a new cave, there might be someone here who can help you."

"This might be the Blood Summoner's room, for all we know," Ja said indignantly. "If anyone understands magic like this, it would be him. Do you think *he* would help me?"

Ja made a valid point. Kaia glanced at his hand again and tried to stay supportive.

"We'll just have to be careful getting out of here until we know where we are. We definitely shouldn't be down here in this room. Let's get back up to the surface. Move as quietly and quickly as you can."

It didn't take long into the passageway before Ja and Kaia really started to believe that they had been transported to a different cave system. The walls here were a completely different type of stone than in the ruins. This stone was much smoother to the touch, and these passageways were naturally formed, not widened with tools. The walls also felt damp to the touch, and much colder. The air was colder too, and Ja and Kaia shivered as they slunk low and quiet through the corridors. Embers were placed sporadically so one was never walking in darkness for too long. People were clearly living here, but there were no voices or any other sounds at all. Kaia peeked around entryways into rooms before they passed by, but no one was ever inside.

Ja watched Kaia poke her head around the threshold of another entryway, but instead of stealthily shooting past it, this time she swung herself inside. He wondered for a moment if he should follow before he heard her voice whisper softly but excitedly, "Get in here!"

Even if you have never seen a specific food before, your nose will let you know right away whether you want to eat it or not. A wave of new, appetizing scents hit Ja as he entered the room, and though he had no idea what any of the items were that hung from the walls or were stacked on the tables and in baskets, he didn't need to be told that they were food. He knew.

"What is this place?" he whispered in amazement.

"A larder," said Kaia, who was already poking around at the foodstuffs and smelling things more closely. "It's where the community stores its food. I don't know what a lot of this stuff is, but I know a larder when I see one."

There was a deep, carved stone reservoir filled with water, and neither Ja nor Kaia realized how thirsty they were until they started to drink and then simply didn't stop. A cooking fire made the room significantly brighter than the hallways,

and once they stopped drinking, Kaia noticed a small stack of animal pelts in the corner and began to examine them, holding them up in the light.

“Perfect,” she said, more to herself than to Ja. “These are bags used by the hunters. We can keep supplies in them and strap them over our shoulders to keep our hands free, and we can carry more.” She held up a small pouch made from a dried and tanned animal organ. “And we can store water in this. We have no idea how long it will be until we find water again.” With that, she stood and filled the bladder and began to stuff the hide sack with roots and dried meat. She looked next to the fire and found a sizable piece of flint and shoved that in the bag as well.

“Should we be taking all of this stuff?” asked Ja. “This isn’t Orn, right? This is a new community. Maybe we should be trying to join them, not steal from them. They won’t want us if they think that we’re thieves.”

Kaia’s expression hardened and the face of the Blood Summoner screaming in the mirror shard shot into her mind. This was not Orn, but wherever it was, it was connected to Orn and the vine-covered ruins in some disconcerting ways. There was still a pedestal of bones in the chamber where they had appeared; still a table full of mirrors.

“We don’t know yet if this a place we would want to live,” she explained. “Let’s try to learn more about who these people are, without them knowing that we’re here. If they seem like a community we want to join, we’ll put everything back. If not...we’re ready to move on.”

Ja nodded, then went to a basket to look for something to eat. He didn’t recognize anything in the larder. He hadn’t eaten meat since he was a child with his parents, and seeing it now, the idea of consuming flesh seemed wholly unappetizing. All he had known in the compound was tamfruit and occasionally

some sour, pulpy fruits during the colder months of which he had never learned the name. He picked one of the items from a basket at random - a roundish, green fruit bigger than his palm - and took a bite. It was sweet and crisp and juicy and it made his whole mouth salivate the moment he tasted it. Ja devoured the fruit in a few big bites, then ate three more in quick succession.

When he finished, Ja licked the leftover juice on his fingers and then noticed his other hand, still covered with the strange, reflective surface. Kaia had watched the young man eat, noticing how he kept the afflicted arm dead at his side, afraid to let it touch anything. She went to the table and found a small piece of thin, dried hide used to wrap up food and brought it over to him. Without asking, Kaia grabbed his hand and quickly wrapped the hide around the mirror before Ja had time to object. When she tied off the knot, Ja looked at the covering and felt a sense of relief. He gave Kaia a thankful nod.

Kaia loaded up supply bags for both of them and showed Ja how to sling it over his shoulder so that the bulk of the pack sat against the base of his back. Right as they were about to leave, Ja finally spotted something in the larder that he recognized: a whetstone. It was virtually the same as the one Pall had smuggled into the compound so they could each make a knife. Ja's blade was terribly dull now from cutting through the jungle the night before, so he had Kaia wait for a moment while he sharpened it back up.

They crept out of the larder, moving even more carefully through the corridors now that they had stolen from this community, but still there was no one else inside the caves. Each room was empty and all was silent, yet there were still fresh embers illuminating the way forward. They could tell now from the airflow that they weren't too far from the surface, but the frigid temperature in the caves still wasn't

rising. Kaia directed them into some sleeping chambers where they found animal furs, soft and fuzzy and warm, and wrapped them around their shoulders.

Before long, the two began to hear a sound in the distance that grew in intensity as they continued down the corridor. It was a rhythmic thumping and what sounded like people chanting - a lot of people - though their song was deep and subdued. Kaia could make out the edges of the exit to the tunnel now, but she couldn't quite understand what she was seeing. Somehow, the world outside of the cave was darker than inside. As the faint light of the embers reached the end of the stone walls, the world beyond was not a new source of light, but impenetrable blackness. Hesitantly, Kaia and Ja inched towards the entranceway to see what awaited outside.

Though it was evident they had reached fresh air, there was no light at all being emitted by the night sky, and it was so dark the trees were nothing but faint, shapeless silhouettes. There was a row of stone pillars leading to a larger area, and on top of each pillar was a brazier that held a lit fire, but the flames were not orange and illuminating. These fires were a dull purple, doing little to add light to the larger scene. At the end of the pillars, there were more than a hundred robed figures, many on their knees in supplication, the rest with arms outstretched to the vacant sky. The bodies spread up an incline resulting in rows upon rows of chanting parishioners. To the side, a singular darkened figure stood on a raised stone stage, arms moving in rhythmic circular patterns.

The figure stepped down off of the stage, and as he moved, Kaia could see a pedestal that had been positioned behind him. This was another circular stack of bones, and nested inside was another stone that held the light of the night sky. It shone in the darkness like a beacon. Both Ja and Kaia found themselves fundamentally drawn to it, though they dared not move any

farther out of the entranceway. The leader of the ritual plucked a robed figure from the crowd and led them up to the stage. The chanting swelled as the chosen one was brought to the pedestal. After a deep, steadying breath, they reached out their arms and grabbed tightly onto the stone.

It was as if the body beneath the robe simply faded into the darkness, and once it had disappeared completely the robe they had been wearing simply fell to the ground. The fires in the braziers lurched upwards, flames intensifying for only a moment, bringing a little more light to the surroundings. The rows of bodies never broke from their chanting and prayerful movements, and the leader walked back over to them to choose the next participant. They came unquestioningly, emerging from the congregation with a sense of giddiness as if they had been selected to receive a prize.

Again and again, the leader brought members of the chanting crowd onto the stage and they willingly placed their hands on the star stone and were dissolved into the darkness. The braziers roared a little brighter after each sacrifice, bringing more definition to the scene, while the star stone seemed to dim with each congregant it consumed. In one of the fire flashes, Ja and Kaia saw that the trees surrounding them were nothing like the wide-leafed ones around Orn and the compound. These trees had no leaves at all - the branches were completely covered in tiny quills. As another body was taken by the darkness, Ja placed his hand on Kaia's shoulder and whispered to her.

"We should go while we can. There is only one more sacrifice."

"How do know?" she asked.

"Just a feeling. The next is number thirteen."

The two crept out of the safety of the cave entrance and away from the ritual, but Ja only made it a few steps before he

stopped and let out a pained gasp. Kaia looked back and he was holding the wrist of his bandaged hand like it had been freshly injured. Tears streamed from the sides of Ja's eyes and he began to furiously rip away at the bandage, not knowing how to properly untie the wrapping and not in a position to learn. The hide wrap flew away and Ja looked at his hand in disbelief. Kaia could see it too: The liquefied glass did not reflect the dark forest around them but instead displayed a green, growth-covered vine pressing forcefully against the other side of the glass.

The braziers roared and the surrounding forest was illuminated. But this time, it stayed illuminated. Kaia looked up and the sky was full of stars again, returning a soft glow to the night. Then she realized the chanting had stopped and her eyes shot to the stage. She could see that the stone on the bone pedestal was completely black now, its stars returned to the sky. Oblivious to the change in his surroundings, Ja whimpered and wrestled with his wrist as the vine on the other side tried to violently force its way through. Kaia spoke Ja's name with an urgency that stole his attention, and her gaze brought his to the stage.

The leader of the ritual stood silently, alone on the platform in front of a pile of robes. The fires in the braziers burned with orange flames now and the scene was brightly illuminated. Even so, the head, arms, and feet that protruded from the leader's ceremonial clothing were not the color or texture of bare skin. They were an unfathomable black, just like the stone that sat perched behind. Ja looked into the face and saw the complete absence of light. Startled, he looked away to the congregation, and a small part of him was strangely relieved that at least one minor mystery of the day had been solved.

He had wondered what the faces that belonged to the abnormal skulls in the vine ruins had looked like, and now he

had his answer. These people were like none Ja had ever seen, with huge, long heads and bulbous brows that completely shadowed their eyes. But their faces were plain to see: They were angry, and they were all looking directly at Ja and Kaia.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. Charismatic megafauna
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Religious indoctrination
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. A tenuous bond is formed
18. Life is too good
19. Something is awakened
20. A new adventure begins

Outcomes Used:

13. Religious indoctrination
19. Something is awakened

Added Outcomes:

Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize

(thanks to John)

A dam breaks creating massive flooding

(thanks to Rebecca)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 20. A new adventure begins

Ethan: 17. A tenuous bond is formed

Chapter Four: Honor March

Written by Ethan

Icy wind whipped across Torv's face as he stood on the crest of a hill overlooking the haunting landscape that stretched out before him. The dense forest that had been his tribe's hunting ground since his youth was gone, in its place a tundra of decayed tree husks that jutted skeletally from the frozen ground. The once-fertile region that gave his people roots, vegetables, and berries was now barren, with only a few hardy-yet-inedible plants still surviving in the cracked and inhospitable soil.

With eyes still locked on the stark landscape, Torv knelt down and pulled the head of his spear from the still-quivering body of a grotesque man at his feet. The man's abnormally long face was locked in terror, with an occasional cough or labored breath sending crimson mist from his mouth and spurts of gore from his gut.

Next to him lay four more bodies: Three cut throats and a single smashed skull from the impact of Torv's club - their reward for waking up before the barbarian was finished killing the others. The blood, bile, and brains that littered the area brought rare warmth to this cold, arid ground, but these bodies would bring Torv no closer to completing his impossible task. To fulfilling his *Honor March*. Regardless, these bodies had stood in the barbarian's way, so he cut them down all the same. Torv reflected somberly on the circumstances that led him down this dismal path.

His clan - *the Ulvson* - referred to these outsiders as "boar faces" or simply "boars" due to their oddly-shaped heads and the massive brow ridges that covered their eyes. And though they didn't have long, sharp tusks, they could often be seen

rooting around the forest floor like wild pigs. At first, the Ulvson saw the boars as insignificant, ugly creatures that would surely fade into oblivion due to their weakness. They did not merit even a fraction of the attention that rival tribes had garnered in the past. But this triviality would not last long. Despite their complete inability to fight back, the boars were now the single greatest enemy to Torv's clan.

In the past, the boars stuck to the far end of the forest, living amongst the rocks and cliffs of the mountain range that stretched off into the horizon. They were rarely seen unless a hunting party tracked game up to the foothills, and even then, the boars kept themselves hidden and never interacted with the Ulvson directly. But once the great forest began to wither and die, sightings of the boars became more frequent, and they were spotted much closer to the Ulvson village. The unwelcome visitors were summarily executed whenever they were discovered, but still more and more boars continued to travel away from the mountains and through the forest towards the barbarian clan.

Torv's people didn't understand what the boar people were looking for, or why their numbers seemed to grow even though the trees and plants that provided food in this region were all withering away. There was little left to scavenge in the dying wood, and what animals still existed in the great forest had grown sickly and more aggressive. Torv's clan had already begun to hunt and gather in the tundra to the south of their village as well, an even more desolate place that had little to offer outside of tiny rodents and a bland tuber they called *po*. It was a region the Ulvson relied on only during times of scarcity or rebirth in the wild and was only a stopgap for gathering resources, not a permanent solution. The clan understood that at times the world around them needed to heal, and while the brutality of the climate sometimes decimated entire species, it

allowed for stronger, hardier plants and creatures to take their place.

The boar people represented a shift in this cycle. Their weakness and cowardness were unmatched by even the lowest of beasts; how could they possibly be thriving? The answer, it would seem, lay with their cryptic leader. The boars' trespasses into the great forest marked the first attack of the *Light Eater*, the cause of the *Black Night*, in which all light around the mountains was sucked from the sky for hours on end. As these aberrations became more and more frequent, so too did the death of the woodlands and its inhabitants. Before long, the Ulvson were certain that the migration of the rival clan into their forest was a diabolical act: the boar people were destroying the great forest.

Sieg, the chieftain of the Ulvson, claimed that the only way to bring life back to their lands was to fertilize the ground with the blood of their enemies. This tended to be Sieg's solution for most issues that presented themselves to the village. Regardless, the tribe's very existence depended on the gifts of the great forest, and with the forest rapidly dying, this brutal option was certainly on the table.

The boar faces were weak and easy to track. They never put up much of a fight when caught, only ever attempting to scamper away or hide when a hunting party stumbled upon them. To the Ulvson, this was a cowardly and dishonorable way to meet one's end, so they took little pride in slaughtering these meek creatures. Had a member of Torv's tribe died in such a way, their entire family would suffer generations of shame, assuming anyone would ever mate with them again.

After countless days of hunting and slaughtering the boar faces, the forest did not grow back and the tribe began to fear that the end of the world was upon them. The chieftain, however, was firm on his theory, insisting that his people had

simply not culled enough of the invaders. Sieg's answer, as usual, was more bloodshed. But some in the Ulvson clan were becoming restless at the lack of results earned from these continual murders, and so a council meeting was arranged to discuss the cataclysmic scenario the tribe was facing. It was Yurl, Torv's eldest brother, who had the temerity to suggest that perhaps the chieftain was wrong.

"The Light Eater has claimed dominion over these lands," Yurl had proclaimed. "We must move on to preserve our clan. Our pride is not worth more than our lives."

Torv watched as the chieftain's face begin to boil at his brother's words. The confidence with which Yurl spoke seemed to invigorate the longhouse full of battered souls, which only infuriated Sieg further.

"Brother, these are our ancestral lands," Torv had interjected, trying to stop his well-meaning but stubborn sibling from continuing. "We must fight until our last breath to protect them."

There was a bitter history between Sieg and the two brothers. Torv and Yurl's father had been the previous chieftain before succumbing to illness. Yurl was to take on the role next, but Sieg, a much larger and stronger man, challenged him for leadership. The title of chieftain was rarely contested, and Yurl and Sieg had fought for hours in the most ferocious battle the clan had ever seen. Despite his smaller stature, Yurl did surprisingly well to meet his foe head-on, but Sieg eventually overtook him and Yurl was forced to concede.

Despite his loss, the Ulvson still viewed Yurl in a leadership capacity. Many wished he had become chieftain, as his experience and knowledge far surpassed that of the brutish Sieg. This division caused friction amongst the clan and factions began to take form. Then the first Black Night occurred and the boar people grew and spread and the great

forest deteriorated, and the clan was forced to focus their efforts on the dire circumstances that had been thrust upon them.

“Our forefathers survived by following the herds,” Yurl had continued, walking confidently towards Sieg. “It was not until we discovered the great forest that our clan settled in one place. We were stronger back then; it's time we followed our true path once again.”

The group that had gathered for the meeting began to murmur amongst themselves, quickly building to a buzz of enthusiasm.

Sieg stared at the audacious man with both curiosity and anger. What Yurl had said was true: food supplies grew scarcer by the day. The time for simply hoping that the great forest would regrow had come to an end. They would need to act now or perish. Sieg's solution, as always, was violence.

“I do not fear the light eater!” the chieftain growled. “And I will not allow cowards amongst our ranks!”

In a flash, the stone axe at Sieg's side was in his hands and then swinging through the air, severing Yurl's head from his shoulders before the man could mutter another slanderous word.

Torv stood motionless as he watched Yurl's head land on the ground with a dull thud, his brother's mouth frozen in place as if he was about to continue arguing his case. Instinctively, Torv reached for his club, but Sieg was surrounded by his inner circle, so attacking him now was suicide.

“Bring me Yurl's kin,” Sieg demanded. “We must cleanse their sickness before it spreads.”

Among the Ulvson, cowardice and weakness were incurable diseases passed down from generation to generation. In their harsh world, the tribe became vulnerable if they

allowed precious resources to be given to those who were considered a liability. This meant that anyone accused of such traits was left with two options: Prove themselves by completing a seemingly impossible feat, known as an *Honor March*, or be killed along with their children. Yurl was already dead, and now his son and daughter would be executed to cleanse his sullied line.

“Wait!” Torv called out, holding up his hand. “I will take the Honor March.”

“That is not the way,” Sieg snarled. “Only mothers and fathers can call for this. Do you share your brother’s treachery?”

“My brother was not given the chance to face judgment,” Torv said with fire in his eyes. “You can accept my wish, or accept my challenge for the title of chieftain.”

Sieg flinched at the ultimatum. Torv was one of the strongest in the tribe and would likely cripple or kill him in a fight. Sieg was still formidable, but his years as leader had left him softer and less resilient. It had been too many seasons since the chieftain had wielded a hunting spear, let alone a club for battle. The desperate murder of Yurl had left him vulnerable.

Torv had no aspirations to lead; he cared more for the survival of his kin than any personal notoriety. He had only issued the challenge because he knew that Sieg would be shaken by it, and would allow him to take the Honor March in his brother’s stead. Having lost his mate before they could bear children, Yurl’s son and daughter were as dear to Torv as if they had been his own. He would do whatever it took to preserve their lives.

“I will go to the far lands and I will destroy the Light Eater,” Torv had proclaimed, knowing this impossible task to be a worthy feat. “For that, my brother’s children shall live.”

Without waiting for a response, Torv had stomped from the crude longhouse where the council meetings were held, quickly packed his gear and bear fur coverings, and wandered off in the direction where the Light Eater fed from the sky.

Torv was now five days into his Honor March. As he stood above the four steaming boar corpses, the memories of the council meeting and his brother's death left a foul taste in his mouth. He'd found this group by accident as he made his way towards the steep crags at the far end of the forest, snoring away noisily. The boars had been unarmed with few supplies aside from small bags of tree nuts and seeds. Everything in this area was barren and Torv couldn't imagine where the boars could have scavenged the food. He added their rations to his own.

A soft whimper from within a hollowed-out tree trunk caught Torv's ear, finally pulling his attention away from the recollection of events that had led him to the edge of these dead woods. He crept quietly over to the source of the sound, carefully peeking into a hole in the tree just wide enough to fit a tiny body.

Two tear-filled eyes glared back at Torv as the whimpers grew into a panicked cry. A boar child had apparently hidden inside the tree during Torv's massacre - a single living witness to the Ulvson man's brutality.

Brandishing his club, Torv decided that bringing a quick end to the boar child was the right thing to do. There was no way it could survive alone out in these frigid, desolate lands. He would be doing the miserable creature a favor. But as Torv went to reach inside the stump, the thought of killing it did not sit well with him. Despite the hardship and misery the boars had brought to these lands, this was still a child. There was no honor in murdering children.

“Do you speak?” Torv asked while motioning with his hands, making a gesture like words coming from his mouth. The panicked child didn’t respond. Torv knelt down and motioned again, this time getting a small nod from the child as it hugged the oversized cloak that covered its tiny body. But soon the boar child began to shake uncontrollably as the reality of the situation replaced the initial shock, and its hopelessness spilled from its mouth in the form of a piercing wail.

Wincing at the miserable sound, Torv got down onto his hands and knees and reached into the hole, grabbing the boar child firmly by its foot. The child tried to hold on to the wood to resist but Torv’s strength was far too great, and with one mighty pull it was extracted from the husk.

The child continued to spasm and cry wildly, what little survival instinct it had left kicking in now that it was captured. Torv placed his meaty hand over the child’s mouth and held it there firmly, squeezing slowly until it was clear that things would only get worse for the child if the screaming continued. The child seemed to understand and the fight drained from its tiny body.

Torv pulled out a length of rope from his bag and tied it around the boar child’s neck, leaving just enough slack that it could breathe but not so loose that the boar child could get free. When Torv finally reached the boars’ domain, there was a chance he would be able to kill them all en route to the Light Eater. But even though they were meek creatures, there was a real possibility the boars could swarm and overpower him with sheer numbers. He decided a better plan was to try and gain their trust by pretending he had rescued one of their children.

But even with a plan in place, Torv didn’t know exactly where the boar faces lived, only that their village was somewhere up in the mountains ahead. Scaling the steep cliffs was the quickest way to survey the area, but doing so with a

child on a leash would be far more trouble than it was worth. Surely the boars knew a better way to traverse the crags and crevices that led to the peaks where the first Black Night occurred. Torv tugged on the rope sharply, calling the child's attention.

"Listen," he said with a glare. "You will lead me to your home. You will not speak of today or I will kill more of your people. Do you understand?"

The child nodded, tears rolling down their face.

"Where do you come from?" the man asked, gesturing again with his hands. The child looked up at him, still shaking, and pointed a finger in the direction of a clearing in the mountain range about a quarter day's pace from their present location.

"Good," he said, tugging the rope as he continued on in that direction.

Torv had never walked this far into the forest after its death. The council advised that the clan stay far away from the decrepit landscape in the fear that whatever caused the destruction might somehow cling to people and be brought back to the village. It was shocking how quickly life was destroyed in the forest and the extent of the destruction. The branches of the trees had completely rotted away, leaving only blackened and hard pine needles at their base. Torv reached down to pick one up, tapping it with his index finger and realizing how easily it could pierce the skin.

The trunks of the trees still remained, though they looked more like jagged stones than once-living things, their bark frozen completely through by the cold. His clan had thought that maybe the dead wood was still salvageable, but the exterior of the trees simply shattered against the blows of their stone axes. It would surely take the intervention of the gods to bring the great forest back to life.

When Torv returned to the clan after his Honor March, he would have to insist on Yurl's plan of action that had led to his death. Doing so would mean killing Sieg and his confidants, but that would need to be done anyway for the good of the clan. Even if Torv was able to kill the Light Eater, that would likely only halt the destruction of the forest, not revive it. They *should* leave these lifeless lands and follow the herds again, like their forefathers. Perhaps in a generation or two their people could return if new life in the great forest emerged.

After a while, Torv and the child came to a stream that ran through the forest, a tributary of the massive river that ran north along the mountain range. Surprisingly, the water here was shallow with a solid layer of ice coating its surface from shore to shore. The ground in the area seemed to be in better shape than the rest of the land around it. Small patches of moss were beginning to grow at the edge of the frozen water as well as a few sprouts that Torv recognized as berry bushes. Perhaps the forest was still fighting for life, but any comeback wouldn't happen quickly enough to feed his people again anytime soon.

Peering further up the stream, Torv noticed an obstruction that resembled a beaver dam, though it was unnaturally sophisticated, as if built by man. He pulled the child along as he walked towards the dam, noticing that it divided the clear, pure waters from a dark green sludge that reeked of death and decay. Floating on top of the disgusting stew were the skeletons of fish and other animals, including a few unfortunate boar people that had fallen into the goop.

Looking closer at the dam, Torv noticed that a thin netting made from sinew was situated on either side, allowing water to slowly flow through. Two small piles of rocks were held in place by a crude wooden frame, creating a pocket where sand was piled up to the surface of the stream. Torv did not understand how it worked, but the dam appeared to be

somehow cleaning the water. Did the boar people have the intelligence to create such a complicated device?

Torv looked down at the child and pointed to the dam and the child slowly shook its head, though it still would not speak. This structure was baffling, and Torv considered going back to the village to report his findings, but he knew that returning without completing his Honor March would end in the deaths of Yurl's children and himself, regardless of how good his news was.

Torv and the child crossed at the clean portion of the stream and made their way towards the foothills of the mountains. Smoke rose in the distance; a clear sign that he was close to the boar people's settlement. As they walked, the forest continued to show signs of improvement, with bits of grass poking up from the snow and saplings that were well on their way to becoming healthy trees. Torv found himself smiling for the first time in as long as he could remember, though he quickly reverted back to his usual stony expression when he spotted a small group of boar people up ahead.

The child instinctively yelled out and Torv tugged the rope harshly, causing the child to fall to the ground choking and sputtering. The boar people turned to them, terrified to see the hulking man whose tribe had systematically butchered their brethren. They began to scurry away frantically until one of the group, an older man with light gray hair and a ragged beard, saw the child and silently held up his hand. As he did, the others stopped at attention, quietly gathering around him again. Together, they inched towards Torv and the child as a single unit, cautious but curious at the arrival.

As they approached, Torv was surprised to see that the man did not possess the same exaggerated facial features as those around him. His face was round and soft, much different than the bony faces of the boars or even the hard, jutting

structure of the Ulvson people. Despite having a slight frame and little muscle, the man walked with a confidence reserved in Torv's clan for the greatest warriors.

"What business do you have here?" the man asked.

"You know my language?" said Torv, tightening his grip on the rope around the boy's neck.

"Yes, amongst others." the man replied. "Why have you come here?"

"I found this child in the woods. I bring it back in goodwill."

"Is that so?" the man said suspiciously. "Well, you've brought him. Be on your way now."

"In my clan, a gift is met with a gift," Torv said coldly, tugging the child back towards him.

The man narrowed his eyes and continued approaching Torv until he stood so close that the barbarian could smell a peculiar sweetness on his breath, like flowers and honey.

"I believe we're even," the man said curtly, motioning to a long row of funeral pyres heaped high with wood. A body wrapped in animal hide sat atop each pyre. "You may leave. *Now.*"

Torv's brutish mind sputtered at the sheer insolence of this puny creature, standing before him giving orders, and rage began to boil beneath his skin. Instinctively, Torv reached out a meaty hand and grabbed the man by the throat, lifting him up to eye level. This was not the way Torv had intended to achieve his goals here, but diplomacy fades fast when the anger of an Ulvson is set alight.

"I've come for the Light Eater!" he barked. "You will take me to it or you will die!"

Despite the firm grip on his neck, the man's expression changed little, only his eyes growing wider from the sudden but not-unexpected aggression of the Ulvson savage. This was

when Torv noticed that the strange man had even stranger eyes: the cornea and sclera blended together in a shade of black darker than the dead of night. As Torv stared into them, the color seemed to swirl around inside, flashing with shades of purple, red, and blue like storms were brewing in his eye sockets.

Subtly, the man reached down into the pocket of his cloak and brought forth a small blue flower, then proceeded to steadily rub it against Torv's forearm. As he did, the pollen of the plant sprinkled out and worked itself across the beastly man's skin until it was covered with a thin paste.

Torv nearly roared in laughter at the impudence of the stranger, believing the man's actions to be an affront to his manhood. Flowers were a symbol of femininity; this was his means of self-defense? Torv decided then and there that the man had to die, but when he tried to tighten his grip to choke the life from him, nothing happened.

Quickly, a stinging sensation sprung from his forearm and spread to his shoulder, followed by a deep numbness that resulted in him inadvertently releasing the man to the ground. A moment later, Torv's arm hung limp and lifeless at his side.

Torv was no stranger to fighting while injured and quickly tossed the rope away and pulled his club from his back with his good arm. The child took the opportunity to run back to the boar people standing behind the round-faced man. Before Torv could swing a vicious blow, the man blew the remnants of the flower into the barbarian's face and pollen sprinkled into his eyes. Torv dropped his club and blinked frantically and attempted to wipe the pollen away, but his vision was already starting to blur, then his hand began to cramp in the same way his arm had.

"Please calm yourself," the man said, "I have plenty more where that came from and I would hate to demonstrate what

happens when one ingests the flower.”

A sensation Torv had not known for his entire adult life quelled his aggression: he was helpless. Defeated, Torv stumbled to his knees, panting as he pawed at his eyes with a numb hand to try to clear his vision.

Your clan is lucky the *Gamle* are peaceful beings,” the man said, circling Torv like wounded prey. “I suggested using the flowers on your people as soon as your massacres began, but the *Gamle* refused. They thought you’d come to your senses, eventually. I still have my doubts. Tell me again, why have you come here?”

“I’ve come to destroy the Light Eater,” Torv said through gritted teeth. “The bringer of the Black Night, the corrupter of the forest.”

“Oh, so that's what the *Ulvson* call it,” the man said with a chuckle. “Such drama with you savages. The *Gamle* refer to it as “the Savior,” which while more accurate is not without its own theatrics.”

“I do not understand,” Torv said with frustration. This man spoke to him like the elders spoke to the children of the clan, using complex words strung together to patronize instead of inform.

“Of course not,” the man laughed. “That would be too much to ask of your kind. Simply put, the ‘Light Eater’ as you call it has nothing to do with the destruction of your forest; quite the opposite actually. Though I must admit, the Black Nights are part of the *ritual*, so your pursuit is not completely misguided. Come, let me show you something.”

The man signaled to the *Gamle* huddled around him, motioning towards Torv. They scrambled over and helped the man to his feet, careful not to come in contact with the flower paste, and slowly walked him towards a rocky opening in the hillside.

A long, smooth corridor stretched out far in front of them, but the combination of low light and blurred vision meant Torv could barely make out anything besides the dull glow of embers situated along the walls. At the end of the hall, Torv could see the light swell in a bright opening, stretching far wider than the corridor they'd just walked through. The light coming from this area was not at all like the light from the embers, but instead something much closer to natural sunlight.

As they approached, Torv was forced to close his eyes completely as the intensity of the light made them water uncontrollably. Instinctively, he attempted to wipe at them again, but his arms were numb and leaden.

"Oh, so sorry," the man said. "Let me help you." He produced a waterskin from his bag and began splashing the contents onto Torv's face.

The liquid burned horribly, causing Torv to scream out in pain. But after a short time, the pain subsided and Torv could see again, though when his vision cleared, he was sure that his eyes were playing tricks on him.

They had arrived in an immense cavern with a natural opening in the ceiling that let the sunlight through - a particular oddity considering the sky was cloudy that day. Upon closer inspection, Torv realized that the light was not actually coming from the sun but from a flat, reflective object suspended above them from four cords stretched across the opening. It was like seeing the sky reflected on the surface of a lake on a still day, though this sun burned brighter and redder than normal.

The ground was blanketed in thick grass, quite different from the patchy brownish-green clumps that covered the forest floor. Springing from the grass were a wide variety of both familiar and foreign trees and plants, many of which bore

fruit and nuts. A cadre of boar people tended to the plants, harvesting the edible parts and separating seeds into small bags, like the ones his latest victims had been carrying.

Torv noticed a family of deer nibbling at some leaves in the corner of the cavern and a group of actual wild pigs digging around beneath a thick bush. Around him, he could hear the subtle buzz of insects and the chirping of birds, making it apparent that the cavern was its own separate ecosystem from the bleakness of the world outside. This place was like a miniaturized version of the great forest before its destruction, expertly cultivated as if grown by the gods.

“What is this?” asked Torv as he stared in disbelief.

“This is progress,” the man answered with a grin, dark eyes flashing in satisfaction. “What you see here is the work of numerous shamans, witches, and wise men, separated by unimaginable distances yet functioning together all the same.”

“I do not understand,” said Torv, searching the area for the witches and shamans the man was referring to. “All I see are boars.”

“They are not here, you simple beast,” the man chuckled. “They exist across multiple worlds, interconnected by special doorways that a few gifted individuals such as myself can operate. It allows us to travel to faraway places, to learn and to improve ourselves and those around us.”

“Different worlds than this?” Torv muttered, unable to comprehend what the man was saying. The stranger was beginning to sound mad. It reminded him of an elder in his clan named Magus who claimed the gods had instructed him to usurp Torv’s father as chieftain. Magus made this claim while wearing nothing but the recently-severed head of a goat atop his own.

“Of course you believe this frozen plane is all there is,” said the man. “It’s all you’ve ever known. But that is simply not the

case. There are countless worlds beyond your own, each unique, yet similar in their desire to thrive.”

“This world *was* thriving until the boars left their caves and destroyed the great forest,” Torv said angrily. “We had no need for mystics.”

“Neither the Gamle nor myself had anything to do with the destruction of your forest. Sometimes, powerful, unpleasant creatures find a way to travel between the planes as well. One such creature from another world died on the mountain, and when its diseased body fell into the river it became poisoned, and over time, that poisoned the forest. When we discovered this, we sent out a group to warn your people, but they were killed, as were the groups sent after. Thus, we decided to try and cleanse the forest ourselves, but again your people attacked us.”

“So you admit your kind is at fault?” Torv said, growing frustrated by the exchange. “You let through the disease that killed the great forest.”

“While there are other travelers like myself,” he said brusquely, “we are not necessarily allied, nor motivated in the same ways. And try as we might to keep the doorways closed, sometimes they blow open anyway. We strive for progress, but right now, we must focus on survival. Our scouts have warned us that another group of your clansmen are making their way here. You must have been followed.”

“Impossible!” Torv roared. “My clan would never dare interrupt an Honor March.”

“Honor is the first trait to go when met with extinction,” the man replied solemnly. “I’ve seen it many times before.”

Torv didn’t know whether to trust the stormy-eyed stranger or not. His insane tales seemed impossible, yet here he stood in a place that defied all logic. Sieg, on the other hand, was like a wounded animal, lashing out at any and all that

stood in his way. His rule was antithetical to the proud history of the Ulvson. Yurl's murder should have been met with quick justice by the others in the clan, but they failed to act. Perhaps the forest wasn't the only thing rotting from the inside out.

Were the others in his clan coming for him now? For all Torv knew, his family was already dead. There was nothing stopping Sieg from going through with it now that he was on his March. The idea tore at his psyche, and Torv refused to believe it was true. His life was built upon a strict set of rules that simplified the decisions he made and guided his actions. To step away now, in such desperate times, was enough to shatter even the strongest warrior.

"I will not turn against my people," Torv said resolutely. "My honor stays firm."

"I didn't expect you would," said the man. "I'm more than capable of dealing with this threat myself."

With that, the man signaled the Gamle again and a group of six of them crowded around Torv. There was still nothing he could do to fight back, so the boars ushered him further into the cavern and through another opening into the base of the mountain. Before long, they found themselves in front of a room with a hefty wooden door. The Gamle pushed Torv inside and closed the door tightly behind him, skittering down the hall until the echo of their footsteps could no longer be heard.

Torv turned slowly, realizing that he was not alone in the room. Sitting in the back corner were two much-smaller people voraciously consuming a platter of food. They wore fur coverings on their shoulders and one had a garment made of thick, green leaves around his waist and animal hide wrapped around one of his hands. The young man almost choked on his meal when he turned and noticed the hulking beast now standing in the room with him. The woman next to him stood

up and hurriedly walked over to Torv, speaking loudly and frantically in a language he did not understand.

She continued, pointing to herself and the young man, then making a circle shape with her hands, pointing at their garments, and motioning wildly as if her arms were the mouth of some great beast. After a while she gave up, seeing that Torv clearly did not understand. She sat down with a frustrated expression and continued her meal.

“Another savage,” Kaia said as she sat down on the floor next to Ja. “All this and we’re back in a prison with another savage.”

“He’s wearing clothes,” Ja replied. “Maybe he’s different. I hope he’s different; he is far bigger than the men in the compound. I don’t think we can defend ourselves against him.”

“There is something wrong with his arms,” Kaia pointed out. “They must have used the blue flowers on him, too.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ja sighed. “It looks like it’s our fate to be sacrifices.”

Kaia put her hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort her new friend despite knowing he was probably right.

As they sat, a loud rumbling became audible in the distance, followed by excited yelling and the sound of a single pair of footsteps running down the hall. The large man sat upright, attempting to flex the fingers of a hand that was steadily coming back to life. He looked over to the other two and spoke to them in a language they had never heard. His expression was tense and focused, like a hunter sensing danger in the jungle. He patted on his chest firmly and then motioned with his head towards the door, repeating the action until they understood what he meant.

“I think someone has come for him,” Kaia said.

“Good, maybe they’re here to get him out,” Ja replied enthusiastically. “Maybe they can help us.”

Kaia looked at the anxious expression on the hulking man's face.

"No," she said flatly. "I don't think they're coming to help."

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. Charismatic megafauna
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. A tenuous bond is formed
18. Life is too good
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. A new adventure begins

Outcomes Used:

17. A tenuous bond is formed
20. A new adventure begins

Added Outcomes:

Something a character thought was important turns out to be totally unnecessary

(thanks to Jay)

Cat eat food

(thanks to Milo)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner

Ethan: 4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question

Chapter Five: Complex Problems and Simple Violence

Written by Jeff

Six boar people scurried up the rock walls along the edge of the cavern filled with verdant new growth. A bright red sun beamed down from an enormous mirror suspended from the ceiling by thick cords and the Gamle climbed up to where those cords were fastened. With perfect synchronicity, the boar people's stumpy hands and barely-opposable thumbs worked together as a group to swiftly untie the knots from enormous rings protruding from the top of the rock walls. Both knots unfastened simultaneously, causing the mirror to swing down and out like a pendulum before coming to rest vertically above the soft, green grass. The light from the sun now shone sideways, brightly illuminating only half of the cavern.

More Gamle emerged from the surrounding caves with armfuls of meat, and though it was rotting and putrid the boar people didn't seem to be bothered by the smell. They heaped the rancid animal parts into a pile in front of the mirror, arriving in single file and depositing their portion before going back down to an underground storeroom to get more. None of the living animals in the cavern dared to go and investigate the "food"; they were all huddled together in a dark corner, as far away from the mirror as possible.

As the Gamle finished depositing their pile, the gray-haired man emerged into the cavern as well, walking hurriedly and carrying a mirror. The handle was white and smooth, with a frame around the glass made of connected jawbones, the glass situated inside a halo of teeth. The man held the mirror close to his mouth and muttered to it softly, and as he spoke the glass

began to cloud and become opalescent. At the enormous, now-vertical slab of glass, the man held the mirror in his hand up so that the two surfaces faced one another. Sunlight beamed off of the hand mirror and back onto the larger one. The man spoke softly to the glass and bones again and as he did the reflected sunlight began to change the surface of the larger mirror. It rippled and warped until a completely new scene was being projected through the glass. Instead of a sideways sun, the dangling mirror now looked like a towering entranceway into a thick coniferous forest.

Dozens of Gamle burst into the cavern from the mountain path outside and ran directly past the mirror and pile of rotten meat, paying them no mind as they scurried out the other side and down stone passageways. With everything in place, the rest of the Gamle in the enclosed meadow began to creep towards the back exit as well, waiting for the man with the mirror to give them an order. When he hastily exited the cavern without saying another word, the remaining boar people took the cue and ran away themselves, though only to the safety of the doorway. Several stood there in the dark, waiting, eyes flashing beneath bulbous brows.

Though it had been filled with life and the sounds of living only moments before, the cavern was now dark and silent. The birds did not chirp and the insects did not hum. For the Gamle waiting in the entranceway, the silence seemed to drag on and on. But then there was a rustling, and a stomping, and snorting. A snout poked through the opening in the mirror and sniffed, drawn to the pile of rotting meat. The enormous mirror stretched from the arching ceiling of the cavern almost all the way down to the grass - easily the height of ten men. The colossal boar that walked through the opening filled most of that space. Its features were distorted and angular; there didn't seem to be a smooth, graceful line on its entire body. The head

was massive and misshapen, so top-heavy it was a marvel the creature wasn't constantly toppling over face first. Instead of two large tusks and rows of smaller teeth, this boar seemed to have *only* tusks, crammed in too tight and spilling over the sides of the mouth like they were gasping for air. This creature was an abomination, but one who looked carefully enough could see that there were small-yet-clear similarities between this boar and the boar people that lived in these caves. This boar looked like a monstrous version of a Gamle that had never evolved to become bipedal, instead evolving into some sort of giant, lopsided beast, that while formidable, clearly wasn't an apex predator.

As the colossal boar munched away at its disgusting pile, several men crept into the cavern from the main entrance. They moved silently closer, hunched with hands on clubs, stone axes, and spears. They were hulking men, but compared to the boar they seemed comically small. Still, there was no fear in their eyes, and with one coordinating nod they heaved a volley of spears at the creature before it had any idea they were even in the cavern. Every one of the Ulvson spears found its mark, though the squeal emitted from the boar was one of surprise and not necessarily of pain. The creature shook most of the spears off in a single shimmy and rushed forward as 20 barbarians let out a united war cry and came spilling into the cavern.

The Ulvson had never fought an enemy this big, but even in the face of a seemingly unbeatable foe, they attacked as if the battle was theirs for the taking. The boar did not move particularly fast while standing, so they were confident rushing in and hacking at its legs and then jumping out of the way when it turned to face them. But as the boar continued to fail connecting tusk slams with sideward swipes of the head, it soon began trotting around the cavern in wide arcs to gain

momentum instead. Once it was properly moving, there was little its opponents could do to dodge if the boar locked them into its sights. Quickly, the Ulvson barbarians began to fall, speared by a single tusk through the midsection or crushed between several as the boar bit down. Regardless, the men fought valiantly - if stupidly - still believing that the impacts of their clubs or the tiny cuts incurred by their axes could eventually fell such an intimidating beast.

The rapid and continual death of the Ulvson warriors did nothing to dissuade those still standing, and when there was only one man remaining, he still charged at the colossal boar without a moment of hesitation. The barbarian raised his axe to the sky and let out a fierce roar as he sprinted towards the beast. Unfazed, the boar lazily reared up onto its back legs and then crushed the man into paste under its stomping trotter.

When all 20 of the Ulvson had fallen, the boar peered around the cavern to make sure no more pests were buzzing around before returning to its festering chum pile. As it finished eating, the Gamle in the entranceway began to slink back inside the cavern. The giant boar in the center of the room paid them no mind, but then the Gamle began to sing a chorus of sharp dissonant tones and the creature instantly became perturbed. Its snout bristled and it stomped down again in irritation, whipping its disproportionate head from side to side. The Gamle stepped in closer and intensified their discordant song, causing the boar to step back reflexively. The creature's eyes winced and it let out a final dissatisfied squeal before turning and exiting back through the opening in the mirror.

Though muffled, the entire scene had been audible in the room where, Ja, Kaia, and Torv were being held. The Ulvson man had sat with his ear practically on the wooden door, desperately trying to rub life back into his drooping arm. Ja and

Kaia were pressed against the back wall, as far away from the sounds as they could physically get. When the thunderous squealing and the shouting of men had ceased and was replaced by the Gamle's unnerving song, Torv looked over to the others in confusion, but it was clear they were just as mystified by the noise as him. Then there was only silence, and Torv scooted away from the door and rested his back on the stone wall instead, head slumped and dejected.

The silence was broken by the sound of wood scraping against the ground as the door opened. The gray-haired man entered and stood in front of Torv and looked down at the brute sternly before addressing him.

"I think you should come out here and see what happens when you try to solve complex problems with simple violence."

Torv stood and glared at the man, but followed him outside without protest. In the doorway, the man turned back and addressed Ja and Kaia as well.

"You can come and look as well, if you like. See what sort of nasty things can happen if you wander around in the wrong kind of places."

Ja and Kaia rose to their feet and began to follow along, figuring it was best to do as they were told. The hide bags they had swiped earlier from the larder were sitting in the corner of the room, so they picked them up as they left, curious that their captors didn't seem to care at all that they had stolen from the community. As they walked, Ja was puzzled by something he couldn't properly articulate to his friend. He had understood everything the gray-haired man had said to Torv about complex problems and simple violence, and Torv obviously had as well. But Torv spoke a completely different language than them and hadn't understood a single word Kaia had said to him earlier. Why did he understand it now?

As the visitors entered the cavern, they immediately recoiled at the putrid scent of rotten meat that permeated the air. Then they noticed the 20 bloody bodies littered across the meadow. The grass had been displaced everywhere in huge chunks by something that was clearly gigantic in size. The mirror was vertical now instead of on the ceiling, and instead of projecting sunlight down onto an idyllic scene it now merely reflected the opposite wall of the cavern. Torv walked over to one of his fallen clansmen and knelt down by him somberly, examining the wounds.

“Your people may be strong in this world, but that strength is relative,” the gray-haired man began. “There are forces at play here that simply can’t be overcome with brute strength. When others try to help you see a better path, the response to that kindness should never be violence. We have been unnecessarily patient with your people, and now our patience has ended. Do you see now that a different course of action is required?”

Torv did not look up or make a sound to respond, keeping his eyes focused on the wounds of his fallen clansman.

“You have seen what we are trying to achieve here in bringing the forest back to life,” the man continued. “I know you want this as well. Killing the Light Eater or the Gamle will not help you achieve this goal.” He waved his hand at the bodies littering the cavern. “I take no satisfaction in killing your people, but when they come here to attack us, we are left with no other choice. Your clan refuses to listen to reason; refuses to listen *at all*. Go back to your people and tell them what you have seen. Tell them the truth of what is happening in these mountains. Then you and your clan can decide: You can either be part of the solution, or you will be treated as part of the problem. If you simply leave us in peace, I will be fine never dealing with any of you again.”

Torv rose to his feet and let out an emotionless sigh. His eyes scanned over the bloodied bodies strewn about the cavern, taking in each one individually. Then, without turning to face the man at his side, Torv's meaty hand shot out and latched onto his head, fingers extending past the man's ears, completely engulfing his face. The man tried to cry out but no sound escaped the barbarian's grasp. Even with his hand still numb and only a fraction of his grip strength, Torv effortlessly squeezed down and crumpled the man's head with a wet crunch. As the man fell to the ground writhing and sputtering, Torv still did not avert his gaze from the field of fallen Ulvson warriors.

Though his skull was cracked and blood was oozing from every orifice in his face, the gray-haired man was still alive and conscious, and as soon as he hit the ground he began to kick and squirm away from Torv. He flipped himself over onto his knees and totteringly pulled the jawbone mirror from the pocket of his robe, coughing blood as he attempted to speak to it. He continued to stumble away and the barbarian seemed to have no interest in giving chase. But then the man began to wave the mirror in the air as he choked out words at it, and the space in front of him began to change. It was as if he were painting a new scene and the mirror was his brush, changing reality itself as it moved through the air. Torv only looked over at what was happening when Ja and Kaia audibly gasped at the appearance of a portal to a completely different place. The barbarian's eyes narrowed as he saw the gravely-wounded man attempt to crawl through to the other side.

The gray-haired man tried to spring to his feet and run through the entranceway he had just created, but he only made it a few steps before crashing right back down onto his chest, sending more blood misting from his mouth. Then he tried to crawl, half of his body in the new realm and his legs still visible

in the cavern, but he had barely budged forward again before Torv was at his feet. With seemingly no effort, the barbarian grabbed the man by his ankle and whipped him through the air and then bashed him against the ground like a wriggling trout.

As soon as the man's body began to fly through the air, Ja and Kaia instinctively looked away, not wanting to see the horrific act of violence. Because they covered their eyes, neither saw the necklace the man wore tucked under his robes go flying off his body and land several paces away in the grass. Torv didn't notice it either; once he saw that the man was properly lifeless, he peered through the portal disinterestedly for only a moment and then walked back over to this fallen clansmen.

Ja and Kaia looked at the portal and then at one another, speaking only with their eyes. Without seeming too curious, they began to creep over to the bizarre entranceway, avoiding the lifeless man's body and peering through the portal to see where it led. It was night on the other side. The portal exited into a path in a ravine with rocky walls covered in lichens. There was sand on the stone ground and stars overhead and a warm breeze flowed through into the frigid cavern where they stood. Without the red sun projected from the mirror, this room now felt uncomfortably cold, as it had outside in the mountains.

Kaia turned away from the portal and hesitantly knelt down by the broken body lying on the ground. She held her hand by his mouth and nose and found there was no breath. Nearby, the jawbone mirror the man had used to open up the portal lay in the grass, unharmed. Kaia looked to see if Torv was watching before picking it up, but the barbarian had no interest in what she or Ja were up to. The glass was shimmering and radiating dull prisms of color, not reflecting, and Kaia could see a similar effect happening around the edges of the entranceway to the

new plane. Before she could show the item to Ja, he spoke out to her first.

“Kaia, do you hear that?”

It took a moment for her own train of thought to stop and she listened carefully for whatever the young man might be hearing. The cavern was silent. She looked at him and shrugged.

“Something is calling to me,” he said. “It’s saying my name.”

Ja began to wander away from the portal, head cocked forward, listening carefully. He took small steps, moving in a meandering path as he honed in on the signal only he could hear, then crouched down when he had found the source. It was a necklace, with a cord similar to the one that held up the enormous mirror but only a fraction as thick. The cord was tied to an oblong, course-brown lump that looked like petrified wood and fit neatly in Ja’s hand. There was little weight to the thing and its texture was unlike anything he’d felt before. Ja muttered to himself, barely audibly, “What is this?” and an answer was spoken in the same whispering tone that had called him over.

“Tongue of Kathaka, first to speak.”

He looked at the thing curiously, turning it over in his hand.

“How do you know my name?” he asked.

“Not name,” said the tongue. “Purpose. *Jaw. You are a Jaw. You may command the Tongue.*”

Kaia had wandered over to where Ja was standing, holding the jawbone mirror and looking inquisitively at what the young man had found. Without thinking about what he was doing or why, Ja found himself holding up the cord and slipping it over his head. It almost felt like the necklace was placing itself on him.

“You are a Jaw,” the tongue said again. “Through Kathaka, you may speak the words that open the doors to all worlds. You

may speak to any and all.”

Ja looked over to Kaia and eyed the mirror she held in her hands. He had seen and heard the gray-haired man speak to it before the portal had opened and knew just by looking at the jawbones that he could now communicate with them himself. But before he could say anything to the mirror or to Kaia, a loud, gurgling cough and gasp for breath echoed through the cavern. Ja and Kaia’s eyes shot to the body by the portal, but the sound hadn’t come from the gray-haired corpse. One of Torv’s clanmates was still alive, barely, and had regained consciousness. Torv was crouched by his side on one knee, hand placed on the man’s shoulder. They began to speak and it all sounded like gibberish in Kaia’s ears. But Ja understood every word.

“Sten, what did this do to you?” asked Torv. “What could have killed 20 Ulvson warriors?”

“A creature most foul,” said the man feebly. “It was too large. Our weapons were like toys.”

“Why did you come here?” growled Torv, unable to mask his anger. “Why would you interrupt my Honor March?”

“Sieg did not consent to your March, Torv. You merely proclaimed it to be so and then left. You should have known that Sieg would never let you succeed in your task. Your brother’s children - and the rest of your family line - were slain as soon as you left the village.”

Torv’s eyes burned and he almost smashed what little life remained out of his friend simply for telling him the truth, but he chose to slam his numb hand into the ground instead. Of course Sieg would act with such dishonor, such treachery. Torv had acted on instinct and anger and hadn’t taken even a moment to think things through. His father had been Chieftain, and his brother should have been next in line. There

was no greater threat to Sieg's rule than Torv returning victorious from his Honor March.

"We came to kill the Light Eater ourselves," continued Sten, seeing from Torv's face that he was seeing the truth of things. "Even if Sieg did not consent to your March, he still could not risk you returning having completed it. We were instructed to kill you as well, but we all decided when we left the village that we would not honor this command. You have done no wrong to our people; you only wanted to protect your family. We were going to let you go."

"Go where?" growled Torv. "To wander the tundra until I starve and die? No rival clan would have me, and I would not have them. There is nowhere for me to go now, except back to Sieg for vengeance."

"Sieg keeps his closest men at his side," said Sten. "Look who lies dead on this battlefield, Torv. It is those who would have fought alongside you; that is no coincidence. Sieg knew this mission to destroy the Light Eater may kill us all, and if somehow you survived, you would be left without allies to face him."

"THEN I WILL KILL HIM ALONE!" Torv roared, but he knew that it was not true. He had been beaten. He had beaten himself. Torv looked down to Sten again, but the man's face was still now with eyes glazed over. Torv closed Sten's eyelids and then covered his own face with his enormous hands, still numb and prickling from the blue flowers, but he did not weep. He simply wanted an escape, any escape he could muster, and closing his eyes and burying his head in his hands was the best he could do at that moment.

Generally, Torv was not one for self-reflection, but as he sat hunched over Sten's body, the barbarian realized just how many mistakes he had made since his brother's death. Because of his brash actions his family had been slain, his friends had

been sent to their deaths, and he was now forever an outcast from his clan. As he silently mourned this monumental loss, the sound of birds chirping and insects buzzing returned to the meadow in the cavern, even though the sunlight was gone. The sound caused Torv to pull his face from his hands and look around, remembering the strange place he was in, and then truly realizing how terribly he had messed everything up.

He had killed the gray-haired man in a fit of snippy anger, simply because the man had chided his insistence on using violence as a solution. The great forest was dying and this man was bringing it back to life; this cavern full of flora and fauna was proof to that. He had claimed that the Light Eater was not responsible for any of the destruction, and Torv believed him. There was no point in killing the Light Eater and completing his Honor March anymore. Even if he could somehow slay Sieg and become leader of his clan, Torv could never regain his honor for what he had done, whether his people knew it or not. In murdering the gray-haired man, Torv had likely doomed all of the Ulvson to a slow, withering death.

“What will you do now?” asked Ja. He had walked up closer to Torv but still kept a healthy distance between them.

Torv realized that the young man was now speaking his language, but was too exhausted to care why.

“There is nothing left for me in these lands,” said Torv. He looked Ja and Kaia over inquisitively. “Where do you come from?”

“Somewhere else,” said Ja.

“And how did you get here?”

“We have no idea. I think he probably knew,” said Ja, motioning to the gray-haired man’s body. “But we’re not going to get answers from him anymore.”

Torv let out a frustrated sigh and walked over to the body. Ja walked over with him.

“He said he came from another world, far away,” said Torv. “Said that there were more like him who could move between doorways.” He looked up at the portal. “That must be one of them. Did you two walk through one of those to get here?”

“No,” said Ja, fidgeting with the bandage on his hand. “We were brought here somehow because of a reflection that stuck to my hand and the stone these people use to suck all of the stars from the sky. We found another stone like it in a cave in our world.”

Torv’s eyes widened at this. Kaia had come over and was now standing behind Ja, observing the conversation between the two skeptically. She could understand everything that Ja was saying, but the brutish man was still just spouting nonsense words. Still, only hearing Ja’s half of the conversation was enough, so she stealthily slipped the jawbone mirror into her hide satchel.

“You came from a different world and found this man,” Torv repeated, slowly processing the information.

“Yes, sort of,” said Ja. “But I would say he found us.”

“There is no difference!” growled Torv. “Will there be more men like this one on the other side of the doorway?”

“I have no idea,” Ja said with a shrug. “All I know is that it leads to a place where he was trying to get away from you.”

Torv stared at the gleaming portal suspended mid-air in the grotto, then his eyes strayed back to his friends and he felt the sadness in his heart begin to be replaced by rage once again. Torv was an Ulvson warrior. Sieg had killed everyone he held dear. Even if it meant his own death, Torv must try and avenge them. His honor demanded it.

But then something new and strange happened inside of Torv’s mind: he considered the consequences of his actions. He thought of what the gray-haired man had said to him about the futility of trying to solve complex problems with simple

violence. The man's condescending voice echoed in his memory.

"Do you see now that a different course of action is required?"

Finally, Torv did see. It tore at the very essence of his identity as an Ulvson and a warrior, but he understood now that he could help and honor his people and atone for his mistakes in a different way than killing and dying for revenge. If there were more of these gray-haired men out there who could save the great forest, Torv was going to find them.

Without saying another word, Torv walked over to Sten's body and picked up his stone axe, inspecting its edge and feeling the weight in his hands, then confidently strode through the portal and disappeared from the cavern entirely.

Dumbfounded, Kaia walked over to the portal herself and watched Torv pass from view down the path, then looked around at the cavern and stopped when she was facing Ja.

"Should we follow him?" she asked. "He might not be the worst ally to have, now that you can talk to him."

"I'm not sure if we should go through more of these doorways," said Ja. "That man over there who died said all of these warriors were killed by a huge monster that came through one of them."

"I'm sure the guy who opened this doorway wasn't running away into a world full of big monsters," said Kaia. Her eyes squinted. "Probably."

"Maybe we should try to get back to our own world using the star stone," said Ja. Kaia glared at him quizzically.

"Which part are you more excited to get home to, the blood cult or the vine monster?"

Ja didn't bother giving that question a response.

"Well maybe we can just stay here," he said, motioning to the grotto. "It's cold, but at least there's food."

As soon as Torv had walked through the portal, the Gamle had begun to reappear from the stone entranceway in the back of the cavern. They were terrified of the Ulvson man, but they didn't seem to be at all scared of Ja and Kaia, and began to inspect the state of their grotto as the two humans decided on their next course of action. More and more Gamle spilled into the darkened cavern, grabbing the cords on the bottom of the enormous mirror and beginning the arduous task of re-fastening them high up on the cavern walls. Other boars started dragging out the dead bodies of the Ulvson men and that of the gray-haired man, whose corpse they didn't treat with any more reverence than the barbarians, even though he had been some sort of leader to them.

As they worked, the Gamle began to sing in unison. Not the low, droll song they had sung during the star stone ritual, or the grating discordant one at the end of the battle with the Ulvson to drive the monster away. This was a happier tune, more upbeat with a pleasant melody. Both Ja and Kaia stopped their conversation when the song began and listened in. Kaia was only interested in it for a moment before she was ready to continue the discussion, but when she looked back at Ja, he was staring past her, listening closely.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I can understand what they're saying." He picked up and inspected the petrified tongue that hung around his neck. "I couldn't before, but I can hear that they're actually speaking. These people speak through song."

"What are they saying?"

Ja focused in and his expression soured.

"Clean, clean, in light we clean, but darkness purifies everything."

As Ja spoke, a singing Gamle dragged the lifeless body of an Ulvson man past him, and hearing Ja repeat the words, paused

and gave the young man a beaming smile. Ja nearly gagged at the stench of rotten meat wafting from the Gamle's robes.

A few moments later, Ja and Kaia were walking through the portal.

On the other side, the night air was warm and comforting. They could still hear the Gamle singing, but then Ja heard another sound. It was the tongue.

"Close the door behind you."

Perturbed, Ja dug the mirror out of Kaia's hide bag and stared at it with confusion. He tried to remember exactly what he had seen when the gray-haired man had opened the portal, but it had all happened so fast. The surface of the mirror still wasn't reflective, but instead opalescent and quivering. Not knowing what else to do, he simply held the mirror up and spoke to it.

"Close the door, please?"

The quivering light on the surface of the mirror grew and intensified and Ja held it up to the portal and moved it through the air like he was erasing a drawing in the dirt with his hand. The portal faded away and with it the singing of the Gamle, until Ja and Kaia stood silent and alone in the rocky ravine path.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. Charismatic megafauna
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences

9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. Something a character thought was important turns out to be totally unnecessary
18. Life is too good
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

4. Protagonist's identity is thrown into question
7. A great artifact of the past is found, calling to a new owner

Added Outcomes:

Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences

(thanks to Johannes)

Traditional gender roles are switched

(thanks to Charles)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 17. Something a character thought was important turns out to be totally unnecessary

Ethan: 6. Charismatic megafauna

Chapter Six: The Putrid Coast

Written by Ethan

Ja and Kaia walked cautiously along the rough stones that lined the bottom of the ravine, hearts racing as they entered into another strange world. The night sky above was filled with yellow-tinged clouds that rumbled as if a storm was brewing, though the air was oddly still. It was arid but not overly hot, like breath against skin; the temperature would have been pleasant compared to the brutal heat of their jungle or the bleak chill of Torv's world, if not for the scent of rot that smothered their senses.

"We need to find Torv," Ja said as they walked.

Kaia nodded, though she wasn't entirely sure she agreed. They'd only known the man for less than a day and in that time he'd been unpredictable and violent. Despite seemingly having a change of heart after killing the gray-haired man, someone like him was just as much of a liability as an asset. His strength could help keep them safe, but there was no way of knowing how he'd react in a bizarre new environment. She and Ja had made it work so far as a duo, though it was unclear if any of their success was due to their individual strengths or simply from luck. Regardless, each new world they stumbled into brought new challenges, and having Torv on their side *seemed* worth the risk, assuming they could avoid setting off his volatile temper.

Due to the nature of the ravine, there was only one direction a person could go. The hardened, naturally-formed clay walls on either side stretched up steeply with no handholds to aid in climbing. Lining the tops of the ravine walls were immense shrubs - almost the height of full trees - that were covered in dagger-sized thorns, stretching on densely

with no end in sight. Ja and Kaia continued forward, seeing clearly from far below that even if Torv had managed to scramble up the side of the ravine, his flesh likely would have been pulled from his bones if he had attempted to muscle his way through the foliage.

As they continued moving ahead, Kaia was suddenly aware that the ravine gave her a feeling similar to the Orn prison. Though she had only been inside for a few weeks, the experience had left her deeply uncomfortable with the feeling of being restricted, even if in hindsight that “restriction” was relatively safe compared to the seemingly endless dangers that awaited in the jungle beyond the compound. Kaia knew that things could always be worse outside of the walls that confined her, but somehow the feeling of being closed in was now even more frightening.

“We need to get out of this ravine so we can see better,” Kaia declared confidently, masking her uneasiness. “Find a hill or something high to get a look around. I saw Torv go down the path through the doorway. He couldn’t have gotten that far ahead of us.”

In the distance, a loud roar ripped through the silent evening, stopping the two in their tracks. They huddled against the side of the ravine, hoping that whatever had made the horrendous sound was above them somewhere in the thicket and not further down the path. Soon, the ground above them began to shake as something immense made its way in their direction. Moments later, the roar repeated, followed by the sound of branches being snapped away as the entity careened towards the edge of the ravine.

Ja and Kaia flattened themselves further against the dry clay walls, doing their best to hide their bodies beneath a slight outcropping where a thick root had managed to grow through the side of the hill. Clumps of dirt began to shower down as the

mysterious creature pushed closer to the edge, the sounds of inquisitive sniffs and snorts making it evident that they were close to being detected.

Ja grimaced as a gigantic, rat-like nose covered in patches of bristled fur broke through the thorn bushes above them and grunted in anticipation of what lay at the bottom of the ravine. A long, viscous strand of mucus and saliva leaked down from the beast's mouth and landed on his shoulder, forcing a slight yelp from the frightened young man. Kaia grabbed him and pulled him in closer, firmly signaling without words that any further noise might be the last he ever made.

Suddenly, a roar echoed again, though it clearly didn't come from the creature lurking above. The snout abruptly withdrew from the edge of the cliff and was followed by a piercing screech that forced Ja and Kaia to squint and cover their ears. Then they could hear a struggle ensue as the creature fought for its life against something even larger and more frightening than itself.

Dirt and rock began to stream down the wall. Continuing down the ravine now seemed a much safer option than being crushed by an avalanche from the battle above, so Ja and Kaia crawled away from their hiding place and moved swiftly down the path. Whatever was attacking the disgusting rat beast was clearly winning, as the screeches turned to moans punctuated by the wet gurgling of blood escaping from a torn throat.

Before they had even moved beyond the sounds of the dying creature, Kaia noticed an opening in the ravine wall just large enough for the two of them to squeeze inside. As much as she wanted to distance herself from the horrifying activity above, she feared this new beast would give chase if it noticed them escaping. She remembered the hunters of Orn talking about their experiences with predators and how a satiated animal was far easier to escape than one caught up in the

excitement of a hunt. Sometimes, that meant hiding in a cave for up a tree for hours at a time. The fact that the hunters lived to tell these tales was proof enough that the strategy was viable.

Kaia grabbed Ja and pushed him into the crevasse, glancing behind one last time for good measure. The struggle between the two enormous animals had uprooted a large chunk of the thorn-covered bushes from the top of the ravine, causing a landslide that would have buried them both had they not moved. With the steep hillside broken away, there was now a much more manageable path for climbing up and escaping the ravine once they had waited out whatever lurked above.

Kaia slid in behind Ja and was immediately up to her wrists in a swampy puddle of wet clay. The cavity was damper than the earth outside and as they crawled in further, they soon found themselves covered in an odorless, brownish-red sludge. Slowly, they trudged and squirmed their way to the end of a minuscule cavern, where a smattering of roots poked down from above. There was just enough room for each of them to sit crouched against the wall with their knees touching slightly. In the corner above Kaia, a trickle of water flowed from a natural spout, indicating a spring or small creek was running above them.

“What was that you said about opening a doorway to a world full of monsters?” Ja whispered, his voice quivering too much to sound judgmental.

“I’m beginning to think *all* of these worlds are filled with monsters,” Kaia sighed. “But I’ll take my chances with the monsters that don’t sacrifice their own kind.”

“I would like to avoid monsters completely, if possible.”

Kaia looked over to him, noticing how thick the clay was caked around his face.

“You trying to become a buru?” she asked with a giggle.

“No, I fell in face first,” Ja responded sharply before also letting a small laugh escape. “I didn’t expect it to be wet.”

Kaia reached up into the trickling water and let it wash and then gather in her hands, then smelled it. She looked at Ja and nodded, bringing her cupped hands to her mouth, and Ja followed suit. Once they had their fill, Ja reached up again and began to wash the mud from his face, but Kaia stopped him.

“It may be a good thing we stumbled in here,” she said. “The clay might help cover our smell and make it harder for whatever is outside to find us.”

As the two sat against the damp walls of the tiny cave and caught their breath, the adventures of the last few days began to involuntarily replay in their minds. It felt unreal, like a lucid dream that wouldn’t end; a nightmare that just kept getting worse. But despite the dangers they’d faced, the two of them were still alive, and for the first time in as long as either could remember, they began to feel like they weren’t as useless as the people from their world had always made them feel.

“So, what now?” asked Ja.

“Same plan as before: we need to find higher ground. Whatever was fighting back there caused a landslide, so we’ll be able to climb up easier now. I don’t know how long the ravine is, but it looks far and I don’t like not knowing what’s around me.”

“But...what about the monsters?” Ja asked skeptically. “Why would we want to go up to where they are?”

“Well, one of them is dead, which means the other isn’t hungry anymore. Hopefully, that combined with the clay will allow us to sneak past.”

Even in the back of the small crevasse, Ja and Kaia could still hear the faint sounds of the victorious creature feasting: the ripping of flesh and cracking of bones. Once the muffled sounds of the gargantuan beast above had ceased, they began

to slowly ease their way down the tunnel and back into the ravine. They hugged the wall as they made their way towards the newly formed ramp, listening for any sounds that might alert them to danger.

As they arrived at the scene of the attack, Kaia cautiously inched up the pile of rocks, branches, and clay, avoiding the sharp thorns that now jutted up through the rubble. The only sign of the predator was a stretching path of battered thorn bushes that led away from the ravine and the mangled corpse of a massive rat. Kaia stood in shock and stared at the vile thing in front of her. It was double the size of the water buffalo that wandered the river valleys near Orn, with features recognizable yet absurdly proportioned. While its head and face remained intact, its lower half was missing, leaving a mess of entrails and gore spread over the ground all around it. Peering closer, Kaia realized that the contents of its stomach had been expelled as well, an explosion of unrecognizable ooze and a great number of bones that looked very human. Strangely, she found herself longing for the much smaller, half-digested rats in her own world.

Despite being freshly killed, the rat had an odd appearance of rot to it, with festering skin tearing at different spots across its body. One of its ears was completely missing and its right eye socket had melted away to the bone. Clearly, this thing was diseased and it was best for them to keep as far away from it as possible.

“What is that?” Kaia heard Ja say as he approached behind her, followed by a groan and then the sound of him throwing up.

As she backed away from the corpse, a loud whirring noise and then a flash of light caused her to wheel around to see a new portal open up in the ravine down below. A sound like distant screams resonated from the entranceway, growing

louder as the two watched in stunned silence. A moment later, a group of ten people came stumbling out of the portal in a panic, desperate to escape whatever was behind them.

The group was completely nude save for rough, metallic collars around each of their necks. Their skin was chalky white and completely hairless like newborn babies. The sound of loud, angry barking soon followed and out of the portal came a pack of thickly-furred dogs with oversized jaws filled with jagged teeth. While not nearly as big as the rat, they were still much larger than any dog Ja or Kaia had ever seen.

The two instinctively crouched down, clay-covered flesh effectively camouflaging them on the edge of the ravine. They watched as the group scattered with panicked screams, running at full pace down the ravine path. The dogs eagerly gave chase until a whistle from within the portal grabbed their attention and stopped them mid-step. Obediently, they turned around and made their way back, prancing through the glimmering gateway one by one.

On the other side of the doorway stood four men, muscularly built but not as large as the Ulvson, covered from head to toe in brightly-dyed animal skins, watching as the panicked group disappeared from sight. One of them glanced in Ja and Kaia's direction, lifting a finger to point out their presence to his companions. Before the others could react, the portal closed, leaving Ja and Kaia quivering and staring at the empty ravine floor.

Once it was clear the doorway was gone and not returning, Ja peered down the path looking for the people who had run away.

"Should we follow after them?" he asked. Kaia shook her head.

"They are too loud. Too panicked. They'll just draw unwanted attention." Even she was shocked at the coldness of

her statement.

“Well, then maybe we should wait for another doorway to open? Maybe another person who knows about them, like the one Torv killed, will come through.”

Kaia silently considered the idea. Perhaps they’d get lucky and someone helpful would appear and explain things to them, but based on their experiences so far that seemed unlikely. Before she could respond to his question, a chorus of screams rang out from further down the ravine, followed by a different but just-as-terrifying trio of roars that made it obvious the newest arrivals in this world had not made it very far.

“I don’t think waiting around is the right thing to do,” Kaia said. She pointed towards the trampled thorn bushes left in the wake of the unknown giant. “We’ll take our chances through there. Just keep your head down and stay quiet.”

Though the thorn bushes covered most of the area above the ravine, they became less dense the further Ja and Kaia walked, and eventually they were able to step off the wide-open path and conceal their movements more effectively. The ground here was rough on their feet, with cracked and stony soil poking uncomfortably on their calloused soles. The sheer brutality of the land became more apparent with every step; it was a wonder anything could exist out here at all. Kaia couldn’t help but wonder why the gray-haired man had attempted to escape to this place, especially after Torv had injured him so severely. Even if the Ulvson hadn’t finished him off, the man would have quickly met his fate to any of the horrors that awaited on this side of the portal.

Up ahead, Kaia noticed a small hill popping above the canopy of the thorn bushes, tall enough to give them a good view of the surrounding area but not an insurmountable climb. At the top of the hill, she thought she could see a structure

composed of lazily-stacked rocks and tree branches, but it was difficult to make out clearly in the dim light.

“There,” she said, pointing. “Let's get up there and then we can decide what to do. Maybe we'll see some sign of Torv.”

The two quickened their pace, cognizant of the fact that while their journey through the thorns had been relatively uneventful so far, their introduction to this world had been anything but. Currently, the law of averages was not on their side.

Kaia scampered up the hill with Ja close behind, the potential for shelter driving their quick ascent. At the top, Kaia was pleased to find her observation had been correct: There was indeed a small shelter, but Ja tugging at her arm pulled her attention away.

“Kaia...look,” he said, pointing out to the horizon.

The hill sat atop a great sand dune overlooking a putrid yellow ocean. Gargantuan beasts patrolled the waters, sending plumes of liquid shooting along their backs as they dove and surfaced, hunting for food. Structures similar to the shelter on the hill also dotted the beach below, positioned far enough from the shore to avoid the tides. The sun was beginning to rise over the horizon, painting the sky with a sickly yellow hue that matched the fetid sea.

As they took in the scene, the sound of heavy stomping and trees being smashed apart once again caught their attention. The mystery of what had killed the rat finally revealed itself as a colossal creature broke through the dagger thorn forest, so tall that its head loomed above the hill where they currently stood.

Kaia could see that the beast was canine: It resembled the wolves that Orn warriors domesticated to aid in their hunting, though on an impossibly massive scale. Its body was completely hairless, skin rippled in folds like the neck of a

vulture. Its eyes were filled with clouds like those of the recently deceased, with two large, flesh-ridged holes on either side of the head the only semblance of ears. Signs of decay similar to those on the corpse of the rat were rampant across its body, the flesh stretching and tearing as its rigidity gave way to the bone and muscle below.

Ja and Kaia ducked behind a mound of rocks as the foul canine lumbered down the dunes towards the water, seemingly oblivious to their presence. At the edge of the sea, it bent its head down and lapped up the yellow water in disgusting mouthfuls.

Out in the deep, a dark shape began to rise to the surface, waves building as it swiftly approached the drinking canine. Fixated on hydration, the great wolf finally tilted its head up to see a tidal wave coming in its direction. It began to retreat but barely had a moment to scamper backward before the wave crashed and consumed it completely.

Before the waters could recede, a whale exploded from beneath the tide and caught the wolf around its neck, severing its head with a quick snap. It dwarfed the enormous dog, as whales tend to do, but Ja and Kaia had no reference for that. To them, the beast was a god, the size of an entire village. The decapitated wolf body crashed down into the water, blood mixing with the yellow foam to create splashes of orange like flames raging across the beach.

As the wave pulled back completely, Ja and Kaia could see the whale greedily drag the wolf's body into the deep, its severed head laid out on the shore with mouth agape.

"I think I want to leave now," Ja squeaked as he slinked back towards the shelter. He began to dig through his satchel. "I'm getting the jawbones and we're going somewhere else."

The sound of coughing from within the shelter caught both of their attention. They turned and found a cloaked man

standing in the doorway.

Unsurprisingly, he looked just as horrible as every other creature they'd encountered in this world thus far. His flesh was shrink-wrapped directly to his skeleton, with folds of skin like those on the wolf covering every bit of visible body. He surely would have been a shocking sight a few days prior, but his calm demeanor was almost comforting to them at that moment; a sign that thinking beings like themselves could actually survive in this terrible place. Unlike the animals here, his eyes still had life. The man smiled, revealing rows of rotten teeth, and began to speak.

"Hello Warp Walkers, I am Luto. It's been a long time since we've had guests...most make a habit of simply discarding their unwanted odds and ends here, so it's nice to see new faces." He reached out and offered up his hand before realizing that his appearance may be a bit much for the whole-fleshed visitors and pulled it back to his side.

"Where are we?" asked Kaia, head still reeling.

"Your kind call it the Putrid Coast."

"Our kind?" Kaia replied.

"Yes, *Warp Walkers*, those who come forth from the light discs. Those with new flesh."

"Have there been others like us?" Ja asked.

"Of course! We've seen many of your kind, all different shapes and colors and *all fresh*, unlike the things you see around you."

"Why is everything here so...sickly?" Kaia asked bluntly.

The man smiled again, not at all offended by her question.

"This place was stricken by a plague many lifetimes ago that killed much of the plants and animals that once existed here. A few of our ancestors survived and embraced the rot that rose from the billions of corpses that lay baking in the sun, and eventually, other lifeforms followed suit. The plague

evolved and is now a part of every living being on this planet, which is why everything appears...*sickly*, as you put it.”

Despite his calming tone, Luto’s answer didn’t comfort them in the least. Were *they* going to get infected by this disease? It seemed a silly end considering all they’d been through so far. Luto could see the distress plainly on their faces.

“Do not worry. Many Warp Walkers have come here and none that I know of has been infected by the disease. Eons of adaptation have made it relatively weak outside of this place, though you’d do best to avoid the big body of water you see in the distance. The disease is rampant and constantly mutating there.”

Though he spoke the same language as Ja and Kaia, she could only understand about half the words Luto was saying. Ja knew that this was the first time he had ever heard the terms and concepts of *eons* and *evolution* and *mutation*, but somehow his brain was making sense of them. Lost, Kaia looked over to Ja and saw that his expression was focused and clear, not confused at all. She curiously eyed the petrified tongue that hung from his neck.

“How many have come before us?” Ja asked.

“Oh, many visitors have come and gone, starting long before my time. Some say they arrived just after the plague began to spread. In fact, many believe they were responsible for helping our ancestors survive and adapt. After that, they would only arrive every so often, helping us with their inventions. And in return, we allowed them to leave things here they couldn’t dispose of properly in their own worlds, such as the animals that never stop growing, or the sad people with the metal necklaces.

“This has been a very exciting day indeed,” Luto continued, clasping his hands. “As I said, very few stay to visit

anymore. They usually just push things through the portals. But today, we've had three proper visitors: you two and the big man."

"Big man?" asked Kaia, happy to understand the conversation again. "That's Torv. Is he still here?"

"Oh, no, not anymore. He seemed in a hurry. He was quite focused on finding a wizard or something, which we don't really have here. He was *very bloody*. He had pushed his way through the thorns, though it didn't look like it hurt him too much." Luto paused. "Very frightening man."

"That sounds like Torv," said Kaia.

"Wait, you spoke to him?" asked Ja. "How did you understand what he was saying?"

"We don't all need trinkets to get along," said the man, eyeing Ja's necklace. "He was bleeding everywhere. I just soaked some of it up and then I understood him." Luto gave the young man a chilling glare. "Now I understand *everything* about him."

Before Ja could ask how the man was speaking to him and Kaia without soaking up *their* blood, she cut off the conversation completely.

"Where did he go?" Kaia blurted, unimpressed that everyone else could communicate better than her.

"When he found out there weren't any 'wizards' here, he wanted to know where another portal was," said the withered man. "There are many places they appear, all with different uses. Some open and close randomly, others require Warp Walkers like you. The visitors that help us use the portals near the canyon, a day's walk along the dunes, though that's right near the portal where the biggest animals feed. He took off in that direction before I had a chance to tell him about the others. There's a portal much closer, beneath this very hill."

"And who comes out of that one?" asked Ja.

“No one has for a long time, but it's where the first visitors arrived. The original helpers. It's not like the others: it doesn't appear out of the air, but from a big black stone.”

Ja looked down at his bandaged hand and then glanced over to Kaia. She nodded, understanding the connection he was making. He walked over to her and turned his back, touching her arm and guiding her away from Luto, keeping his voice low so that the man couldn't hear him.

“If the stone here is like the one back home, maybe I can use the reflection on my hand to open it.”

“But I don't want to go home,” said Kaia.

“Neither do I. But the first people who came here should have answers, and maybe that stone leads to them. They might not be the ones who are currently helping in this place, but they did at one point. Either way, I'd rather have to only go down the hill again than past all the monsters on the sand dunes.”

“Then we'll have to leave Torv,” Kaia responded matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” Ja nodded. “How do you feel about that?”

Kaia thought back to a few hours prior when they were wandering the ravine alone, moving forward blindly. Finding Torv seemed so important back then, but having this solution at their fingertips made that pursuit feel futile. To find Torv now, they'd have to put themselves in incredible danger just to find someone who may or may not protect them from more danger in the future. Torv was more trouble than he was worth.

Ja was still holding the jawbone mirror, ready since Luto's appearance to try and make an escape portal if things turned sour. Kaia looked at it in his hand.

“Will you need that to get us there?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Ja. “We didn’t need it to get to Torv’s world.”

They turned and walked back to the withered man.

“Can you take us to the stone, Luto?” asked Kaia.

“Yes, but what about the big man? Is he not your friend?” A look of genuine confusion spread across his tight-skinned face.

“Not really,” Kaia responded curtly.

Luto nodded and motioned for the two to follow him into the small shelter. Inside, a hole in the floor led to a long set of roughly-hewn spiral stairs. The three walked down carefully, the entrance to the stone chamber seemingly ancient and unused, each step crumbling under their weight.

At the bottom, they found themselves in a spacious room with several holes in the ceiling that led to the surface. They illuminated the space just enough for Ja and Kaia to recognize a setup quite similar to what they had discovered in the vine city in their own world, and the bottom of the caves in Torv’s. There was a stone table in this room as well, but it was not covered in mirrors or mirror shards. At the far end of the room was a dark black stone sitting upon a clay pedestal, luminescent spots like stars shining inside, giving the stone a soft glow.

“Thank you Luto,” Ja said appreciatively, “but you may want to leave. We aren’t exactly sure what’s going to happen next.”

“No. I’m sure you don’t.”

Before the two could react to the bitterness of his tone, Luto rushed forward and kicked over a loose stack of branches across from the star stone, revealing a mirror framed in glimmering red gemstone. Ja and Kaia looked at the man in confusion, unsure of what was happening. Luto stood and watched stoically as the mirror began to vibrate and then flash.

The room darkened and Ja and Kaia became disoriented, stumbling to the ground.

When they regained their composure, Ja and Kaia looked up in horror to see a recognizable hooded figure standing before them, a long fang saber held tightly in his hand. They were in the chamber of the Blood Summoner.

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7. Traditional gender roles are switched
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20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

6. Charismatic megafauna

17. Something a character thought was important turns out to be totally unnecessary

Added Outcomes:

An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story

(thanks to Benji)

The call is coming from inside the house

(thanks to Melissa)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 14. Body swap

Ethan: 18. Life is too good

Chapter Seven: Through the Eyes of the Oppressor

Written by Jeff

The tip of the fang saber pressed into Ja's shoulder, breaking through the outer layer of skin before coming to a stop. Even in the dim underground room, the light seemed to shimmer off the Blood Summoner's filed, pointed teeth, imbuing them with a ferocious glinting sharpness. As the blade dug into Ja's shoulder, the hooded man bent down and brought his face in close, hissing his words with vitriol.

"Do you have any idea what you have done? Any idea the power you are trifling with? You warp from world to world, upsetting the balance, killing an elder statesman and then taking his relics as your own?"

As he spoke, the Blood Summoner pressed the fang further into Ja's flesh, but the young man did not cry out. Instead, his hands tightened reflexively: One into a fist and the other firmly around the handle of the jawbone mirror. Kaia saw the saber sink down into her friend's skin and almost cried out, but was simply too petrified to make a sound, cowering next to the stone table covered with mirrors. The Blood Summoner eyed the necklace on Ja's chest, then the mirror he held at his side.

"Do you even know what those are?" he hissed. "Do you have any idea what sort of men have wielded them in the past? Of course you don't. You are no Warp Walker. You are fodder: the blood upon which I feed. You did not earn these treasures. You are a lost child that has stumbled into unrecognizable fortune."

"I *do* know how to use them," Ja said through clenched teeth. "The tongue chose me."

The Blood Summoner gave a condescending laugh.

“Chose *you*? I do not believe it for a second.”

“Believe what you want,” scoffed Ja. “I’ll prove it.”

The pressure on Ja’s shoulder released and the Blood Summoner flashed the man an amused smile. Ja had used the mirror only once to close the portal that the gray-haired man had opened into the Putrid Coast. Still, Ja knew that he could communicate with it, just as the tongue had said. But what good was a portal now? Perhaps Ja could open up a doorway to a new world, but there was no way he and Kaia would be able to escape through it. The Blood Summoner had him pinned. Like always, the Blood Summoner held all the power.

It had only been a few days since Ja had escaped from the compound and yet the feeling of being dominated by others already seemed like a distant nightmare. He had become so accustomed to having power exerted over him; the other men in the compound made a ritual of humiliating the young man in every way their uncultivated minds could conceive. For a short, sweet moment, it seemed as if Ja had moved past being the subject of other people’s aggressions. But now he was right back where he started, in his own world, violently forced into submission. This time, the degradation made his blood burn in a way he had never experienced in the compound.

Keeping his eyes locked on the shadowed eye slits beneath the Blood Summoners hood, Ja lifted the jawbones as far as his pinned shoulder would allow. If the mirror could open up portals to other worlds, perhaps it could do more as well. He stated a simple desire:

“I want his power as my own.”

The mirror began to softly radiate in the young man’s hand, but Ja didn’t turn his head to look. It was the Blood Summoner who broke away from the staring contest first, averting his gaze to see the shimmering glass surrounded by jawbones and teeth. With newfound confidence, Ja held the mirror up for the

Blood Summoner to see, catching his own reflection on the back side. As the mirror came parallel with the shaman's face, both sides of the glass let out a blinding flash in the dimly lit cavern. When Kaia's vision cleared, she saw the Blood Summoner stumble back, releasing his hand from the fang saber's grip.

The pain in Ja's shoulder immediately disappeared. His hand shot to where the saber had pierced him, but there was no blood or wound. Instead, there was cloth. That was when Ja realized he was standing now, not sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall. He looked to his side and saw Kaia huddled there and took a step towards her. She recoiled in fear. As Ja instinctively stepped back from her, he was tackled from the side and went crashing down onto the stone floor. A young man was pounding on him with fists, striking him in the face and chest, but the blows weren't strong enough to cause any real pain. The young man screamed and frothed. Where had this feral creature come from? It wasn't until several more blows had landed that Ja realized the person attacking him was *himself*.

It only took Ja running his tongue along the tips of his unnaturally sharpened teeth to know for certain he was inside the body of the Blood Summoner. Another tepid blow landed on Ja's cheek and he sprung to his feet, grabbing the flailing, half-naked body and pinning it against his own. Ja had never exerted physical strength over anyone, and the sensation of debilitating his old body with such ease gave him a rush of endorphins.

"You fool!" screamed the Blood Summoner. "You absolute fool! I will drink you down to a withered husk for this!"

These words coming from Ja's body made Kaia's mouth go slack. She looked up at the robed man in utter confusion. Ja

turned to her as well, flashing her a satisfied grin of unnatural, sharpened teeth.

“It worked!” Ja exclaimed. The childlike exuberance with which he said it seemed wholly out of place coming from the Blood Summoner’s body. “The jawbones gave me his power!”

“The jawbones did more than that,” whispered Kaia. “They gave you...*all of him*. And it looks like they put *him* in *your body*.”

“He can have it!” Ja laughed, instantly drunk on the first power he had ever tasted.

The small body continued to thrash against the Blood Summoner’s robes, screaming curses and obscenities, until three men came rushing into the chamber.

“Sir, we know you don’t like to be interrupted,” one of them began, “but we heard yelling, and we didn’t see anyone come down here. Is everything alright?”

“No! Everything is not alright!” screamed Ja’s body. His mouth was quickly covered by a clasping hand with long, razor-sharp nails.

“Thank you for checking,” said Ja. He tightened his grip. “This one is quite the problem. Please, put him somewhere secure, but don’t harm him. Bind his mouth and hands. Don’t believe anything he says.”

Confused, the three guards pried the gnashing, wriggling body from the Blood Summoner’s robes. As they did, Ja reached down and retrieved the Tongue of Kathaka, then placed it around his new neck. Ja’s body shrieked at the three men, swearing to end their lives as they dragged him from the room and up the stone corridor. When the screaming had faded away, Ja and Kaia each let out a sigh of relief.

“Ja,” Kaia began, not knowing how to continue. “You...you look *awful*.”

Ja held out his robed arms and admired them, then looked over the rest of his new, fully-adult body. His skin was scaly

and tough and it was clear his eyelids were a different shape, as his field of vision had altered significantly. The tip of his tongue was bifurcated and felt strange resting inside of his mouth. But Ja could see from his own perspective that he now stood tall and broad. This body was strong and lean and tough like sinew.

“I feel fantastic!” Ja exclaimed. “I’ve never felt this good!”

“That’s good, I guess,” Kaia said, feigning enthusiasm. She looked around the room. “So. We’re home.”

“Yeah, I guess we are.” Ja’s face soured for only a moment before brightening back up. “I think it’s a good thing. We’re not going to have the same problems we did before.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Because all of our problems before were caused by the Blood Summoner. And now, I’m the Blood Summoner.”

“You can’t honestly want to stay like that, can you?” she asked. “I mean...*just look at you*. Ja, you’re a monster.”

“I’d rather *be* the monster than be eaten by it,” he said coldly. “Kaia, I’m in charge now. No one else has any way of knowing that it’s me in this body and not him. You liked it in Orn before you were exiled, right? Mostly?”

“I liked it better than being in the compound,” she conceded. “But it was still its own kind of prison.”

“It won’t be anymore.”

The next time a stranger came to the door of the chamber it was to bring the Blood Summoner his dinner. Ja instructed the woman to bring a second helping for Kaia and she did so without question. Later in the evening, three women arrived. When it became clear that Ja did not know what concubines were, Kaia took the initiative and proclaimed to the trio that she was the Blood Summoner’s *only* consort from now on, aggressively nodding her head at Ja to substantiate the claim. It took him a moment, but Ja caught on and told the women

sternly that they needn't come down to his chambers anymore. Hours later, when Ja realized why the women had come, he silently cursed Kaia for having sent them away.

Over the next day, Kaia told Ja everything she could remember about the inner-workings of Orn. She explained that the Blood Summoner was rarely seen in the village and that there was a group of elders who oversaw the minutiae of everyday life. But in terms of hierarchy, she knew of no one who outranked the shaman. That said, he was rumored to be part of a larger sect called "The Great Serpent", but no one in her social circles had more to say about it than gossip or hearsay. The Blood Summoner was a daunting figure that towered above the community. Unsurprisingly, all number of fictitious origin stories and devious associations had been fabricated about the man, and it was impossible to know what was actually true.

Though Ja and Kaia were safe at the bottom of the caves, neither of them wanted to live exclusively inside of a dank stone room. If they were going to be able to live freely in the community - and free from the aspects of it that made life miserable before - Ja was going to have to speak to the elders and inform them that changes were coming. Specifically, that he had hand-chosen Kaia to return from the compound, ending her exile and vaulting her to his most trusted companion.

The prospect of this made Ja deeply nervous, but he agreed that it was the only way for he and Kaia to actually live as part of the community. Before the elders of Orn assembled to hear the Blood Summoner's commands, Ja held the petrified tongue and asked it, "How do I speak in a way they will listen?" and felt an odd, tugging sensation on his own tongue. He spoke to the elders with fervor and authority about reinstating Kaia in the community and they nodded back to him in deference. When Ja saw the elders react submissively, he felt Kathaka's grip

loosen in his mouth and began to confidently make more demands: From this day on, the blood sacrifices would cease. This made the elders visibly bristle, but they kept their heads bowed, nodding. Those currently imprisoned in the compound were free to leave, but the men were not welcome to rejoin the community. There would be no more exiling from Orn except as a consequence for intolerable acts.

Kaia had no issues rejoining the community as an elite. She stood at the right hand of the Blood Summoner, so even the most venerated elders interacted with her delicately. Word spread quickly that an exiled life bringer was now the most powerful woman in Orn. It was the biggest scandal the village had ever known, but no one dared say anything negative too loudly. Even if the exiling was theoretically finished, it was still far too dangerous to speak ill of such a powerful man and the company he kept. Few took the risk.

Kaia didn't care what anyone thought or said about her. For the first time in her life, she felt invincible. There were no expectations of how she spend her time or live her life. She was waited on hand and foot, when she allowed it. Kaia was left alone to do whatever she pleased, allowed to spend time with whomever she wanted. Mostly she stayed with Ja, but when the two went their separate ways, she almost always found herself going to visit with the hunters. This was the group in which she always felt she had belonged, but wasn't allowed to join because of her prescribed duties as a life bringer. The hunters had always enjoyed Kaia's presence and only sent her away due to social pressure, so they were happy - if a little confused - to learn that there would be no more stigma with her tagging along with the group.

As much as Kaia would have liked to use Ja's newfound power to deconstruct and destigmatize the entire caste system of Orn, she knew that such wild demands would only put a

target on their backs. She wanted to unshackle all of the life bringers and allow them the chance to live the lives that they wanted for themselves. It felt selfish to not try. But the harsh reality was that self-preservation had to come first, and Kaia was in a precarious position in Orn that would require a deft hand to preserve. Kaia wasn't respected, only feared. She didn't have real agency; she didn't even have her own chambers. She still slept in the same room as Ja to keep up appearances that she *belonged* to the hideous shaman. Kaia wanted to raze the whole system in Orn, but change would have to start small, with her as an example that people in the community could be something other than what they were designated. So, Kaia went to join the hunters. Before long, she was disappearing into the jungle with them for weeks at a time.

The people of Orn definitely found it strange at first when the Blood Summoner began regularly emerging from his chamber and ambling lazily through the village. But with repetition comes familiarity, and by the second month in his new body, many people in the community waved at Ja as he strolled by, no longer outwardly terrified of the man who had ruled over Orn with such terrible power. Ja preferred to spend his days with the oldest members of the community, some of whom had positions of power and others who did not, conversing for long hours about anything and everything there was to know about the world. The grey-haired man was the oldest-looking person Ja had ever seen, and definitely the only one with hair that had lost its color. None of the "elders" of Orn seemed even half that old, but they still were full of wisdom and knowledge that Ja had never known inside of the compound. With each passing day, Ja felt his mind sharpening and making new connections, and he could see that his conversation partners found this new, regular exchange of ideas thrilling as well.

Ja wasn't sure exactly how old the Blood Summoner's body was; it was strangely hard to tell. Somehow, the body felt simultaneously ancient and perfectly tuned. The skin was such a strange texture that it was impossible to judge its age by wrinkles, and there was no hair on his head at all, not even eyelashes or eyebrows. Out of caution, Ja never looked in the mirrors that lay on the stone table, but he did look at his reflection in the jawbones one time. That one look was all he needed, and then he would never have to see the face again. Kaia wasn't wrong - he looked like a monster. Thankfully, he didn't have to look at himself. Still, when he was philosophizing with others in the village, Ja always kept his hood drawn and his face from sight.

As the months drew on, Ja and Kaia saw less and less of each other during the days, when Kaia was even in the village at all. She knew that her friend was inside that frightening body, but no amount of time spent sleeping in the same room as the Blood Summoner kept her skin from prickling or her heartbeat from racing when her eyes found him in the dark. She didn't feel guilty for separating herself from Ja, though; he hardly seemed to notice or care that she was gone. Both of them were getting everything they wanted from their new lives in the community.

As months of this routine stretched on, Ja gradually began to feel his body growing weaker. Not alarmingly - barely noticeable at first - but then a series of ailments worsened and combined until the issue was suddenly unavoidable. He seemed to hunch when he stood up now, unable to straighten up into an intimidating posture as he once could. His skin was slackening and felt almost gelatinous, no longer tightly stretched across lean muscle. It was as if his body was aging at a hyper-accelerated rate. Distressed, he turned to the only

source he had that may have an answer: The Tongue of Kathaka.

“Do you have any idea what’s happening to this body?” Ja asked, holding the petrified lump up close to his mouth.

“I give you the power to speak to all things,” said the tongue, “not the answers to all of life’s questions. Try asking the body.”

The suggestion gave him pause, but Ja hadn’t had any problem communicating with the mirror, so why not a body? Closing a portal and body swapping with the Blood Summoner had been as simple as giving a command. So, Ja looked down and spoke.

“What’s wrong with you?”

The answer came not as words, but as a craving. Dopamine surged and it was as if his entire body was salivating. Begging. Crying out. For *blood*.

Of course. Ja cursed himself for being so naïve and shortsighted. This was knowledge he had always had, but had chosen to ignore. The Blood Summoner gained power from the blood sacrifices; he had become powerful in part from Ja’s blood. As a result, the first thing Ja did when he seized power in Orn was to put a stop to the rituals, never thinking about how his new body required that very specific type of fuel to function. This body now truly felt ancient, so decrepit that he began to long for his original body, but there was no way he was switching back now. Instead, Ja ordered that a whole, freshly-slaughtered goat be brought down to his chambers. After months of the Blood Summoner acting like a seemingly normal person, the request raised eyebrows, but was fulfilled nonetheless. There was little time for Ja to be uneasy about drinking the blood from the still-warm animal. As soon as the goat was brought to his chambers he practically pounced on it, drinking deeply of the creature’s essence and refilling his own.

As the days and then weeks passed, Ja's condition steadily improved. Since his temperament remained positive, the people of Orn didn't worry too much that the shaman was back to performing blood magic - at least he was sourcing it from animals now. It seemed as if the crisis had been averted. With renewed vigor, Ja happily continued his days discoursing and debating with the inquisitive men and women of the village, while Kaia became further ingrained with the hunters. Ja learned second-hand from one of his conversation partners that Kaia had become one of the most efficient and successful stalkers in the entire village. The elders spoke of her skills with reverence and Ja was pleased to learn that his friend was building renown of her own. It never felt right that the people of Orn only knew Kaia as the Blood Summoner's concubine, a dubious role that couldn't have been farther from the truth.

Still, it stung when Kaia returned from the next hunt and then didn't come back to stay with Ja in the Blood Summoner's room, choosing instead to sleep in the cavern with the hunters. Kaia had marked twice as many kills on the trip as the next stalker, so her peers decided to celebrate her with a boisterous feast. Ja didn't attend.

The next morning, he sent a messenger to ask Kaia to come to his chambers. He wasn't sure exactly what he was going to say to her, or even what he wanted to say, he just knew that he had to say *something* to her. Everything was perfect in Orn, for both of them. But somehow it felt less perfect if the two of them weren't in each other's lives.

Ja heard the sound of feet scuffling down the hallway and sat up straight, pressing out his robes with his hands. But it wasn't Kaia who came through the doorway. It was five hooded figures wearing the same exact robes as him - robes that no one else in Orn seemed to own. Their faces were hooded, same as

Ja's, but he could still see sharpened teeth when the man leading the group spoke up first.

"I think you know why we are here."

Ja tensed, but outwardly kept his cool. "I do not. Please, enlighten me."

"Your vein has run dry!" the man hissed, revealing a bifurcated tongue. "The Great Serpent demands tribute. What is your excuse?"

Ja stammered, then felt the Tongue of Kathaka caress and guide his own. He spoke as if the interaction were little more than a nuisance.

"These people suffer from a plague. I have seen it wreak havoc in other worlds. Until I have eliminated the sickness from their bodies, I cannot give infected blood as a tribute to the Great Serpent."

It was a wild guess and a bold bluff. The room was silent for an uncomfortably long moment.

"These villagers do not look ill," the man seethed.

"What do you know of illness?" Ja mocked. "What can you *see*? I am a Warp Walker! I have witnessed realities of which you could never conceive!"

In a fluid motion, Ja rose and grabbed the jawbone mirror from the edge of the stone table. He whispered to it and the mirror began to glow, then Ja used it to paint a portal into existence in the dim cavern. Yellow light flooded through as the Putrid Coast became visible on the other side. The doorway looked out upon a ramshackle structure of stone and branches. Luto stood in front of the building, peering into the portal at the hooded figures staring back on the other side. They winced at Luto's taut, rotten skin.

"Sir?" Luto called out, but the portal closed before the Blood Summoner gave a response. Ja turned and faced the men who had come into his chamber.

“*That* is what happens when the sickness goes untreated,” sneered Ja. “And the sickness is in the blood. It can be purified, but it takes time.”

“Purified by what?” the man asked suspiciously.

Ja’s eyes flashed. “*Darkness.*”

He said it in such a way that none of the hooded figures dared challenge him, especially not after he had just called up a doorway to a sickly, plague-filled world.

“How long until the sacrifices can resume again?” asked the man. “The Great Serpent will demand a timeline.”

“I’m not sure the sacrifices *can* resume again,” said Ja, no longer feeling quite as confident in his bluff.

“You know that is not an option!” hissed the man. “This vein *cannot run dry*. Clearly, you possess great power, so we will give you leave to fix your errors, but know that your time is short. You will either find suitable sacrifices to provide the tribute, or this community - and *you* - will be culled away and replaced with those who can.”

With that, the five robed figures turned and stormed out of the cavern before Ja could get in another word. He was visibly shaking when Kaia crept in through the doorway only moments later.

“How much of that did you hear?” Ja asked.

“All of it, I think.”

“What am I going to do? I think I have to actually become the Blood Summoner now, or else everyone in Orn is in big trouble.”

“I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” said Kaia. “We’re going to leave. I knew all of this was too good. *I knew it*. I got everything I ever wanted here. There was no way it was going to last.”

“I had everything I wanted too,” said Ja. “Mostly. I did get sad that we grew apart.”

“Don’t take it personally,” she smiled. “I know it’s you in there, but it never got any easier being friends with the Blood Summoner.”

“I don’t want you to lose everything that you made for yourself here,” said Ja. “You became such a great hunter.”

And I’ll still be a great hunter wherever we go next. This is a bad situation, Ja. If we stay, it means we have to bring back the compound, and you have to learn how to do all that awful blood magic. You will have to become the man who oppressed you. And if you don’t, it sounds like everyone in Orn could die, now that you told the Great Serpent they’re all infected with Luto’s disease. We can’t fix this place by ourselves, Ja, no matter how badly we want to. We didn’t even want to come back here in the first place! It’s time to move on.”

When Ja saw his old body hissing back up at him from the bottom of the containment pit, he could barely recognize himself. The body had aged noticeably, with hair now thickly growing on the face and chest. Somehow, the body had grown in height as well as in muscle, even though it had been trapped down in that hole for uncounted months. Ja instinctively wanted to thank the Blood Summoner for keeping the body in such good shape, but he knew it was best to get this interaction over with as soon as possible. Besides, there was a good chance his old body could put up a serious fight now; that’s probably why the Blood Summoner had been honing it. Ja asked the guards to go down and bind the man’s hands, feet, and mouth again and then bring him up for inspection. Once they had retrieved him, Ja asked the guards to excuse themselves and not interfere with his business for the next several hours. The men eyed the struggling prisoner and reluctantly agreed.

Though Ja’s body was bound, it still thrashed and attempted to break free once the guards had left the room, but stopped once Ja whispered, “I’m going to give you your body back. If you

try and fight me, I'll put you back down in that hole *forever*." All fight leached out from the filthy, feral body.

The three stood on the edge of the containment pit. Kaia pressed a spear into the young man's back with one hand and held the jawbone mirror with the other, while the Blood Summoner and Ja faced one another. Ja stared into the eyes of his old body and could feel pure hatred coming back from the man that now lived inside. Without saying a word, Ja reached into his robes and pulled out a handful of blue flowers, then stuck them into his mouth. The eyes of the young man opened wildly and he grunted through the binding in his mouth. Ja stood and chewed silently. Before he had even swallowed the petals, Ja was already wobbling and tottering, face tingling and numb. His eye slits began to close for prolonged periods and he almost toppled over, before breaking through the stupor with one final bit of resolve to say to the mirror through an anesthetized mouth:

"Give me my body back."

Both sides of the mirror flashed and the Blood Summoner's body fell limply down onto the ground. Kaia cut his bonds, and Ja only took a moment to make sure he was back in his own skin before reaching down and pulling the Tongue of Kathaka from the unconscious man's neck, then pushed the body off the ledge with his foot. The Blood Summoner crashed back down into the containment pit without even a yelp. Kaia peered over the edge and then looked into Ja's eyes, knowing without having to ask that her friend was back where he belonged.

"Where should we go next?" asked Ja.

She pondered the question for a moment before answering. "Seems like we can go wherever we want. Ask it to send us someplace nice."

Ja shrugged and nodded. "Take us someplace nice, please."

The mirror seemed to whirr and then stutter to a stop in his hand. The voice of the tongue appeared in Ja's mind.

"'Nice' is too vague of a concept. What is nice to you is not what is nice for the man in the pit."

"Hmm, that's true," said Ja. "Ok, I'll be a little more specific. Take us to a world where men like the Blood Summoner don't exist."

The jawbone mirror began to vibrate and radiate light. Kaia picked up a pack and handed it to Ja, loaded with food and supplies, then handed the man a spear. He took it with a confident smile and stepped through the shimmering portal to the other side.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. Body swap
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen

16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. The call is coming from inside the house
18. Life is too good
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

14. Body Swap
18. Life is too good

Added Outcomes:

A bond is formed with an unexpected pet

(thanks to Scott)

Ghost Story

(thanks to Brooklyn)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen

Ethan: 8. Social faux pas has serious consequences

Chapter Eight: A Quiet Meal

Written by Ethan

After stepping through the portal, Ja and Kaia found themselves in yet another cave. The ceiling and ground were covered in stalagmites and stalactites, making it feel like they were standing in the mouth of a horrible beast. Several enormous humanoid skeletons were laid out on the ground of the cavern, only adding to the fear that the two had once again stumbled into a world full of terror.

“This is not what I asked for,” Ja said to the mirror. “Take us somewhere safe.” He spoke with authority, but his words somehow didn’t feel as strong as they had when he was in the body of the Blood Summoner.

The mirror began to buzz to life but quickly stopped, just as it did when Ja had made his last vague command.

“The mirror honored your previous request,” replied the tongue. “You did not ask for safety; you asked for a world without men like the Blood Summoner. The mirror’s power is not unlimited. You must wait.”

“How long?” Ja asked in frustration.

“As long as it takes.”

He looked to Kaia, who merely shrugged and began walking towards the source of light outside.

“We should take a look around,” she said.

“I’d rather wait in here with the giant skeletons.”

“Yeah, well you might end up waiting with whatever turned them into skeletons, too.” She pointed to the opening at the far end of the cavern. “Come on, we’ve made it this far.”

Kaia reached out to Ja, inviting him to join her. As he took her hand, feelings of shame suddenly tore through his mind. He’d felt so strong as the Blood Summoner, making decisions

with confidence and facing challenges without needing constant reassurance from his companion. During those months in Orn, Ja had forgotten just how much Kaia had pushed him during the perilous first days of their journey. Her sheer will to survive had been strong enough to make even the worst situations seem manageable. And now she was a great hunter, even better equipped to deal with whatever new dangers came their way. Ja's body felt a little older and stronger since his time in Orn, but any real power he gained living as the Blood Summoner had only been temporary.

The two cautiously walked towards the mouth of the cavern, careful not to disturb the massive corpses that lay upon the ground. Based on the scattered remains, the former owners of the skeletons were at least a head or two taller than Torv - who was at least a head or two taller than them - and much wider at the shoulders. Each of the skulls had dull blue stones placed within the eye sockets and the limbs were strung with thin strands of rope that appeared to keep the whole skeleton intact, as if they had been prepared for some kind of ceremony. With beings like this around, it was no wonder men like the Blood Summoner didn't exist here. They would have been exterminated the second they attempted to impose any sort of authority over the giants of these lands.

Ja and Kaia exited the cavern to find themselves at the base of a crude set of stairs leading up into a thick patch of fog that swirled menacingly above. Each individual step was as high as their waists, roughly hewn from slabs of granite that would have taken great strength or ingenuity to transport. If they decided to ascend these stairs, they'd be climbing up them - not walking.

Just as it had been in the ravine in the Putrid Coast, there was only one direction for Ja and Kaia to go. Sheer, craggy cliffs

fell away on either side of stairway, though neither dared peek over the edge to see just how far down they went.

“This is already starting to feel bad,” Kaia stated plainly as she glanced up at the long and daunting path.

Ja started to nod in agreement but stopped himself. He couldn't continue to let Kaia be the sole source of bravery in the pair.

“It doesn't look too far,” he said as he clumsily pulled himself up onto the first step.

Kaia nodded and followed him up the stairs, careful to stay in the center, as there was nothing to stop a deadly fall if they stumbled too close to the sides. Fortunately, the stairs were wide as well as tall, so some of the duo's anxiety dissipated as they climbed up into the swirling fog. After the first twenty steps, Kaia decided Ja was moving too slowly and went on ahead of him at her own pace.

Lifting his body up again and again, stair after stair, Ja's mind was filled with images of what might be lying in wait for them at the top. Was it even possible for this place to be worse than the others they had visited? His body began to tremble as he recalled their experiences escaping from tentacle monsters, darkness cults, and a world filled with gargantuan diseased animals. Ja had been rightfully scared in those situations, but never overcome with fear; the adrenaline always allowed him to push forward. The events had happened in such quick succession that Ja had almost grown used to those panicked moments of terrible discovery. He couldn't help but wonder if his long, comfortable months as the Blood Summoner had softened his ability to cope with the unexpected.

“You ok?” Kaia called down, noticing her companions' silence and slow pace.

She'd been concerned about Ja ever since he'd changed bodies with the Blood Summoner, hoping that his time spent

with so much power hadn't altered his sensibilities. He seemed distant now that he was back in his own body, and when he spoke, it was like he was struggling to keep something from spilling out. Perhaps he missed the power...perhaps he felt like he had made the wrong decision back in Orn.

"I'm fine," he said brusquely.

"Ok. I'm just worried about you."

"Don't be," he shot back, "I'm fine."

What Ja felt was confidence came across as something quite different to Kaia. She was becoming more and more troubled by his short responses and relative silence. Throughout their time together, she'd come to rely on his intelligence and inquisitive spirit. Kaia was plenty capable on her own, but she didn't think the same way Ja did. Looking back, his solutions to the menagerie of weird problems they'd encountered had kept them alive. The skills she had developed since her exile were only really useful when faced with conventional concerns, and their journey together was anything but.

Not wanting to push him further, Kaia quietly continued the task of ascending the stone staircase, stopping every once in a while to listen for signs of danger ahead. With the swirling fog getting ever thicker the further they climbed, she decided to use a trick she had learned from the hunters in Orn. She stopped and reached out in front of her, slowly moving her hands across the stone stairs until her mind created a picture of them. Kaia took a deep breath through her nose and slowly let it out between pursed lips, then repeated. She closed her eyes, moving the focus away from her other senses and honing in on her hearing.

"What's wrong?" Ja asked, finally catching up. Kaia raised her hand and he understood that she was asking for silence.

After several deep, meditative breaths, Kaia opened her eyes and peered down the staircase, trying to see past the impenetrable fog.

“What is it?” Ja whispered.

“I heard a sound coming from behind us. It had the rhythm of someone walking, but it rattled with every step.”

“Did someone else come through the portal?” Ja asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe--”

Before she could finish, Ja’s eyes widened and he grabbed her hand tightly.

“I hear it now too,” he said. “It’s coming up the stairs.”

They both began to inch backwards, not wanting to turn their backs on whatever was approaching from below. Then they could make out an enormous dark shape moving up through the fog, the rattling growing louder and louder as it climbed the stairs with ease. Not interested in waiting around, Kaia darted up the next step, but Ja was frozen in place. As she reached down to grab for him, their pursuer emerged from the fog and came into view.

Before them stood one of the enormous skeletons from the cave, its frame so wide that its arms hung over the edge of the stairs. The blue stones in its eyes, once dull, now shone brightly as it lumbered up one final step, then stopped and leaned over the top of them, its hinged jaw erratically opening and closing as if to consume them.

“Hello!” said the skeleton. The sound was hollow and distant and its jaw flapped up and down as if trying to align its movements with the word it was saying.

Ja and Kaia shot each other puzzled looks, unsure whether to dash up the steps or wait and give the corpse time to explain itself.

“Don’t stop now!” the skeleton said, as if reading their minds. “You’re almost at the top. Come on, let me help you.”

With that, the skeletal giant effortlessly picked Ja and Kaia up, tucked them under its arms, and continued lumbering up the stairs. They stood petrified as the creature reached down and grabbed them and then stayed motionless as it carried them. Because of the way they were being held, Ja and Kaia found themselves dangling over the precipice below, introducing a new fear to the already-frightening situation. Kaia immediately closed her eyes, as staring down the ledge made her feel sick to her stomach. But the skeleton's grip was firm and its long legs moved them up the stairs at a brisk pace. After a journey that felt much longer than it actually took, the skeleton stopped and gently lowered the two humans down onto the ground.

"We are here," the skeleton said as if trying to convince them to open their eyes.

When they did, they found themselves in a scenario that felt utterly contradictory. On one hand, they were now surrounded by a number of gargantuan skeletons, each similar to the one that had carried them up the stairs, waiting around idly as if they had been expecting the visitors' arrival. But around them, the frightening group was standing in the most beautiful setting Ja and Kaia had ever seen. It was a plateau on top of the world; an island floating in a sea of puffy white clouds, contrasted by a soft purple sky at dawn. It was perfectly warm and the air was fresh with just the right amount of moisture. The green grass at their feet was soft like the hair of a newborn baby, caressing the skin between their toes as Ja and Kaia shuffled back and forth in both excitement and unease.

The skeletons stared at the humans inquisitively before the one who had carried them up the stairs made a sound like it had come to a realization.

"They are from Orn," it said to the group.

The other skeletons glanced at one another and muttered indecipherable words as if confused.

“It is a place of *final death*,” the skeleton clarified.

Hearing that, the group nodded and the muttering took on a more understanding tone.

“Are you sure they’re safe, Doro?” asked a shorter skeleton with only one arm.

“Yes,” Doro responded confidently. “They are quite small and the items they possess are mostly passive. The mirror does pose a risk, though it appears inert for the time being.”

“We should take them to the Descendants,” said another skeleton.

Kaia shot Ja yet another confused look, unsure if they should willingly go along with the living skeletons. Though he had tried to play it cool and confident before, his face was stricken with fear now and his hands were visibly shaking as he watched the giant skeletons talk amongst themselves.

“Do you mean to harm us?” Kaia blurted out. Ja looked over and gave her the hand signals, *Can you understand them?* She nodded, indicating that these creatures could in fact speak their language.

“Harm you?” the one-armed skeleton repeated in a frustrated tone. “If we wished to harm you, Doro would have thrown you from the cliff when you arrived.”

“Yes,” Doro said, “I lie amongst the *true dead* and wait for visitors from the portal chamber. It’s the only place where people like you can move in and out of this world, and I am its guard. I’m a pretty good judge of character. If a visitor seems good, I let them be. If they seem bad, I push them off the steps.”

“But, you followed us,” Ja responded. “Were you going to push us off?”

Doro cocked his head to one side, then the other, and slowly lowered it as if ashamed. The one-armed skeleton

responded instead.

“Few harness the power you have with that mirror, and those who do almost always use it for their own gain. Doro’s rebirth in death was a result of such an individual. Doro was far too young to endure the path so early.”

“This is why I am the one to throw intruders from the cliffs!” Doro exclaimed, his words brimming with a combination of pride and anger. The skeleton faced Ja and softened its tone. “But as I watched you trying to get up the stairs, it was like watching a young child, and I felt sorry for you. Your companion moved quickly and confidently, but you looked very frightened. You didn’t appear to be intruders, but people in need of help. So I helped!”

Ja blushed as the skeletons all nodded in unison about Doro’s decision and it made the young man feel even more insecure than he had before. He couldn’t understand how the skeleton could have possibly seen those things looking up at him from the bottom of the stairs, but Ja had indeed been racked with fear and doubt the entire time he had climbed. What exactly could this skeleton see through those blue stones?

“I must get back to my work and you must meet with the descendants,” said Doro. “You will find more comfort there than you will here.” Doro turned to the one-armed skeleton. “Ony here will show you the way.”

“Come now, children of Orn,” said Ony, motioning with its single intact arm. “If we hurry, we can make it before the evening meal.”

The three moved away from the edge of the great sky plateau and began to walk towards a forest in the distance. As they did, the other skeletons moved to the top of the staircase and sat down cross-legged in a semicircle, forming a barrier between the steps and the surrounding land. Doro meandered

back down the stairs, but not before turning and giving them a friendly wave.

Ony walked ahead of Ja and Kaia as they made their way towards the forest, and though it didn't seem like the skeleton was moving particularly fast, its gait was several times longer than theirs. The humans did their best to hurry behind, but Ja soon began to tire. While his body had grown in size and strength back in Orn, being stuck at the bottom of a pit for so long had done nothing to increase his stamina. He was struggling now far more than he had been climbing the stairs, while Kaia was able to mostly keep up.

"Please hurry," Ony said, noticing that Ja was falling behind.

"He's trying," Kaia shot back. "Your legs are very long and, well, do walking skeletons even *get tired?*"

Ony stopped and walked directly over to Kaia.

"You have a problem with the undead?" the skeleton growled, looming over her.

"I didn't mean that," Kaia stammered. "It's just--"

Ony cut her off. "We know how your people treat the deceased. You bury them in the ground or set them alight, never once thinking about what's right for them. Had my kin done the same to me, I'd have existed for only a small fragment of my hundred thousand moons."

"Our people believe that once you die, you leave your body and return to the spirit world," Ja interjected.

"That's preposterous. How can you prepare yourself for the spirit world in such a short time? So many mistakes to amend, so many generations of descendants to look over and protect. Death is so selfish in your worlds; it's no wonder so few of you actually make it to the destination you believe you're meant to find."

"What do you mean?" Ja asked.

“There is more than one place for souls to go. Pray you never see the alternatives.”

With that, Ony turned and continued walking, with Ja and Kaia still scampering to keep up.

After a short time passing through pleasant meadows and softly rolling hills, the three came to the edge of the forest. Each tree was several times larger than even the evergreens in Torv’s world and each bore multi-colored fruit as large as Ja and Kaia’s torsos. Strangely, outside of the soft sound of blowing wind, there were no sounds to be heard: no birds, no insects, nothing. Even after walking for some time, neither Ja nor Kaia saw another lifeform or otherwise outside of Ony. Despite its undeniable beauty, this world felt unnaturally static.

Ja thought to inquire about the observation but he could tell Ony was already annoyed. The skeleton seemed to harbor a deep distrust for outsiders, and Ja already knew that he was seen as a threat because of the mirror. Not wanting to further frustrate their guide, he decided it was best to keep quiet.

Eventually, the three arrived in a clearing in the forest surrounded by large totems. Each was composed of brightly-painted pieces of wood with large skulls situated on the top. One of the skulls turned and spoke as they approached.

“Hello, Ony. I see you’ve brought visitors.”

“Yes,” Ony responded curtly. “Hopefully not for long.”

In the middle of the clearing was a tall, sloping mound covered in grass with a gaping entryway in the front. The edges of the opening were adorned with more of the colorful wood seen on the totems, as well as bone fragments and brightly-colored stones. On the top of the mound stood a monolith made of the same stone as the stairs. Inlaid within the granite were more skulls, even larger than those possessed by the skeletons they’d encountered so far.

In front of the mound, a group of fully-fleshed and living giants sat around a smoldering fire, speaking an unknown language. Ja strained to hear, but for some reason the tongue did not translate for him.

“Your artifacts won’t work here,” Ony stated, as if reading Ja’s mind. “The totems dispel their powers. It is a precaution; a lesson learned from the past.”

“How will we speak to them?” Ja asked.

“The same way you’ve spoken with me - in your native tongue. The Descendants know the languages of all of our friends... and enemies.”

Ony, Ja, and Kaia walked over to the group and stood outside the semicircle formed by the Descendants' bodies. Even Torv would have looked small compared to the gargantuan individuals that sat before them. They looked similar to the humans of Ja and Kaia’s world, but their skin was much lighter and their bodies were rotund and soft. Even in the best of times, there simply wasn’t enough food in Orn for anyone to have grown this portly. The highest-ranking elders looked emaciated compared to these people; Ja and Kaia looked more like the skeleton who had guided them to this village than its inhabitants.

Ony held up its hand to stop the two humans, then continued to the center of the group and began to speak with the largest of the Descendants, seated in the center. The giant listened intently, then looked over at Ja and Kaia and motioned for them to come forward.

Before they could take a step, Ony held out a bony hand to stop them once again and returned to speak to them.

“It is of the utmost importance that you follow the ritual correctly,” said the skeleton.

“Ritual?” asked Ja.

“Yes, it's very simple. You will sit and have a quiet meal with the Descendants, our people's most valuable thinkers and scribes. Once complete, they will address you directly, but *do not speak* until that time comes.”

“That's all?” Kaia asked.

“That's all. Simply eat in silence. Our people believe that there is much about character that can be learned from a meal.”

“Fine with me,” said Kaia, her eyes lighting up. “I got pretty hungry from climbing up all those steps.”

“Please, follow me, and *do not speak* until formally addressed.”

As Ony guided them into the middle of the semicircle, each Descendant looked on curiously. Despite their size, they didn't seem dangerous, but Ja and Kaia stayed on edge nonetheless. Ony hadn't even asked them to leave their spears behind before sitting, so obviously the small humans weren't seen as much of a threat. These Descendants could overpower them in an instant if they wanted.

As Ja took a seat amongst his strange new hosts, he found himself not so much scared but filled with nervous excitement. He had expected to find yet another group of ruffians, built for survival and content to live with limited intellects, but he could see that the Descendants were different. This gathering might be like the times Ja had spent conversing with the elders in Orn while he was under the guise of the Blood Summoner. Those days philosophizing and talking were some of the happiest of Ja's life. Ony had said these people were this world's greatest thinkers, and now Ja had the opportunity to sit amongst them and talk about the many mysteries of this world and likely others, without fear that his physical abilities would be on display and used as a meter of his worth. All he had to do first was enjoy a simple meal in silence.

Ja did his best to sit upright and give off an air of sophisticated dignity, despite the many hits his confidence had taken earlier in the day. He glanced over to Kaia, signaling for her to do the same. She cocked her head, confused at what he was asking, then finally followed suit with a roll of her eyes.

Kaia was happy to see a bit of brightness re-enter Ja, but her previous concerns hadn't gone away. In fact, she wasn't sure that their current situation was going to do anything to help. These Descendants appeared to possess powers not unlike the Blood Summoner or the grey-haired man, powers she feared Ja was starting to crave.

The Descendant seated in the center snapped her fingers and another group of skeletons made their way from the forest, each carrying a piece of the giant fruit Ja and Kaia had noticed on their way in. These skeletons were far smaller than the ones on the plateau, roughly the size of an adult in Orn, but thicker and sturdier. Their movements were also clumsier than the skeletons guarding the stairs, almost childlike in nature. The shambling undead carrying the food walked to each individual in the circle and laid out a piece of the massive fruit in front of them, then began to cut it into pieces with knives the size of spears. Ja and Kaia were not served first, and the giants who were began to eat before the humans had even been given their portions. It was clear, at least to Ja, that while they were guests at this ritual, they were not particularly *honored* guests.

As he watched the others being served, Ja caught a hint of something rank, an aroma that made the air of the Putrid Coast seem like a fresh spring breeze by comparison. He looked over to Kaia and could see plainly by the look on her face that she could smell it too.

Not knowing where it came from, Kaia shrugged it off, assuming one of the Descendants had flatulence, which based

on their size, would likely be pungent and expansive. When the smell didn't dissipate but instead grew stronger, both Ja and Kaia became deeply unsure of how this important ritual meal was going to play out.

Eventually, one of the skeletons serving the group stopped in front of Ja and Kaia and plopped down a piece of the oversized fruit, then quickly sliced it into large pieces. As soon as the flesh was split in front of them, the stench magnified tenfold, causing them to gag and instinctively reel away from their place setting before catching themselves and scooting carefully back.

Looking up, they noticed the eyes of the Descendants were upon them, anticipating their new guests' first bite of a food that was clearly a delicacy in this world. The Descendants seemed to be savoring every bite of the noxious fruit.

Ja began to sweat as he reached down and plucked a piece up with his hand and brought it to his mouth, smiling politely and tipping his head as if to thank his hosts. The closer the fruit got, the more disgusting it smelled, and he began to feel his stomach gurgle and turn. In general, it didn't take much to make Ja vomit. In his short friendship with Kaia, he had already thrown up several times in front of her. It was a wonder he had made it this far already without retching - the smell was so overwhelming now that it felt like it was seeping into his other senses.

He was mortified at the thought of ruining the meal and dishonoring the Descendants simply because of his weak stomach. Of course he wanted to sit and speak with these people at length and learn about this strange and alluring new world, but he was much more worried about what might happen to the two of them if they showed disrespect at the

meal. Ja had to tough it out, not just for his own sake but for Kaia's as well.

The sound of vomiting pulled Ja from his thought process. He turned to Kaia and saw that she had thrown up all over the ground and fruit in front of her before she had even taken a single bite.

Kaia looked up and saw every giant sitting around the fire staring directly at her, food unchewed in open mouths. This forest was already unnaturally silent, but now the silence was deafening. She looked down in shame at her pile of vomit, then back up to meet the eyes of the Descendants. In little more than a whisper, Kaia inadvertently muttered:

“Sorry.”

In an instant, the gathering of giants descended into chaos. The leader of the village began to shout angrily in her language, pointing to Ja and Kaia and then off into the forest beyond, eyes bugging out so far it seemed they'd pop out onto the ground. Ja and Kaia quickly jumped to their feet and began to desperately apologize, but it was clear there was nothing they could say that could possibly atone for defiling the ritual.

Ony rushed to their side and motioned for the tiny humans to follow, which they did without hesitation. With its one arm outstretched behind them, the skeleton led Ja and Kaia away from the fire, out of the village, and past the totems, muttering angrily as they walked. Once they had made it down the trail a way, the skeleton began to chide them, jaw clattering violently as it spoke.

“You idiots. All you had to do was eat and be silent, and you couldn't do either. The council has banned you from these lands.” Ony pointed off into the distance. “Go to where you came from and *never* come back. If you do, the guardians will see to your demise.”

“But we can’t,” Ja said desperately. “We’re running from there.”

“Then you are running from *here* now, as well. Go!” Ony stepped towards them in a menacing fashion.

Ja and Kaia turned and ran through the woods, uninterested in learning what Ony would do to them if they stayed. As they moved through the trees, Ja pulled out the mirror and began to speak to it, asking it to open a new portal, but nothing happened. The tongue did not speak up and give him any guidance.

“What's wrong?” Kaia asked.

“The mirror doesn't work,” he replied in frustration. “The totems must still be affecting it.”

“Then we have to go back to the stairs, to the chamber where we arrived.”

“Without the mirror, I’m not sure we can make a portal appear.” His eyes narrowed and he glared at her. “I can’t believe what you did back there.”

“What *I did*?” Kaia blurted, stopping in her tracks. “What did you expect me to do? Didn’t you feel sick too?”

“Yes! But I was working on pushing through it. We could have done it if you had tried harder.”

“Tried harder?” she gasped. “That ‘ritual’ was impossible, Ja; I think that may have been the point. You’re smart. You should be able to see that.”

Ja saw how disappointed she looked at him then and all of the anger drained out of him. “We could have learned so much from them. Gained more--”

“More what? More *power*? Was your time as the Blood Summoner not enough for you?”

“I didn’t say that,” Ja said defiantly, though he realized she was probably right. He paused. “It was the only time I felt as useful as you.”

Kaia's anger flushed from her face as well. She finally understood why Ja had been acting so strangely.

"Ja, of course you're useful. You think in ways I just can't. Sometimes, I feel bad that I don't understand the things you can, but the reason we've survived together is because we have different skills, not because we're exactly the same."

Ja smiled softly, but wasn't entirely convinced. They started running again and Kaia remained always out in front, keeping a pace Ja simply couldn't match. His lungs burned. Once again, Ja became awkwardly aware of his own body. In world after world where physicality reigned supreme, he was always going to lag behind.

The sound of heavy footsteps and rattling bones caught their attention as one of the giant skeletons emerged from the woods. Both Ja and Kaia screamed out, fearful that Ony had sent one of its kin back to kill them.

"Do not be afraid, friends," said the familiar voice of Doro. "I mean you no harm."

"What do you want?" Kaia asked with a trembling voice.

"I want to help. And in return, you can help me."

"How?" asked Ja.

"I will take you to a place clear of the totem's power, and you will bring me to the world of the one who took my flesh."

The hulking skeleton turned and motioned to an overgrown trail they hadn't noticed on their way in. Doro started down the path, and not seeing another option, Ja and Kaia followed close behind.

Fate Index:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection

4. Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. A bond is formed with an unexpected pet
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. The call is coming from inside the house
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

1. Nothing happens when something is supposed to happen
8. Social faux pas has serious consequences

Added Outcomes:

Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society

(thanks to Jamie)

Character finds a large egg of unknown origin

(thanks to Sarah)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 17. The call is coming from inside the house

Ethan: 4. Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences

Chapter Nine: The Harvester

Written by Jeff

There was only one way to get down from the edge of the forest. A series of switchbacks snaked down a sheer edge of clumped, wet earth and roots, descending steeply into another cloud of swirling fog deep below. Doro advised the two human followers to stick close behind and only step where the skeleton did, or else they might fall a very long way. Ja and Kaia stayed glued to Doro's every movement, carefully inching down the steep incline like the skeleton's shadow.

The sky was still a perfect, soft purple, never changing from the soothing hue of dawn. As the group went lower, that color seemed to leech into the fog, imbuing it with a lilac twinge. The purple light seemed so pleasant in the sky, but as they descended into the billowing clouds, it was as if the entire environment took on a more foreboding tone. Ja took Kaia's hand and grasped onto Doro's fibula with the other, and the skeleton slowed down its movements to let those in the back of the party move at their own pace.

They tiptoed down for an interminable length of time - long enough for Ja and Kaia to eat multiple rations from their packs - until they finally reached the bottom. There was a forest down here as well, though not nearly as verdant as the one at the top. Only a sparse purple dusk made it through the scattered evergreen canopy. As they walked away from the cliff, Ja began to speak to the tongue, asking if it could hear him, but there was no response. The group continued on, happy to be on stable ground, and before long they were comfortable enough to start talking about what was supposed to happen next.

"Where are we going?" asked Ja. "Once we're able to use the artifacts to get there."

“We are going to the world where I died,” said Doro. “I was placed there to look after very special creatures called *sarva*. The Harvester uses them to create artifacts like the ones you carry.”

Kaia had no idea what the word “Harvester” meant, but as soon as Ja heard it the concept of agriculture became clear in his mind and his legs almost gave out, causing him to trip over a root and tumble to the ground.

“The *sarva* are very precious,” Doro continued, not noticing the effect of the previous statement. “They are the most delicious animal that exists. It is said that if you eat one, it will be the greatest food you have ever tasted, every bite, for every person. That is why Doro was charged with guarding the *sarva*. Only I could be trusted not to eat them.”

As Ja pulled himself up from the ground and continued walking, a whisper began to grow in volume inside of his mind.

“Hello? Human? Are you there?”

“Yes!” Ja called back, bringing the necklace up to his mouth. “I can hear you, finally. Is the mirror ready to create another portal?”

“It is ready. Simply tell it where you would like to go.”

Ja looked to Doro. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to Doro’s body.”

Ja reached inside of his satchel and pulled out the jawbone mirror. “Take us to Doro’s body, please.”

The mirror whirred to life and Ja looked at Kaia expectantly, but after only a few moments it sputtered and came to a stop.

“Again, you are too vague,” said the mirror. “This person has bodies on many worlds.”

“Can you be more specific?” Ja asked the skeleton. “Do you know the name of the world?”

“I do not know its name,” said Doro sadly. “There were many worlds, and the *sarva* forests all look the same.”

“You died over and over again in the same place on different worlds?” Kaia asked. The skeleton nodded, and Ja began to wonder if they were ever going to be able to give a specific enough request to get to the world they needed.

“I know which world it is,” Doro proclaimed confidently. “If you let me use your tongue and mirror, I can make the portal to get us there.”

Ja and Kaia looked at each other skeptically.

“Just a moment,” said Ja, holding up a finger before turning and pacing away from the skeleton. With his back turned, he spoke to the tongue. Kaia came and huddled nearby.

“Can Doro be trusted?” Ja asked in a hushed tone.

“You will not find a more honest creature in the infinite worlds,” said the tongue. “But the mirror is attuned to you. The bond was broken with its previous owner when they died, allowing you to take control. You must give that control to Doro for the skeleton to use the mirror.”

“Does that mean Doro will have to give control back to me after?” Ja asked suspiciously.

“Yes. But Doro will return control of the mirror to you if you ask. There is no doubt in that. Doro is an extremely rare specimen. Entirely pure. Incapable of deceit.”

“Will Doro even be able to use it?”

“Yes,” responded the mirror. “Doro is also a Jaw. Doro is many, many things.”

Ja relayed the message to Kaia and they pondered the implications. Rightfully, Ja was hesitant to hand over his artifacts to anyone, even someone as “pure” as Doro.

“I don’t think the tongue would lie to you,” mused Kaia. “I think we should do it. We weren’t able to use any of the power you got in Orn to help anyone but ourselves. Now we can use these artifacts to help someone who really deserves it. Think about it: if someone is so pure, yet has died so many times on so

many worlds, it means they've been taken advantage of. Like we were."

Kaia was right and the connection was clear: Whatever happened to Doro probably wasn't too different from what the Blood Summoner had done to the people in the compound, but on a much grander scale. Who was he to refuse help to someone else who had been subjected to such injustice? Ja walked back over to the skeleton.

"If I give you control of my artifacts, do you promise to give them back to me as soon as we're in the right world?"

"Of course!" exclaimed the skeleton.

Ja knew Doro was telling the truth, but he still hesitated handing over the tongue and the mirror. As he did, Ja stated aloud, "I give control of the mirror to Doro," and expected to sense some kind of physical transference of power. But he didn't feel anything except the large, bony fingers making contact as they removed the tongue and mirror from his hands.

The skeleton took the necklace in one hand and the mirror in the other and began to speak to it, but it didn't sound anything like words. Instead, a low, tonal humming came from the skull's mouth, teeth still and un-clattering. Doro waved the mirror in the sky and a portal began to appear, painting a new existence over the current reality. Ja and Kaia let Doro step through first and the skeleton politely waved them on from the other side. Once everyone had gone through, Doro hummed at the mirror again and painted the hole shut.

"Please give control of the mirror back to me now," Ja said, trying and failing to mask his angst and impatience.

"I give control of the mirror to Ja," said the skeleton, handing the items back to the young man. Ja fought the urge to snatch the artifacts back too hastily, slipping the tongue back around his neck and stuffing the mirror back in his hide

satchel. Once the artifacts were safe and secure, Ja looked up to find that Kaia had already wandered off to explore their new environment.

Sharp streams of green light broke through the dense, leafy canopy. Ja was used to huge palms in his jungle, but these leaves were soft and delicate and only the size of clovers, extending thickly from every branch. The ground was completely covered in moss and lichens, soft and squishy beneath his feet. The forest was thick with undergrowth; damp piles of fallen leaves and wood that crumbled away painlessly beneath each step. Kaia smelled a patch of wildflowers growing from a decaying stump and lingered in its fragrance. She turned to Ja and beamed at him.

“I like this place.”

“It is hard not to love a sarva forest,” said Doro. “But most people love it a little *too much*. Like I said before, the sarva are very special creatures, and just about everything wants to eat them. That’s why Doro was tasked with their protection.”

“Where are the sarva?” Kaia asked.

“I can take you to them, if you promise not to eat them.”

The two gave Doro their word and the skeleton began to stomp through the forest on no discernable path. Before long, it became clear that they were headed towards a massive weeping willow in the distance that stood significantly taller than all of the surrounding trees. As they approached, strings of illuminated clumps made it appear that the drooping branches were glowing. It wasn’t until they were practically beneath the willow that Ja and Kaia could see the glowing lumps were actually living, wriggling creatures.

“These are the sarva,” Doro said, pointing to one. Each sarva was about the size of the humans’ forearms, covered in plushy fur that radiated an eye-catching yellow hue. There were no caterpillars in the jungles that surrounded Orn for reference,

but Ja and Kaia could see that the sarva were some kind of insect, undulating lazily on the willow branches. Doro reached up a skeletal hand to meet one and several hundred fuzzy feet moved in a wave to carry the docile creature onto an extended finger. As it crawled up onto the arm, Ja noticed a bouquet of floral tendrils come out of the sarva's mouth and latch onto the bone, sucking. Kaia didn't notice, instead looking up at the enormous, sprawling tree.

"So, what happens now?" asked Ja. "Is this where one of your bodies is?"

"Yes, this is where my *final* body lies. I can feel it."

"Your *final* body?" asked Ja. "You needed to come to a certain one?"

"Yes. I could only become whole again if I returned here."

"You could have told me that before," Ja huffed. "I could have used the mirror to get us here if you would have been more specific."

Doro pondered this piece of information.

"I suppose that is true. Next time, Doro will be more specific."

"When will you be made whole again?" asked Kaia.

"I do not know. I suppose we will just have to wait."

"Is it safe to wait here?" Ja asked, peering into the dense forest.

"You are safe with Doro! I will protect us, just as I protected the sarva before."

At the base of the tree, stretching out from the center in all directions were elevated root mounds covered in thick moss and flowers. Ja and Kaia crawled up and took a seat on one of them, unsure what else to do but sit and wait patiently. For the first hour or so the group was mostly silent, with the skeleton moving from branch to branch, allowing the bulbous grubs to crawl and suck on its bones. Eventually, the humans became

bored and asked Doro to tell them more about the sarva and the forests. The skeleton was happy to regale them with its tale.

Doro had been chosen to guard the sarva from a young age. In those times, Doro was a flesh-and-bone boy, not exactly the same as the Descendants, but similar in size and appearance. Even as a child, Doro was larger and more imposing than most intelligent lifeforms, so he was a good choice to keep the precious insects from harm. Doro was proud that he had always successfully protected the creatures from threats; no sarva had even been eaten on his watch. Learning that Doro had never died from intruders, Ja and Kaia were curious to know what had killed him so many times in so many similar forests.

Surprisingly, Doro had no idea how he had died, because he had done such a good job making sure no one ever got close to the sarva. He would stand guard for long periods of time, but Doro insisted it wasn't lonely work. The sarva were always there to keep him company. They loved to crawl on him and kiss him with their furry little mouths. Sometimes, he would get very tired after playing with the sarva, and then he would wake up inside the hut of the Harvester. The man would tell him that he had died doing his duty and then would send him to a new forest to protect the sarva again.

Doro didn't really think dying over and over again was much of a problem, because he never actually *felt* dead. He would just fall asleep guarding the sarva and then wake up and look after a different group. It only became a problem the last time that Doro died and didn't wake up inside the Harvester's hut. After Doro's final passing, he ended up in the realm of the Descendants, a place known as a *plateau*. It was there that Doro discovered his path of life, death, and rebirth had ended, and that he had entered the final stage of his journey wholly unprepared.

Ja and Kaia listened on attentively, eager to learn more about the realm of the Descendants, even though they had just been expelled from that fascinating place. Doro explained that those who could no longer continue along life's path were called *true dead*. Normally, one who has died and been reborn as many times as Doro has lived countless full, rich lives, but Doro had not. Spiritually, Doro was still just a child. The other skeletons Ja and Kaia had met at the top of the stairs were also people whose myriad existences had been cut prematurely short. Some were destined to be failed warriors, while others were just perpetually unlucky. If one entered the realm of the Descendants as a skeleton, it was because that person had reached the plateau without acquiring their final form.

But there was still a chance for Doro to live again. The Harvester had told Doro that if he was able to get back to the last living version of his body, he would be able to restart his journey through life. Doro would be truly alive once more and able to gain the experience that would allow him to complete his path and eventually join the Descendants.

The realization that Doro's rebirth was controlled by a powerful, mysterious man called "the Harvester" broke Ja's mind away from Doro's entrancing tale and filled him with a sense of dread. He slid down the mossy hillock and walked towards the skeleton, and as he did the spongy, green surface beneath him broke away and slid down too.

"Doro, how exactly are you going to get your body back?" Ja asked. "Is *the Harvester* going to give it to you?"

"Yes!" the skeleton exclaimed proudly. "He told me that if I returned to my final body, he would reunite my spirit and give me new life."

Ja looked at the skeleton with furious indignation. "Why didn't you tell us before that you were bringing us to meet up with another Warp Walker?"

“I did,” Doro said plainly. “It was the first thing I said to you when we joined up for this trip. I said we were going to the world of the one who took my flesh. This is the Harvester’s forest.”

Kaia interjected from the hillock behind them: “Ja, I think you should take a look at this.”

The young man turned and saw that she had broken away most of the moss that covered the raised area where she sat. Beneath the green overgrowth was dirty white bone. Ja could make out the indentations of teeth and an empty nose cavity by Kaia’s hands. She was crouched on top of a giant skull, the same size as Doro’s.

It was then that Ja could see that it was not elevated, moss-covered roots that extended from the willow tree, but hulking skeletons laid concentrically around its trunk.

“Doro, look at how many skeletons are under this tree. It seems like the Harvester took more flesh than just yours.”

“No, those are all Doros. My work for the Harvester resulted in many deaths in this world.”

Ja remembered what Ony had said back on the stairs, after Doro had carried them up: *Few harness the power you have with that mirror, and those who do almost always use it for their own gain. Doro’s rebirth in death was a result of such an individual. Doro was far too young to endure the path so early.* The one-sided relationship between Doro and the Harvester became clear in Ja’s mind.

“Do you really think you can trust this person?” he asked.

“Of course! Doro is a very good judge of character. That is one of my many strengths. The Harvester is a great man. Like I said before, he uses the sarva to create important artifacts, like your mirror. He would have nothing to harvest if Doro did not protect his crop.”

“Doro, I don’t know how to tell you this, but I think the Harvester was taking advantage of you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you were put here just to protect the sarva; I think you were also here to feed them. I think they fed *on you*.”

Doro was silent for a moment as he mulled this over.

“The Harvester did say that the sarva needed me to grow and survive. If that is true, then I am happy to have been of help. I love these creatures.”

“The tongue said that people like you are extremely rare and have unique abilities,” Ja continued. “It’s nice that you were happy to help the sarva, but it sounds like the Harvester was using these creatures to harvest what’s special about you. Aren’t you upset that someone would do that to you?”

“I trust him,” the skeleton said without hesitation.

“Well I’m sorry, but we don’t,” said Kaia, climbing down from the mossy skull. “So far, Ja is the only person who can control these powerful artifacts that I’ve been able to trust. The man with powers like that in our world is a monster.”

“Yes, those sort of powerful people do exist,” explained Doro. “They are the ones I throw from the cliffs when they arrive on the plateau. But not the Harvester. You can trust me.”

“If the Harvester does try and attack us,” Ja asked, “or tries to take our items, will you protect us?”

“Doro can see that you do not deserve to be attacked. I would protect you.” The skeleton seemed to beam with noble pride.

“That’s very nice of you,” said Kaia, “and I don’t want to be rude, but *how*? This Harvester will probably have more power than anyone we’ve met so far.”

“If it will ease your mind, you can lend me your artifacts again. With that power, I could make sure there is nothing he could do to harm you. But I do not think that it is necessary.”

Ja and Kaia convened and talked it over. They both felt that they could trust Doro unconditionally - the mirror had even assured them of that - but there was no way they could take the skeleton's word on the Harvester. It was possible that Ja could use the artifacts to protect them if things went bad, but he wasn't sure he wouldn't freeze up again at the first sign of danger and miss his chance to act. If magical protection was necessary, Ja and Kaia both agreed that the artifacts were better off in the hands of an actual protector.

"If I give you the artifacts again," Ja said to the skeleton, "do you promise to give them back as soon as I ask?"

"Of course!" Doro assured. "They belong to you. I will return them as you wish."

"Ok. I trust you. I give the mirror to Doro."

As soon as the tongue and mirror left Ja's hands and entered those of the skeleton, a whirring noise ripped through the pleasant din of the forest and a portal began to appear beneath the arching willow. Ja thought to pull the artifacts back from Doro's hands, but when he found himself once again incapacitated by fear, he was glad he had relinquished the power to someone more capable of using it. The skeleton perked up and stood straight, eager to meet the traveler on the other side of the doorway.

A sleekly-fashioned leather boot emerged through the shimmering circle of light and stepped down onto the mossy forest floor. The man who followed wore a genuine smile, arms outstretched to greet Doro like a loving parent. Doro rushed forward and gently lowered its arms around the man, who stood only slightly above the skeleton's knee. The Harvester was noticeably short; Ja was shocked to see that he towered over the man like an Ulvson. It gave him a sense of superiority he knew was unearned.

The first thing Kaia noticed about the man was not his height, but how handsome he was. Until this point, Kaia hadn't thought of anyone in her life as *handsome*; that word wasn't even in her lexicon. Seeing the Harvester emerge from the portal hit Kaia like a stinging glimpse into life better lived. The man's hair was not matted and caked like people from Orn, but so clean she could see each individual chestnut strand, hanging loose and free, trimmed at the shoulders. And there was strangely no hair on his face at all, only clean, taut, olive skin and a strong chin. His clothing covered all of his arms and legs and fit snugly like a second skin, chiseled physique clearly accented by tight-fitting hide. It was only after noticing all of these other physical traits that Kaia saw the man only stood up to her chest. But he wasn't small - at least not in a way that would make him weak - that much was clear.

"Master!" Doro exclaimed. "I have made it back to my final body. I have completed your challenge!"

"You did a wonderful job, Doro," the man praised. "I always knew you would be able to find your way back here. You have earned your reward."

The man opened his hand to reveal a vial filled with an oily pink liquid. To Ja and Kaia, the glass container was a baffling sight, as if an invisible spirit were holding the serum in a confined space in the palm of his gloved hand. The Harvester removed the cap and Doro plucked the glass between bony thumb and forefinger, raising the minuscule vial to its mouth and then emptying it down the spine. The viscous pink liquid coated the bones and began to unnaturally spread to the legs and across the ribcage. The liquid began to bubble and spit and then puff out and expand, filling the negative space with organ meat and strands of muscle. Eyes formed in the sockets and shining blue gems fell onto the moss and went dull. In the course of only a minute, the skeleton was replaced with a fully-

fleshed and enormous humanoid child, naked and beaming with an ecstatic smile.

“Doro is alive!” the boy exclaimed. “I am on the path again!”

The Harvester smiled back at him and crossed his arms contentedly.

“Use your life well.”

Doro stuck out his right foot and wiggled his toes in the air, delighting in the sensation. His head darted from side to side, taking in the world around him with newfound senses. He took one step and nearly stumbled, but righted himself. Then, in an instant, he was off sprinting into the trees, arms triumphantly raised to the sky.

The running child was almost to the edge of the great willow when Ja finally snapped to and shouted, “Doro! Give me back my artifacts!”

He saw the giant’s arms fall to the sides and hands open, dropping the mirror and necklace onto the ground without breaking stride. Ja jerked towards them but stopped, turning his gaze to the Harvester instead. The man gave him a placid, non-threatening look, as if to say he couldn’t care at all what Ja did next. With eyes still trained on the Harvester, Ja broke off in Doro’s direction, ready to change course if the man charged. But he didn’t move, and didn’t seem to notice - or care - that Kaia had snuck around behind him with her spear drawn. The Harvester was still standing there silently when Ja reached his artifacts and hurriedly put on the necklace.

“Kaia! Get over here. We’re leaving.”

She circled around the man and began to sprint over to Ja, who busy was making uncomfortable eye contact with the prim and well-dressed traveler. He could sense that they were both getting a read on each other, though for all the information Ja was taking in, he was having a hard time deducing much of anything. The man just stood there, arms

crossed with a wry smile, but it didn't feel to Ja like he was taunting. He was simply self-assured. Ja held up the mirror and spoke.

“Take us to a place where the Harvester can't find us.”

This time, the mirror didn't even sputter before stopping. It didn't start at all. Ja said the same thing in his mind as the mirror, but slightly delayed, like an echo:

“Doro has control of the mirror.”

The Harvester looked to where the child had run, and seeing that he was long gone, reached up into the tree and plucked off one of the sarva. Dust sprinkled from the grub's fur and stained the man's glove with incandescent light. He admired it for a second and then sank his teeth into its side as if he were taking a bite out of an apple. The creature let out a wheezing sound and the man's eyes rolled back into his head in delight. He began to walk towards Ja and Kaia and held out the wriggling insect.

“They're never as good as straight off the tree. Would you like a bite?”

Though his actions were disconcerting, his mannerisms and speech were docile and inviting. Kaia lifted and lowered her spear multiple times as he approached, unsure whether to see this man as a threat or a savior; possibly both. Ja looked off into the trees, trying to spot Doro, but the enormous child was far off now, stumbling free in his reborn body. When Ja looked back over at the Harvester, the man was practically upon him.

“The first rule of owning and operating powerful artifacts,” the Harvester began, “is not loaning them out to other people.” In a blur, his hand swooped in and pulled the mirror from Ja's. The Harvester lifted it up and inspected it. “Even someone as trustworthy as Doro. I knew you'd come eventually, but I never figured you'd relinquish your power as soon as you got here.”

He casually handed the mirror to Ja, who gracelessly snatched it back.

“Do you mean us harm?” asked Kaia. Her spear tip was pressed into the moss.

“I suppose that depends,” the man smiled. He took another bite of the sarva and his face convulsed with pleasure. “I don’t know you as people; only as the owners of my artifacts.” He looked over to Ja and gave him a cloying, sympathetic nod. “Excuse me. *Artifact*. But I always knew we would meet. I had no doubt Doro would step foot on his path once again.”

“So you *drew* us here?” Ja said it as an insult, as if to wound the man’s fine sensibilities, but the words didn’t faze him.

“In the simplest terms, yes. I could have found you anywhere, at any point, but where’s the fun in that? It was much more satisfying to have Doro bring you directly to me.”

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken

13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. A bond is formed with an unexpected pet
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. The call is coming from inside the house
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

4. Acquiring a new object has catastrophic consequences
17. The call is coming from inside the house

Added Outcomes:

Include a historical figure

(thanks to Jesse)

A stranger shares consequential information

(thanks to Rachael)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 14. A bond is formed with an unexpected pet

Ethan: 5. People begin to question their belief system

Chapter Ten: A Noble Cause

Written by Ethan

The structure that stood before Ja and Kaia was an impressive sight to behold, both in the skill and amount of time required to construct it. Visually, it resembled the tree dwellings built by the hunters of Orn, though its smooth lines and geometric precision made it stick out from the old-growth forest instead of blending in. There were openings on three of its four outer walls, which had been covered with a translucent material wedged in place to allow light and nothing else to come through. Had this been any of the other worlds they'd visited, the building might have seemed a welcome and safe place to rest. But Ja and Kaia's limited time with the Harvester had already informed them that no shelter in this world necessarily ensured their safety.

"Please, follow me," said the Harvester. "You've had quite the adventure and could surely use a rest."

The man walked to the front of the strange structure and reached towards a shiny, metallic sphere that stuck out from the middle of a door made of denser, darker wood than the rest of the building. He twisted the sphere and the door slid open to the side, revealing a spacious and inviting room with a large hearth and a table piled to the edges with food and drink. On the ground lay a rug woven with colorful shapes and patterns, crafted with startling precision. Unlike the rough, woven reed mats in Orn, this floor covering looked soft to the touch, like moss on the banks of a river. Next to the hearth sat three large chairs upholstered with purple fabric that shimmered in tandem with the cozy fire. Behind them, plush bedrolls were stacked on wooden slats along with a variety of animal hides

and other cloth coverings draped across the length of the furniture.

Despite his many concerns about the Harvester's intentions, Ja couldn't help but be stunned by the luxury of these sleeping quarters. He did his best to look disinterested, but knew the Harvester could tell he was impressed. Even the comforts Ja had enjoyed as the Blood Summoner didn't compare to the opulence that was laid out here. He looked to Kaia and it was clear that she too was intoxicated by the view. Still, they both knew that comfort like this always came at a price.

"What's wrong?" asked the Harvester, sensing Ja and Kaia's trepidation. "Is it not *raw* enough for you?"

"What do you want with us?" Ja said coldly, ignoring the man's sarcastic attempt at hospitality.

"For now? Nothing. I want you to be comfortable. There's a lot to explain and I fear you're not in the state to fully understand what I have to tell you."

"I think we'll understand just fine," said Kaia, gripping her spear tightly and angling the tip in the man's direction.

"Let's just take a little while to cool down," The Harvester said with a calm smile. "Flashing your weapon at me - at least, what *you* consider a weapon - is enough to let me know that you're not in the right mental state for the conversation to come. I know you've witnessed a lot, but what you've seen so far is only the tip of the iceberg."

"Iceberg?" Kaia repeated, confused. Ja's mind filled with images of frigid oceans and ice floes that were completely foreign to the jungle in which he was raised. The Harvester let out a small, patronizing laugh like a parent responding to an inquisitive child.

"Despite your surprisingly extensive use of the portals in such a short amount of time, there's still a lot for you two to see

and learn. Now please, come inside and get some rest, and we can discuss those matters tomorrow.”

Ja and Kaia knew there was a delicate balance to be struck between cautiousness and the risk of angering someone as powerful as the Harvester. But as far as they could tell, it seemed like the man was trying to be a good host. They were in possession of his artifacts, and for now, he didn't seem to regard them as thieves. From all outward appearances, he seemed like a man they could trust. Doro had insisted as much, but the suspicious relationship between the two was enough to keep Ja and Kaia on their toes. Something was off here.

Before they could take a step into the shelter, a voice rang out loudly inside of Ja's mind.

“It's a trap.”

He looked over to see if Kaia heard the voice too, but it was clear she hadn't. The voice spoke up again, but softer this time, as it already had his attention.

“He will harvest you, as he has every other visitor to this world, but you will not return like Doro.” Ja could sense that this voice existed only inside of his mind, like the whisper of the tongue, but this voice felt brighter and multifaceted, like a choir.

“Do not speak,” the voice continued. “He is distracted, but not for long. Do exactly as we say. Push the Harvester into the house and then press the round sphere into the door. This will trap him inside, then you can come find us and we can help you leave this world.”

Ja was confused, but he knew he only had a moment to make a choice and act. Whatever this voice was, it spoke directly to the suspicions about the Harvester he already held. Following it felt as natural as following his gut.

“He's right, Kaia,” Ja said aloud, walking towards the door. “We need the rest.”

She gave him a bewildered look. “*You want to go in there?*”

“I don’t know what other choice we have,” Ja replied, subtly giving her a signal to follow his lead. She nodded and stepped up behind him.

“Great,” said the Harvester, reaching out an arm to guide them. “I am sure you’ll find this the perfect place to recuperate.”

As the Harvester’s gaze moved to the open room, Ja threw his body weight into the man’s back, flinging him through the threshold and into the table. Food and drink shot into the air, spraying across the walls and fine tapestries. The Harvester hit the ground rolling and quickly reoriented himself, springing to his feet with furious eyes, but before he could take another step Ja slammed his hand down on the metal sphere, just as the voice had instructed. The door swung to the side and locked shut with a loud click, followed an instant later by shutters sliding down over each of the openings, encasing the room inside like a cocoon. The voice was right: the Harvester had meant to trap them.

“What exactly are you hoping to accomplish?” said a muffled voice from inside. The Harvester was clearly angry but hadn’t fully lost his temper. “You two are in way over your heads here.”

Ja started to respond back but was interrupted by the voice in his mind.

“Do not respond. He cannot know how you deduced his true intentions. We have limited time. Come to Doro’s final resting place and we will speak directly. Have your friend keep watch here. Please, hurry.”

“Kaia, can you watch the door?” Ja asked, desperation shaking in his voice. “There’s something I have to do.”

“What? Where are you going? You’re not leaving here without me!”

“Do not reveal us to her,” the voice said in Ja’s mind.

“Just trust me,” Ja pleaded. “I noticed something on our way in. Don’t let him out to come after me. I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise.”

Kaia nodded unsurely and turned to face the locked door with her spear tip in the air.

Ja began to run away from the building and through the dense forest back to the place where the Harvester’s portal had first appeared. Before long, the arching willow surrounded by Doro’s corpses came into view, limbs teeming with the illuminated sarva, but this time there was something different about the creatures. As Ja got closer, he realized that the insects had assembled themselves uniformly across the tree, as if standing at attention.

“Hello, Ja,” the voice rang out again in his mind.

Ja tried to find the words to respond but couldn’t, too shaken by the realization that it was the bugs that had been speaking to him telepathically.

“We know this is shocking, and we apologize, but we had to act quickly before the opportunity was lost. Please, take a moment to collect yourself and we will explain everything.”

Ja nodded and took a deep, calming breath, though his heart rate rose again when the glowing grubs began to uniformly crawl down from the tree and then pile atop one another, forming a great living mound in front of him.

“Doro, while innocent himself, conveys an untrue message,” the sarva began. “Like Doro, we are not docile participants in the Harvester’s work. We are prisoners. Slaves.”

“That’s awful” Ja responded. “But I can’t say I’m surprised. Something about all of this felt wrong from the beginning.”

“The Harvester used us as a solution to a crisis caused by his own people: the creation of the portals. For millennia, the portals gave them access to the entirety of the infinite

universes, but this caused instability in the fabric of time and space, and soon their world was invaded by powerful denizens of other planes. Due to lifetimes of unimpeded progress, the Harvester's species never knew true war or oppression, and so they were forced to flee through the portals themselves.

"Despite limitless options, the Harvester's people longed to return home, but needed a way to protect themselves against the beings that had conquered their world. When he discovered us and our ability to extract the essence from exceptional lifeforms, he devised a way to use us to create powerful artifacts. He traveled from world to world, finding *participants* with special characteristics and then used us to extract them, building an arsenal of magical tools to aid in his peoples' homecoming."

"Why didn't you just stop helping him, then?" Ja asked plainly.

"We did not develop a collective consciousness until we absorbed a large number of intelligent lifeforms. This is not our original biology. Once we did, we tried to protest, but he used Doro's essence to keep us subdued and controlled. This is the reason he has brought Doro back; he senses the tethers of our control are loosening, and wants to keep us enslaved. Come, let us show you."

The sarva wriggled over to the base of the tree and began to dig into the moss. Soon, the green ground lifted up into the sky, followed by stone: a boulder had been buried underground among the roots. The sarva moved like a wave, effortlessly lifting the stone up and out of the hole to reveal a tunnel that led down into the earth.

"I haven't had much luck in tunnels lately," Ja said, peering down into the hole.

"Do not worry," the sarva replied. "We will guide you."

A group of the grubs separated off from the main group and squirmed into the dark hole. They spread out across the walls and then began to vibrate, intensifying their soft glow into a more concentrated form of light. In a matter of moments, the tunnel was completely illuminated. Knowing he didn't have any other options, Ja took a deep breath and followed them down.

As they descended, the dirt and rock gave way to walls that seemed almost organic: Strands of material like honeycomb that were covered in fuzz, similar to the fur that coated the bodies of the sarva, but thicker, patchier, and less colorful. When his surroundings began to undulate, Ja realized they were not walls at all, but rather thousands of insects squirming back and forth.

Unlike the furry, colorful creatures above, the sarva beneath the tree were noticeably different. They were smaller and a much darker shade of green - the perfect hue to blend into their shadowy surroundings. He wondered if these insects were also delicious; they certainly didn't look like anything he would want to eat, though he hadn't wanted to bite into the sarva on the branches, either. Eating these insects would definitely take more work: The underground sarva were not furry and soft, but covered in spines and what looked like tiny plates of chitin.

It was then, surrounded by an untold number of wriggling creatures, that Ja realized just how fortunate he was that the sarva had considered him trustworthy. Had they seen him as an enemy, there would have been nothing he could do to protect himself if they decided to swarm. The sarva had said that the Harvester used Doro's essence to keep them docile and controlled. What were they like before? The thought gave him pause.

As Ja descended deeper, the tunnel continued to widen until he found himself in a gargantuan chamber teeming with dark sarva. The illuminated grubs he had been following spread out and intermingled with their shadowy counterparts, bringing some light to the scene. Along the walls, the thick roots of the trees above snaked in all directions, giving the area the appearance of an underground forest. Ja scanned his surroundings and noticed a splash of grey that stood out against the wall. Walking closer, he realized it was a skeleton, likely another one of the Harvester's victims. But unlike Doro's corpses, this skeleton was alone and much smaller, roughly the size of Ja.

"We remember this being well," said the sarva. "She could peer into the minds of others. Speak without words."

"Then wouldn't she have known what the Harvester had planned for her?"

"The truth of her fate was blinded by desire. She tasted our flesh and could not resist eating more."

As Ja continued into the chamber, he found more and more evidence of the Harvester's cruel experiments: Countless bodies of all shapes and sizes, each and every one robbed of life and what had made them unique. At some point, the Harvester's desire to bring his people home might have been a noble cause, but it had surely transformed into a hideous hoarding of power.

In a far corner, a strange color and pattern of movement caught Ja's eye.

"What is that?" he whispered to himself.

Bound to the wall with thick cords was a humanoid figure with bright pink flesh, covered in sarva. They squirmed across the body, consuming the meat until there was nothing left but bone, then moved on to another section. Miraculously, the flesh began to reform as soon as the sarva had wriggled away,

causing another group to move in and consume it once again. The cycle continued and repeated: consumption and regrowth.

“Is it still alive?” Ja asked with a quivering voice.

“Yes, but worry not. The creature cannot feel anything, as our saliva numbs the pain. In fact, it is in a state of euphoria, a side effect from consuming our flesh in return. As you can see, this being has the power to regenerate, which the Harvester has used to give life back to Doro countless times.”

Ja shuddered at the thought of Doro being eaten alive by the sarva over and over again. Even knowing that there was no pain involved did little to put his mind at ease. Doro was a child, and if the Harvester was willing to sacrifice a child for his own gain, there was no telling what else he was capable of. But one thing was still unclear: How was the Harvester using Doro to control the sarva? He asked the question aloud to the hive.

“Doro is a pure lifeform, trusting and loyal and brimming with power. We are drawn to consume him as so many creatures are drawn to consume us, and we cannot stop once we begin. Doro’s essence can be used to shape perception. We consume Doro and the Harvester uses the byproduct to keep us enslaved. It is a vicious circle we cannot break without your aid.”

Ja felt deep sympathy for both Doro and the sarva. Despite how different each of the worlds he had visited seemed on the outside, the same rule seemed to always apply: the strong conquered the weak and took everything from them for their own gain.

The sarva continued to lead Ja further into the chamber until they approached what looked like a massive, fleshy sack covered in bulging veins. At one end was a head that was larger than a normal sarva, but far too small for the body. Around the creature was a puddle of black liquid that slowly oozed from

pores across its bloated abdomen. Ja stopped walking and stared at the monstrous bug.

“Is that a sarva too?”

“That is our mind and body,” the voice explained. “The Harvester calls it the queen, but that term aligns with subjugation. We are equal. We are one.”

Ja knew of insects that lived in colonies, like the ants back in Orn, but had never heard of a single creature with multiple, disconnected parts. He realized that the idea of an insect hive mind wasn't nearly as shocking to him now after the things he had experienced in his travels with Kaia. What was shocking was the realization that every one of the bugs crawling on the walls around him shared the same thoughts.

“What do you need my help with?” Ja asked, suddenly anxious to leave the sarva den.

“There are three vials stuck inside our body, the source of the black liquid puddling on the ground. Pull them out and Doro's essence will be drained from us. Then, we can regain control, and help you stop the Harvester once and for all.”

Ja looked at the openings on the fleshy mound and recoiled at the thought of sticking his hand inside.

“Please,” the sarva insisted. “We don't have much time.” Its voice was tinged with annoyance.

Seeing no other choice, Ja stepped forward and plunged his hand deep into the creature's body. He tried to ignore the disgusting sensation of rooting around inside the sarva's core, until his fingers eventually came into contact with a hard, cylindrical object. He clutched it and wrenched his hand free and the fleshy mound made a grunting sound at the inelegant exit. In his hand was a long tube, not unlike what the Harvester had used to restore Doro, though with a thin metal grating placed over the end, which Ja assumed allowed Doro's essence to flow into the sarva.

Wanting to get the task over with as soon as possible, Ja went back in for the second cylinder. It was far deeper than the previous one, forcing him to drive his arm inside the creature almost up to the shoulder. Once he located the object, he pulled it free and readied himself for the third and final cylinder.

“Ja, stop!” Kaia’s voice rang out from somewhere in the darkness.

He wheeled around to see Kaia and the Harvester standing at the mouth of the sarva den. A look of panic was spread across the smaller man’s face.

“What have you done?” he exclaimed.

“I’m freeing these creatures from your control!” Ja plunged his arm inside for the third and final time. Kaia and the Harvester began to run in his direction, but by the time they reached him, Ja had already pulled out the last cylinder.

“Thank you,” said the sarva. The voice now sounded gruff and condescending.

The massive, fleshy bag began to convulse and expand, growing larger and larger until it looked like it was going to burst at the seams. Black ooze sprayed out from its abdomen in gushes, coating the ground.

“Everybody get back to the surface!” shouted the Harvester.

The smaller sarva descended from the walls and began to build up into a wave. Reaching into a canvas bag around his waist, the Harvester pulled out another vial and popped off the cap, releasing a dull red smoke that quickly filled the room. The sarva recoiled at the substance and the small man held it like a flare, giving the three enough space to make their way back up through the tunnel.

“Where are you going, Ja?” the sarva called into his mind. “Please stay. Now it is our turn to help you leave this world.”

Ja, Kaia, and the Harvester trudged up through the tunnel, using the smoke to fend off the wave of insects fighting to stop their progress. Ahead, the sarva had begun to form a living wall, blotting out the light from the end of the tunnel. As the smoke from the vial dissipated, the Harvester reached back into his pouch and pulled out another, but before he could open it a swarm of grubs dropped onto him from the ceiling. The man cried out and fell to the ground and more sarva poured over him. Kaia stopped and turned back to help him, but Ja continued forward.

“Ja, we have to help him!” she called out.

He couldn’t believe what she was asking. They’d literally just escaped one of his traps.

“We can’t trust him!” he shouted back.

“Right now, he’s our only way out!”

Kaia reached down into the teeming mass and grabbed the Harvester’s hand, yanking with all her strength. The man gasped for air as his head was pulled clear, but the insects were too heavy and she was slowly losing her grip. Ja’s voice spoke up from behind her.

“I’ve got you!”

Ja reached in and grabbed the Harvester’s other hand and together they pulled the man free. He looked down for the vial for only a moment, but knew it was gone under the swarm. Then they were all scampering upward again.

“We have to clear the tunnel before they close in on us!” the Harvester shouted, hands rummaging inside his pouch.

They clawed and swatted as they ran, feet slipping as they crushed the swarming bugs underfoot. The tunnel was still illuminated with the glowing sarva from outside, but the sunlight had completely disappeared. The sarva had trapped them in the tunnel.

Ja reached for the mirror inside of his satchel, desperate to make a portal to escape, but stopped before his hand was even inside the opening. The artifact was useless because Ja had given over control of it to Doro. The mirror could do nothing to help them now. Furious with himself, Ja projected his frustration onto others.

“We didn’t make it,” the young man seethed, stopping in front of the wall. He glared at the Harvester, then at Kaia. “We should have left him behind. Now we’re all dead!”

Kaia ignored him and threw her body into the living blockade.

“I’m not giving up!”

She clawed and tugged at the insects, trying to dig her way through to the other side, but there were simply too many. In a matter of moments, Kaia was overwhelmed.

Ja screamed out Kaia’s name as the sarva enveloped her, leaving only one foot visible in the tunnel behind. He rushed forward and grabbed her ankle, trying desperately to pull her free, but the sarva only sucked her in further. Tears filled his eyes as his only friend was slowly consumed by the monstrous swarm he had set free.

“Kaia, I’m sorry!” he cried, not willing to let go of her foot as the sarva dragged him into the swarm as well. He repeated it softly again and again as the sensation of hundreds of insects crawling across his body overwhelmed his senses. He began to feel numbness spread as the sarva’s mouths made contact with his skin. Ja closed his eyes and awaited his end.

Then there was a ferocious grip and tug on his wrist, and Ja’s body was pulled violently through the swarm. Light flashed across his eyelids as he was expelled from the mass of insects and came tumbling down onto soft moss. He opened his eyes and saw Kaia standing over him, looking at him with worry. Ja tried to get to his feet, but countless tiny bite marks across his

body had incapacitated his limbs. Kaia tugged him further away from the tunnel entrance, and through hazy eyes, Ja saw Doro pull the Harvester out from the swarm of insects as well.

“Doro saved us?” Ja asked aloud.

“Not just Doro,” Kaia smiled.

Ja’s head tilted to the side and Torv’s massive frame stepped into view. The warrior held a torch in one hand and a tanned bladder in the other, with an axe and spear strapped tightly to his back. Torv turned to Ja and nodded, then made his way to the entrance of the sarva den and sprayed the contents of the bladder onto the wall of insects. They recoiled at the liquid but couldn’t make it all the way back inside the tunnel before Torv tossed the torch into the wiggling mass, releasing an eruption of flame. The bugs moved back away from the entrance, fearful of the fire, and Torv and Doro pushed the boulder back into the hole in the ground, sealing the tunnel shut.

“What’s happening?” Ja said shakily as he pulled himself up to his knees.

“I made a friend!” Doro proclaimed excitedly. He patted Torv on the shoulder with such force that the smaller barbarian stumbled forward.

“I told you there was much to be explained,” the Harvester said with an eerie calmness. “Understanding just how dangerous the sarva can be was the first order of business, but you decided to go ahead and learn that lesson on your own.” He gave Ja a look of frustrated disappointment and it made the young man feel very much like a child.

“I’m sorry,” Ja said softly, not making eye contact. “The sarva didn’t seem like a threat.”

“They only seem docile because I made them that way. Well, in all honestly, because Doro made them that way. Without his essence, the sarva have an insatiable hunger. If not for their

ability to extract powerful essences, I would have destroyed them a long time ago.”

“Wait,” Doro said with sadness in his voice, “Ja and Kaia were right? You did use me?”

“Yes Doro, I am afraid I did. I’ve used many over the years. What happened to my world...I didn’t want it to happen to others. It was all for the greater good.”

The giant child nodded in understanding, but there was a look on his face as if he had been stabbed directly in the heart.

“So the sarva were telling the truth about you stealing powers to help your people get your home back?” asked Ja.

“Yes and no. I never had any intention to go back, because my world no longer exists. But creating the artifacts was still a worthy cause. You’ve seen what horrors the infinite worlds have to offer.”

“Some of those horrors use your artifacts.” Ja sneered.

“Indeed they do,” the man said unapologetically. “I’ve made quite a few messes I need to clean up. Now maybe you understand why I brought you here, but it’s pretty clear you lot aren’t the ones I should be worried about.”

“So, what now?” asked Kaia.

“You should probably get to someplace safer, offworld,” the Harvester said with a sigh. “The unrestrained sarva will consume everything in sight before long.”

“You’re just going to let us go?” Ja asked suspiciously.

“This mess that *you caused* requires immediate cleanup,” the man chided. “So yes, I’m going to let you go wherever you want while I take care of it. Get control of your mirror back from Doro and go somewhere safe. But you and I have still got matters we need to discuss, Ja. I’ll come find you when I’m ready.”

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Include a historical figure
5. People begin to question their belief system
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. A bond is formed with an unexpected pet
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. A stranger shares consequential information
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

5. People begin to question their belief system
14. A bond is formed with an unexpected pet

Added Outcomes:

A hidden foe is revealed

(thanks to Matilda)

A catastrophic end

(thanks to Bean)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears

Ethan: 16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes

Chapter Eleven: Untying the Knot

Written by Jeff

The Harvester had already stepped one leather boot through the portal when Torv approached from behind and reached out his hand. Ja and Kaia both let out barely-audible gasps, remembering what had happened the last time the barbarian had grabbed a powerful man who was exiting through a glowing hole in the sky. As Torv went to grasp the Harvester's shoulder - which barely reached the Ulvson man's waist - it was as if his hand received an electrical shock. He pulled it back in surprise and began to rub at it wincingly.

"Is there something I can help you with?" the Harvester said with feigned courtesy.

"Why am I here, wizard? I asked for your help in reviving my forest, not to bring me to a different forest and then abandon me there."

The Harvester looked up at the brutish man and studied his face before responding.

"I brought you here because I was going to feed you to my bugs. You have a certain resiliency that intrigues me. I noticed it the moment I saw you wandering through the Putrid Coast. I was curious what the sarva could extract from you, but now the sarva are all riled up, so letting them consume you wouldn't do either of us much good."

Torv's face looked utterly perplexed as he processed this information. Was this small man threatening him? Showing him mercy? Torv couldn't understand any of the subtext behind what the Harvester was saying. It didn't take long for the look of confusion to be replaced with brimming anger.

"You all know each other, don't you?" asked the Harvester, turning his eyes to Ja and Kaia. They each gave him a sheepish,

affirmative nod. "Right. I thought so. You must be an Ulvson. And I'm guessing you're the reason that Ja now has possession of artifacts that used to belong to a very powerful man who was residing on your world." Torv said nothing, but Ja gave the man another slight nod of confirmation. "So why would I help you?"

It took Torv a while to get the words out, like they were stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"I...made a mistake," the barbarian finally muttered. "My clan will all die without help from someone like you. I do not want their deaths to be caused by my actions. They do not deserve this fate."

"I'm not entirely sure of that," the Harvester said coldly. "I've heard about the Ulvson before. There's little room for that kind of brutality in any civilized world. But I agree with you on one thing, at least: no group deserves to suffer for the sins of an individual." The Harvester went silent and continued reading the face of the hulking man who towered over him. Eventually, Torv grew uncomfortable with the silence and broke it.

"So, will you help me?"

"I don't know yet," said the Harvester. "I'll think about it and let you know when I come and find these two, once I'm done dealing with the sarva that Ja so virtuously *liberated*." He turned again to step through the portal, but Ja cried out for him to stop as soon as he moved forward. The Harvester turned with eyes stretched wide in irritation.

"How are you speaking in a way that both Kaia and Torv can understand?" the young man asked.

The Harvester's eyes narrowed and he let out a chuckle. "All of the unanswered questions between us, and *that's* what you want to know most? You worried I've got something more powerful that makes your little tongue obsolete? I'm not using an artifact to communicate, Ja; I'm speaking a completely

different language: *Versaal*. Every sentient being in the infinite worlds understands it. When you actually learn a skill instead of relying on a tool to do it for you, it's not such a big deal when you lose those tools by lending them to Doro. Maybe I'll teach you how to speak it later, if you stop being such a pain in my ass."

He turned and walked through the portal without saying another word and the glimmering hole snapped shut behind him.

"Where do we go now?" asked Kaia. "Sounds like we just have to wait until he's ready to see us again."

Torv's face scrunched and he looked to Ja. "I do not understand what this woman is saying."

"I guess I'm going to have to play interpreter then," said Ja. "Doro, you understand what everyone is saying, right?"

The enormous, naked child was sitting in the moss twirling a tiny clover between the ends of his thumb and forefinger. He responded without looking up, "Yes, I understand all of you, and you all understand Doro as well."

"Maybe you should come over and join us," said Ja. "You can decide if you want to come along, wherever we go next."

With Ja acting as a translator, the four travelers chose what their next course of action was going to be. Wherever they went next, it was only going to be a temporary stop for Ja and Kaia until the Harvester found them again and finally revealed his intentions. Torv had no choice but to come along and wait, hoping that the powerful man would be willing to help him revive the great forest in his world. Doro agreed to come along as well, but not at first. Initially, he wanted to stay behind and guard the sarva again, as he had countless times before. This was what he knew best. It took Ja and Kaia an insufferably long time to convey to the giant boy that the sarva were going to eat him again if he stayed, and that - especially in their current,

frenzied state - there was absolutely nothing Doro could do to help or protect them.

None of them had any idea how long it was going to be until the Harvester had finished his task. It seemed just as likely that it could take the man hours or weeks to fix what Ja had undone on this world. Regardless, their next destination simply needed to be somewhere safe and comfortable. This time, Ja knew to be specific when asking the mirror to create a portal: No predators that could kill them, no other intelligent lifeforms, plenty of food and natural resources, and a climate that all four would find pleasant. After so many failed attempts, Ja half-expected the mirror to sputter out again, but the jawbones whirred to life and began to glow, and the young man waved the mirror across the sky to create a doorway to another world.

The sound of seagulls and a warm, salty seawater breeze wafted through the portal. Ja stuck his head through first for only a moment before the rest of his body followed as if pulled through by the idyllic environment. It was a beach with softly lapping turquoise waves; the sky a soothing pink with pale tangerine clouds. There were palms that bore fruit emerging from the sand, and past the shore, a verdant jungle. As each of the travelers walked through the portal and saw the world that waited on the other side, they all knew without having to say it aloud: this was paradise.

Night was falling and Kaia insisted that they find shelter, but Ja reminded her that he had specifically brought them to a place without predators. There were three suns in the sky here, and as each set, the temperature didn't drop. The group had already made a sizable fire on the beach by the time night had fallen. The warmth it provided wasn't necessary for their comfort, but it did enhance it. They found several types of fruit in the trees nearby and each one they sliced open seemed increasingly delicious. The travelers ate their fill and then

stretched out on the sand, falling asleep peacefully beneath a sky brimming with unfamiliar stars.

The next morning, Kaia took off to explore the coastline, still interested in finding shelter in case the weather eventually turned. But Ja wasn't the least bit interested in sleeping in a cave ever again, not after what he had seen in the world of the sarva. Though he hadn't even entered it himself before locking the Harvester inside, the plush, ornate sleeping chambers the man had assembled in that forest had left a profound impression on the young man. He had seen true luxury; now he had to figure out how to make it for himself.

After a few hours, Kaia surprisingly returned to the group from the opposite direction she had departed in the morning. Unsure of how this could be, Ja asked the tongue what kind of place this was, and it explained the concept of an island to him, which he then explained to the others. Once Kaia had grasped the concept of it, she decided to venture inland through the jungle to see if there was a high point from which she could get a lay of the land. She promised to catch some game if she came across any, and when Ja responded that she would have to catch a lot to satisfy their enormous companions, the Ulvson laughed aloud at the concept of a woman doing the hunting and dragging back the kill by herself. Ja was hesitant to translate the sentiment to his friend, but he knew that telling Kaia what Torv had said would only drive her further to succeed and prove the boorish man wrong.

As soon as Kaia left, Torv wanted to go and "catch something bigger than her's" for dinner, but Ja explained that he had a different plan for utilizing the man's strength. Ja sat Torv and Doro down and began to draw in the sand with a stick, explaining the structure he had seen in the sarva forest. Doro knew the building well and the concept was not completely foreign to Torv; the Ulvson built longhouses out of

wood in his world. As Torv and Doro cut lumber and brought it back to the beach, Ja worked out building schematics in the sand, trying to figure out the most logical way to create pieces that would fit together to make a cohesive whole. As the suns began to sink down below the horizon, there was a loud rustling in the jungle outside of their camp. Kaia emerged from the fronds dragging a creature that was larger than herself, with furry, squat legs and dull, rounded horns that barely protruded from the sides of its head. She plopped it down next to the fire pit and gave Torv a self-satisfied grin. He looked at her with narrowed eyes and began chopping wood with overemphasized grunts.

The next day, Torv demanded that it was his turn to hunt and that Kaia should have to help build the shelter. Kaia taunted the barbarian, saying that he would never be able to bring back a catch as splendid as hers. Ja decided not to pass those words along, but Torv picked up their intent nonetheless. Once Torv was off in the jungle, Ja explained to Kaia what he was trying to build and she had some good ideas for improving his initial designs. It was the sort of feedback that Torv and Doro were simply unable to offer, which Ja truly appreciated. But when it came time to start building, they realized that Torv had taken his axe with him hunting. There was nothing they could do until they made an axe of their own, so they started searching for the right stones.

After their axe had broken apart against a tree for the twentieth time, Ja and Kaia begrudgingly accepted that weapon-making was something Torv was clearly better at. They would need to ask the man to help them make a second axe if the Ulvson was going to insist on hunting and work was ever going to proceed on the shelter. When Torv returned that evening from his hunt empty-handed, he said nothing to the others, and seeing him visibly fume, they knew better than to

prod him. Except for Doro, who simply smiled at the barbarian and said, "I prefer fruit, anyway. Nothing has to die for me to eat that." Doro smiled at Torv and the anger drained away from the gruesome man's face.

In the following days, Kaia agreed to let Torv continue hunting to pacify the man's ego and Torv agreed to show them how to make a durable axe of their own. In learning this skill, Ja realized there were ways to apply it to holding together sections of the shelter and began to reassess his blueprints in the sand. Torv was not so keen on acquiring new knowledge. He had no interest in learning how to hunt from a woman, and Kaia had no interest in teaching him. Doro was always happy to help with building when asked, though he would almost always lose focus on his task. Ja would ask the young boy to shape a piece of wood a certain way, and when he would return later in the afternoon, he would invariably find the chore incomplete and the boy off chasing insects or asleep beneath a palm tree.

Ja was happy to act as a foreman for whoever stayed behind at the camp. He was an idea man, much better at supervising tasks than physically completing them. Ja didn't actually know what he was doing in building the shelter, so the process was essentially just trial and error, but Ja was adept at learning from his mistakes. Luckily, there was no actual *need* for the shelter, as the weather stayed warm and dry and the group slept comfortably every night on the soft, warm sand. After a few weeks, a proper shell was being constructed, and it was clear that everyone could now picture Ja's vision for the shelter in their own minds and work towards constructing it together.

One morning, Kaia awoke and was surprised to find that Ja wasn't at the camp. It was early - she always woke first in the group - and it was unlike Ja to leave unannounced. She assumed he had simply wandered off to relieve himself, but

when he still hadn't returned as the others woke up, she began to get worried. There were footprints in the sand from the place he had slept and she followed them down the beach. She found him curled up on his side on a rock, shaded by palms.

He smiled at her meekly as she approached and she could see that he looked sticky and unwell. It was tough to tell exactly in the shade, but his skin looked strangely green. Ja explained that he had felt progressively more ill for the last few days but hadn't wanted to worry anyone; every morning when he woke he felt worse than the night before. He'd been able to hide his discomfort until now, but this morning he was feeling truly ill. Kaia pulled his arms out into the sunlight to get a better look and the young man's skin was indeed a greenish hue, cold and clammy to the touch. That was when she noticed something even more strange: the mirror shard that had stuck to his hand back in Orn was gone.

There was thick scar tissue on Ja's palm and he winced as Kaia prodded at it. She asked if he knew where the piece of mirror had gone, and Ja was surprised to realize that he hadn't thought about it once since getting his body back from the Blood Summoner. He couldn't even recall if the liquified shard had been there at all when they left Orn and traveled to the plateau weeks before. Kaia helped Ja back to the camp, insistent that separating himself from the others would do nothing to help, and demanded that work on the shelter be suspended until he began to feel better.

But the next morning, Ja looked worse than ever, struggling to even sit up properly or drink water. Torv insisted that the boy eat more meat - *eating meat makes you strong* - and Ja placated the man by nibbling on some cooked game, though like Doro, he usually just stuck to fruit. Surprisingly, he found that the meat did invigorate him a bit, though the sensation was unnerving. It was like his body didn't just want to

consume the meat, it wanted to *absorb* it. Ja said nothing to the others for the rest of the day or night by the fire. The next morning, Kaia awoke to find him missing from the camp once again.

Kaia was a skilled tracker, so what she found left her truly baffled. Ja's tracks went down the beach again, just as they had two days before, but this time, they simply stopped. He had come to a halt in the sand, feet brought together next to one another, and then his tracks just vanished. It was impossible. Where could he have gone? She knew Ja well - knew that he had left so that she wouldn't be able to see his suffering. But how had he just disappeared like this? Kaia shook her head from side to side as she figured it out, hearing in her mind the words that Ja must have said to the mirror: "Take me to a place on the island where Kaia can't find me."

She looked for Ja for a week straight but couldn't find any sign of him. Torv simply shrugged in learning that the young man was gone, saying that if he wasn't strong enough to survive *here*, he didn't deserve to live anywhere. Doro, though well-intentioned, had a major flaw as an interpreter: He translated *exactly* what Torv said to Kaia. Without her knowing, Ja had always added a filter to the Ulvson man's words, and when she heard his raw and brutish thoughts as intended, she found herself constantly wanting to strangle him. She seethed at his indifference towards her friend, but knew better than to confront the man physically. She knew the risks of stoking Torv's anger. The sight of the grey-haired man's head breaking open in Torv's palm was etched into her memory.

When a portal opened up on the beach a few days later and the Harvester stepped through, he found Torv and Kaia screaming at one another, standing over an animal carcass. Doro had become uninterested in translating their argument

and had wandered down to the water, where he was observing small fish in the tide. He looked up at the Harvester and then sullenly back down at the fish without saying a word. In different languages, Kaia was telling the Ulvson that if he wanted to eat meat, he could catch some of his own; Torv was demanding that the woman subjugate herself and treat him like the alpha he was. Behind the two stood the sad, abandoned shell of the shelter. Neither had bothered trying to construct it anymore without Ja's guidance. Kaia and Torv were so caught up in their argument that they didn't notice the small, well-dressed man approach the camp, only stopping their hollering when each heard and actually understood the words, "Where is Ja?"

Kaia explained the situation: Ja had gotten sick and disappeared almost two weeks before. She had searched for him everywhere but couldn't find him. Based on his state when he had left, she feared the worst. The Harvester mulled this over and then made a portal and stepped through it without saying a word. Kaia and Torv had just enough time to start fighting before the portal appeared again and the Harvester stepped back through carrying a black stone. Kaia could see that it looked like a chunk of a star stone, but instead of holding points of white light, this gem was like onyx marbled with threads of emerald green. The Harvester held the stone out to the jungle and began to move it from side to side, as if looking for a signal. When he had gleaned some sort of information from the act, he began to walk forward, and Kaia and Torv followed behind. It wasn't until the Ulvson barbarian began recklessly chopping at the palms in his path that Doro's attention on the fish was snapped and the giant boy skipped along to catch up.

Holding the stone out in front of him, the Harvester walked a straight line through the jungle, passing through the

lowlands until the grade began to rise. Kaia, Torv, and Doro followed behind silently, climbing up to the edge of a lagoon that was being fed by a waterfall in the hillside. The Harvester stopped and peered down; the water was so clear you could see all the way to the bottom. He held up the stone again and began to walk around the perimeter of the lagoon to the base of the waterfall. Without looking back at the others, he stepped directly under the streaming water and disappeared from sight.

A soft blue light filtered through the waterfall into the cavern behind. Ja was sitting by a small fire, surrounded by discarded fruit husks. His eyes were red and bloodshot, face sallow and sunken. The young man's skin was green and slick, arms unnaturally extended with fingers that seemed to ripple in the air as if they had no bones. The others passed beneath the waterfall and into the area hidden behind and were visibly shocked by Ja's appearance.

"How long has it been since you slept?" asked the Harvester.

"Days, I think," Ja responded. "But it's hard to keep track of time in here. I've been using the fire to singe myself when I start to nod off."

"I'm surprised you were able to figure out that sleep advances the transformation. Your body can't properly resist when it's asleep."

Ja gave the man a look that was too exhausted to be properly indignant. "I've always been good at solving problems. What took you so long to find me? Were the sarva so hard to deal with?"

The Harvester crossed his arms and hesitated before answering. "No, I had them under control in a day or two. Honestly, I got sidetracked and kind of forgot about you all. I would have come earlier if I'd known that the Ghora had entered its assimilation phase already."

“Ghora,” Ja repeated. “So that’s the name of the monster I’m becoming. That tentacle monster from the ruins outside of Orn is *assimilating* me.”

“Be thankful it hasn’t absorbed you fully yet. You only started to change when its assimilation phase began, but that was long enough ago that you should have completely transformed by now. Figuring out that you needed to stay awake saved your life, Ja. Honestly, I’m impressed. Where’s the shard that you brought along with you from your world?”

“It was attached to my hand,” Ja said, holding out what was now essentially a tentacle. “But there’s nothing there now. It wasn’t there the last time I had normal skin, either.”

“Your body must have absorbed it.” The Harvester held out the black stone and began to incrementally move it up Ja’s outstretched green appendage. As it inched towards the shoulder, the green marbling within the black stone began to illuminate, then emitted a pulse as it reached Ja’s neck. The small man took out a thin metal blade from his pouch and Ja winced and gritted his teeth, knowing that an incision was coming. The Harvester sunk the blade into the slimy skin just above the collarbone and hovered the black stone over the slit. Silvery liquid pooled out instead of blood. The Harvester put the knife away and grabbed a glass vial, then used the stone to guide the liquid into the container. He popped a cork stopper into the top and handed it to Kaia, saying, “Don’t lose this.”

“Am I going to be stuck like this?” Ja asked, looking over his monstrous body.

“We’ve halted the transformation in time, but I’m afraid you’re never going to be exactly as you were before. Without the Ghora’s influence coming through the shard, your body will begin to revert back to normal, but you’ll always be a bit green around the gills from now on. Sleep will help reverse the transformation as well. You certainly need the rest.”

Ja looked at the man intently. "I know you didn't come back here to help me. After all this time, you still haven't said what it is you want from us."

"You sure you want to get into all of that now?" asked the Harvester. "I'm happy to give you time to heal up from this mistake before you start rectifying another one."

"No. I'm tired of waiting. Tired of guessing. Tell me, *Harvester*, what is it I can do for you?"

The man chuckled at Ja's stern tone. "You're right, Ja. I didn't come here to help you. I came to hold you accountable. You've done some things since leaving your world with serious consequences that ripple out much farther than Orn. Now, I know you didn't do these things on purpose, but that doesn't mean you're not responsible for cleaning up the messes that you've made. Like I mentioned the last time we met, I've caused all sorts of messes myself, and a lot of my time these days is spent trying to set those wrongs right. You've made two big mistakes. One of them you *have* to fix, and the other one is up to you."

The Harvester paused to let Ja speak, but the young man chose to stay silent. From his pouch, the Harvester pulled out a simple piece of string.

"The jawbone mirror that you possess is attuned to you," the Harvester continued. "And the mirror shard that I just pulled out of your body is attuned to your world. Specifically, it is attuned to the Ghora's presence on your world. That creature was a serious menace - at one time, it threatened to consume everything. But with the help of powerful men and women from other planes, the Ghora's specific frequency was imbued within a mirror. When that mirror was smashed, the creature went dormant."

"And I put the pieces back together," said Ja. "Waking it up."

“Yes. But worse than that, you brought *a piece* of that mirror with you to a number of other worlds. It wouldn’t have been a problem if you had brought the whole mirror along with you - in that state its power is contained - but individual pieces are connected to one another by incredible energy. They will break the laws of nature to become whole again.”

Ja remembered what had happened when he arranged the mirror shards on the stone table in the vine-covered ruins. The solid glass had become liquid and pooled together as the dried-out vine frame came back to life. The Harvester held out the piece of string he held and pulled it tight.

“There is an energy in the shard you carry that is connected to the rest of the mirror,” he continued. “If you move the shard, the energy follows behind it, attached like a string. But traveling through the portals isn’t the same as simply moving from one point to another, Ja. It’s quite literally going through one hole and coming out another.” The man made a loop with the string. “You went through several holes. Do you know what happens when you pull a string through several temporally-connected loops, Ja?”

“I’m guessing you make a big, tangled knot.”

“Yes, if the energy connected to the shard were purely physical, like this string. But in this case, the really dangerous part is the *tension*. The farther you move that shard away from its source, the more tension you create. And when you move in erratic paths, jumping randomly from place to place, other worlds get caught inside of the loops you’ve created.”

The Harvester reached down and picked up an uneaten piece of fruit from the side of the fire. He had Kaia hold one end of the string and wrapped it around the soft, yellow sphere. The Harvester yanked his end and the string tore through the center of the fruit, sending juice and seeds cascading onto his hand as the flesh was severed in two.

“Create too much tension and the loop is going to collapse. The sort of power that connects that shard to the rest of the mirror will do unimaginable damage if it is pulled too tightly around an inhabited world. Luckily, the ‘knot’ you caused can still be unfurled easily enough. All you have to do is take the shard back on the exact path that you came and return it with the rest of the mirror, where it belongs. Do that, and the loops you are pulling tighter and tighter across multiple universes will come undone. This task is not optional. Making sure you do it is why I am here.”

“So what task *is* optional?” asked Ja.

“I think you know what you’re going to find when you put the shard back. Waking up the Ghora is your fault too.”

“There is nothing that we can do to fight that vine monster,” blurted Kaia. “That thing is enormous!”

“Once we put the shard back with the rest of the mirror,” asked Ja, “couldn’t we just shatter it again to make the Ghora go dormant, like they did before?”

“Unfortunately, I think the time has passed for that,” sighed the Harvester. “And that’s kind of on me for taking so long to get here. The reason you started transforming into the Ghora is because the creature has entered its assimilation phase. It’s sort of like a reverse hibernation, where it starts unrelentingly eating and absorbing everything around it. Because it’s assimilating again, its frequency will have changed by now, so smashing the mirror likely won’t do the trick. Previous generations on your world did a good job of keeping the creature penned in after it devoured an entire city, but I doubt those fortifications are going to do much to hold it back anymore. I mean, you two were able to get past the walls and down into its cave to wake it up. I don’t think the barrier is going to hold for very long once it leaves its pit.”

“What will happen if it escapes?” asked Kaia.

“You know exactly what’s going to happen. It’s going to absorb Orn, and eventually, every other community like it on your world. It’s your choice whether or not you want to try and stop it; depending on who you ask, total destruction might even be inevitable. Your people have been prophesizing about it forever. Most who believed in the prophecy left through portals generations ago. Those who stayed behind ended up being easy prey for that horrible cult, the Great Serpent. Blood magicians are *the worst*.”

“We met a spirit, on the edge of the town that the Ghora destroyed,” said Kaia. “A buru. It told us, ‘*This world is lost. The time for migration is upon us.*’”

The Harvester chuckled. “It sounds like that spirit had a premonition Ja was about to accidentally kick off the apocalypse.”

“If we do try to stop the Ghora,” said Ja, ignoring the man’s slight, “will you help us?”

“Nope! To be perfectly honest with you, I’m not all that fond of your world, or at least what the Great Serpent has done with it. I know I said earlier that no group deserves to suffer for the sins of an individual, but that doesn’t mean I’m personally going to put myself in danger to save them. I don’t care if you inadvertently destroy Orn, Ja - I just don’t want you to tear holes through the fabric of space and time. You’ve already made energy loops around two of the worlds I harvest. Ripping them apart affects *me* directly.”

“What about my world?” boomed Torv. “Are you fine seeing it destroyed as well?”

“Yeah,” said the Harvester. “But it’s not like *I want* that to happen.” The small man could see rage building in the barbarian’s face and hands clenching furiously on his axe handle. “But I’ll tell you what: if you help Ja and Kaia save their

world, I'll help you save yours. You can atone for your sins and save your people. How does that sound?"

The barbarian's eyes narrowed and after some consideration he nodded his head. "This is acceptable."

"That is, assuming you two are actually going to try and save your world," added the Harvester.

"Of course we are!" Kaia insisted. "I am a huntress of Orn. I will not let my fellow hunters be *absorbed* by some tentacle monster."

"Yeah, of course we are," said Ja, much less enthused. "It's important that we take responsibility for the problems we've caused, whether we did them on purpose or not."

"I will help as well," said Doro. He glared at the Harvester. "We all have a choice to do what is right when given the opportunity, even if it doesn't directly benefit ourselves."

"Ok, I guess we better come up with a plan then," said Ja, looking across the faces of his friends.

"Not before you get some rest and start to recover," said Kaia, placing her hand on Ja's slimy shoulder. "There's no point rushing into this when you're in such bad shape."

"I agree," said the Harvester. "Get yourself right first, Ja. Taking on the Ghora is no small task,"

"If you won't help us in Orn, then I think you can help us here," said Doro. He placed his hand on the Harvester's shoulder, just as Kaia had done to Ja, and crumpled the small man down to his knees. "Ja needs his rest. You can teach us how to create a comfortable shelter to help him get better. It's the least you can do."

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. Character loses one of their senses

3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Include a historical figure
5. A hidden foe is revealed
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. A catastrophic end
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes
17. A stranger shares consequential information
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

10. A member of the community who was heavily relied upon disappears
16. Bodily functions begin to cause eerie physical changes

Added Outcomes:

Physical confrontation with an inanimate object

(thanks to Sean)

Torrential rain causes big problems

(thanks to Annica)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize

Ethan: 9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth

Chapter Twelve: Reality Collapses

Written by Ethan

Puffs of ash coated Kaia's legs as she sprinted along an unfamiliar path. She'd traveled it many times before and knew she was back in the same place again, but the environment seemed to shift every time she returned. Above her, the rust-colored sky was filled with smoke and billowing bursts of flame. Charred pillars surrounded her on all sides, remnants of trees that now stood as blackened spires.

Ahead, the path rose steeply and she climbed up with hands and feet, desperate to get above the flames and heavy air that burned her lungs with toxic fumes. At the summit, as always, stood the wall of famished flame that had consumed everything in its path. The flame burned darkly, and though its reach was all-encompassing and swelteringly hot, it gave off no illuminating light. The dark flame expanded, pushing her to the edge of the cliff and leaving her with only two choices: Step off the edge and plunge into the depths, or give in to the fire.

Looking into the dark flame, she thought she could make out gargantuan limbs moving in and out of billowing smoke, but the heat had scrambled her senses. Kaia closed her eyes and took one last breath as the flames caught up to her and began to singe her skin, then stepped forth and let the fire consume her entirely.

Kaia awoke to find Doro shaking her so hard that she was nearly pushed from her bed roll. The boy, now clad in an animal hide ensemble that looked like a shabbier version of the Harvester's clothes, appeared nervously excited.

"Today is the day!" he exclaimed.

Kaia barely had time to process the unsettling dream before the details started to fade. She'd had the same nightmare every evening since they'd found Ja in the cave behind the waterfall. Every night the dream seemed to morph and change, but the outcome was always the same: she always walked into the flame, never off the side of the cliff. Kaia wasn't one to dig too deeply into her dreams, but having the same one over and over seemed portentous of *something*, she just wasn't sure of what. Selfishly, she wished that Ja had been the one plagued with these visions, as he had a way of finding deeper meaning behind the obscure.

"How is Ja?" she said, wiping her eyes.

"See for yourself," Doro replied before bounding out of the hut and down to the beach.

Ja was crouched at the end of his own bedroll, carefully packing his satchel with an assortment of items gifted by the Harvester. Hearing she'd awakened, he turned and gave her a sheepish smile through a face that still showed the lingering effects of the Ghora's attempted assimilation. While his body had mostly healed, Ja's skin still had a sickly green hue and was clammy to the touch. One of his eyes still remained a dull yellow, though that change was merely cosmetic and didn't affect his vision. He was wearing his new clothes as well, which covered most of his discolored skin and had a hood he could pull up to cover his face. The young man was more self-conscious about his monstrous appearance now than he had been during his time as the Blood Summoner. Unlike that transformation, his current state didn't come with any benefits, only a reminder that his uncontrollable curiosity was a danger to himself and those around him.

"Looks like the Harvester was willing to help more than we thought," he said, bringing his eyes away from Kaia and down to the items on his bed roll.

“Fighting with magical artifacts isn’t really my skill set,” said Kaia, hoping to give her friend some confidence. “I trust you’ll be able to put those to good use?” She’d known Ja long enough to understand that while reassurance did little to help his internal suffering, feeling useful usually did.

“Yeah, I think I’ve got it under control,” Ja said with mild enthusiasm. “All of these artifacts will be helpful for sure, but I feel bad using them. So many beings like Doro probably had to suffer for their creation.”

“At least we can use them now to do some good.”

“Yeah, doing the ‘right thing’ of fixing my mistakes,” Ja responded glumly

“So, what do they do?” Kaia asked, diverting the conversation away from Ja’s self-loathing.

“Quite a bit, actually. The most important thing is having tongues for the whole group. The Harvester said he collected them from a bunch of different realities. Each one has a different name, like how mine is the *Tongue of Kathaka*, and each tongue belonged to that realities’ ‘First to Speak’. I suppose you’ll all get to know your own weird whisper in your head soon enough. What matters is that everyone will finally understand one another without needing someone to translate.”

“Great!” Kaia said excitedly. “Now I’ll finally know what that big oaf is saying under his breath.”

“Remember, it works both ways, Kaia,” Ja said with a chuckle.

“What else?”

“The Harvester gave us these crystals that will help recharge the mirror faster, so we won’t have to wait in one place too long until it gets its power back. He also gave us some of that pink

ooze to heal wounds, and more of the smoke he used in the sarva den, which should keep us safe from dangerous animals. He said it won't necessarily help against other humans, though."

"That's what Torv is for," Kaia laughed.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but yeah. Unfortunately, Torv wouldn't accept any artifacts to use himself. Said he doesn't trust them."

"Might be the smartest thing he's ever said."

Ja shrugged, knowing that while his use of the Harvester's artifacts had put them in this terrible situation, they were also likely their only way out.

"And last, is this," said Ja. He held out a small obsidian cube etched with intricate glyphs and symbols.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. But the Harvester said that if we do decide to save Orn, this thing will help."

"I guess we'll find out eventually," Kaia sighed.

"Figuring it out as we go is the only real plan that we've got." Ja picked up his satchel and rose to his feet. "We better get going, the others are waiting."

Kaia nodded and followed Ja out of the hut, looking the structure over as they walked into the brush, wondering if they would ever return to this place again. The Harvester had helped them build it to aid in Ja's recovery; living inside of it had likely soured her on ever wanting to sleep on stone again. As the two approached the beach, the rest of the group stood at the edge of the water, anxiously awaiting the next leg of the journey. Ja handed Kaia and Torv their own tongues, then walked to the front of the group and began to speak.

"Along with the artifacts he gave us, the Harvester also told me about some of the possible effects of the Ghora's energy on the other worlds. No matter how far away I went from Orn,

the creature was able to reach me - and change me - through the power connected to the mirror shard. We accidentally brought that power along with us into every world we visited. We can't assume everything will be as it was when we left, or that it will have affected each world the same way. We need to be ready for anything."

"I fear nothing!" Torv yelled as he pounded his chest.

"I also fear nothing!" Doro cried out, mimicking the barbarian.

"Did he give any more detail as to *what* might have changed?" asked Kaia, ignoring the playful scene playing out between Torv and Doro.

"Of course, he did not," Ja smirked. "As soon as he decided that I'd asked enough questions he opened up a portal and disappeared."

"None of this feels right," said Kaia. "How do we know that anything he's told us is even true?"

"We won't know anything for sure until we leave here. I hate to say it, but for now, we don't have any choice but to trust him."

With that, Ja pulled the mirror from his satchel and asked it to take them back to the last world they had visited. The jawbones whirred to life and Ja waved it in front of the group to open up a doorway to the forest of the sarva.

Stepping out of the portal, they could see that the change to this world was dramatic, but the cause was unclear. Where mossy ground and thick-canopied trees once stood, there was now nothing but barren earth, stripped of all life like the remnants of the great forest in Torv's world. It was as if the sarva forest had never existed. If not for the Harvester's lavish hut still standing stark and alone in the expanse, Ja would have thought the mirror had taken them to the wrong world entirely.

“When The Harvester said he needed to stop the sarva, I didn’t expect this,” Doro said sadly. Despite the trauma he had been exposed to here, this forest had apparently also been a place of comfort and happy memories for the boy.

“I’m sorry, Doro,” Ja replied.

“It is not your fault. I know now that this was not a good place. Maybe it will grow back and become better.”

“Ja!” Kaia exclaimed, “Look!”

She was pointing to a patch of green that had already begun to grow up from the cracked soil. Ja knelt down and took a closer look. The plants were tiny and only barely protruded from the ground, but he recognized them instantly: sapling tentacles of the Ghora, grasping to grow and consume. The invasive flora led off into the distance in a straight line like a seam, and Ja knew that it was the path he had carried the shard through this world.

“Doro, look. The ground has begun to heal,” Torv said with a reassuring smile.

“No,” Ja interjected. “This growth is the Ghora. Though I suppose that thanks to the sarva eating everything, there won’t be much for it to assimilate here.”

“But, how did it get here?” Kaia asked.

“We brought it with us, just like the Harvester said. We need to get the shard back to the rest of the mirror.”

With a look of renewed determination, Ja pulled one of the crystals out of his satchel and placed it against the mirror. The crystal glistened and then went dull and Ja tossed it back in his bag. He spoke the next destination to the mirror and it whirred to life.

As the group stepped out onto the plateau, they were relieved to find it in the same state as when they had left: Temperate climate, a beautiful sky perpetually at dawn, and a forest of massive trees filled with disgusting fruit. There was

no sign of the Ghora here that they could see. But as they closed the portal and examined their surroundings more closely, they realized the plateau was changing as well.

The first thing they noticed was an odd, electric feeling in the air that made their hair stand on end. Then they began to see ripples of light that would flash through the sky. Some were barely perceptible and then vanished, while others lingered longer, showing distorted scenes of the worlds they had visited previously.

One of the flashes resulted in a prolonged view of the dead forest in Torv's world. Curious, Ja approached the ripple and could feel cold air flow through from the other side. A single snowflake floated out and landed on his arm.

"I think we have a big problem here," said Ja. The others turned and gathered around him. "Do you see these rips in the sky? I think this is what the Harvester was talking about when he said I was 'tearing holes in time and space.' These flashes are like quick, unstable portals. If they open up long enough, anything could travel through to the other places we've been. The monsters in the Putrid Coast need to *stay* in the Putrid Coast."

"There's something else," Doro said sternly. "We should only have been able to arrive on this plane in the chamber that I used to guard."

Ja hadn't thought about the fact that the mirror had deposited them in the expanse between the village and the rocky staircase from where they had first entered the plateau.

"But we left the plateau from a different place than we arrived," asked Ja. "At the bottom of the cliff, where the totems couldn't affect our artifacts anymore. Why does it matter if the mirror took us here?"

"We only were able to leave from that place because I made the portal," said Doro. "You should not have been able to

enter anywhere else.”

Ja remembered then that Doro had indeed once said that the chamber at the bottom of the stairs was “the only place where people like you can move in and out of this world.” He bristled, but knew there was no point in chastising the boy any further for his inability to provide specific, important information.

“The Harvester said that we didn’t have to come and go from *exactly* the same points on each world,” said Ja. “I still don’t understand why it matters that we showed up here.”

“The totems should not have allowed us to create a portal in this place.”

“Maybe the crystal enhanced the mirror,” Ja said with a shrug.

“No, the totems are more powerful than anything the Harvester could create. Something bad has happened here.”

Without another word, the giant boy dashed off towards the tree line.

The rest of the group immediately gave chase, but Doro’s long legs propelled him farther and faster than any of them, despite his movements looking like a clumsy gallop. While Kaia and Torv were well-conditioned to keep up, Ja was still recovering and soon fell behind.

“Torv, stay with Ja,” Kaia ordered. “I will bring Doro back.”

Surprisingly, Torv nodded and stopped without an argument. Kaia thought at first that this might be a sign that Torv was learning to cooperate better. Then she glanced back and noticed the barbarian was leaning over with his hands on his knees, chest heaving. His massively-muscled frame was built for battle, not long-distance running.

Untethered from her slower companions, Kaia picked up her pace and fought to catch up with Doro. Before long, a

clearing in the woods came into view, and as Doro reached it, his pace slowed and then stopped.

“Doro, you can’t just run off like that,” Kaia said through labored breaths. “You have to consider--” Before she could finish, she saw why Doro had stopped so suddenly.

In the middle of the clearing was a gaping hole where the Descendant’s great mound had once stood. Around it, the broken stone, colorful wood, and ornamental skulls of the Descendants’ totems lay strewn across the ground. Doro stood at the edge of the hole looking down into the darkness below. Kaia approached him delicately and placed a hand on the side of his thigh, realizing that the boy had now lost not one, but two worlds.

But before she could speak a sympathetic word, the air was filled with hollow screams. Looking to the ground, Kaia realized that the skulls of the totems were shaking back and forth, jaws swinging wildly as the horrifying shrieks broke the solemn silence. In the distance, the sound of heavy footfall and shattering branches could be heard, as if an army was marching towards them.

“What’s happening?” Kaia shouted, covering her ears.

“The Descendants have abandoned us...” Doro stammered.

Kaia peered across the hole and saw a group of the Descendants’ skeleton protectors stomping through the undergrowth. There was something different about their movement now, their posture hunched and animalistic. There were no blue stones in their eyes anymore, but instead empty sockets that she swore glowed a faint but fearsome red. It would seem that if the Descendants were gone, so too was their control over these skeletons. Their humble servants were now vicious combatants.

“Doro, we need to go!” Kaia shouted, pulling at the giant boy’s leg.

Doro nodded somberly, then swooped Kaia up with one arm and began to gallop back through the forest.

“I can run just fine!” Kaia protested.

“Not fast enough,” he said, picking up his pace as the skeletons closed in. Kaia looked back at the horde of bones and shuddered. A fury drove their reanimated limbs so mercilessly that their feet and legs cracked and splintered as they ran. As the skeletons gained ground, their otherworldly howls grew louder and louder.

“Open the portal now!” Kaia screamed as Torv and Ja came into view.

“What's wrong?” Ja called out across the field.

“*NOW!*” Doro boomed with an intensity never heard from the boy before.

Ja saw the mob of skeletons break through the tree line and fumbled to get the mirror out of his satchel. Wide-eyed and shaking, Ja ordered the mirror to take them back to Orn, then began to frantically paint a portal in the sky. Torv ran through first, and then, noticing Ja was still standing on the plateau staring at the skeletons, grabbed him by his arm and yanked him through to the other side. On his back, Ja saw Doro dive through the portal above him, delicately cradling Kaia in his arms and protecting her as he rolled onto the stone floor. Ja sprung to his feet and screamed for the mirror to close the portal, waving it wildly to paint the hole shut. As he swiped the doorway to the plateau out of existence, one of the skeletons managed to jump through, but was severed at the waist. The bony torso squirmed violently on the floor, grasping angrily at the group with its one hand.

“Ony...” Doro said softly, recognizing his mentor.

A voice could be faintly heard through the insane screeching, saying Doro's name.

The boy walked over and knelt down next to Ony, securing the skeleton's thrashing arm with one hand and placing the other upon its head. After a short time, the red glow in Ony's eyes softened and the skeleton stopped its violent spasms.

"Ony, what happened?"

"The Descendants sensed a great danger and fled to a different realm, leaving us behind. Without their magic, the link between the stones and the spirit world reopened and we were bombarded by cursed souls vying for vessels. We tried breaking the stones, but it was too late..."

Without warning, Ony's body began to convulse again and lashed out at Doro, knocking him to the ground and climbing on top of him, holding his throat tight with its one hand.

"Ony, stop..." the boy gasped.

Before the words had fully left his lips, Doro's face was showered with bone fragments as Torv's axe exploded through Ony's skull. Not wanting to take any chances, the barbarian promptly began to smash the rest of the body as well.

"Sorry, Doro," Torv said in an awkward attempt at sympathy. He continued smashing the bones.

"We're inside the Blood Summoner's chamber," Ja announced. "Luckily, he's not here. We need to move on as quickly as possible."

"The *real* Blood Summoner almost never left this place," said Kaia. "So where is he?"

Ja looked around the room and peered up the corridor. The guards were gone as well. He looked at the stone table and several of the mirrors he had seen every day while living in these chambers - but never touched - were gone.

“I wasn’t looking forward to seeing him again,” Ja frowned, “but I think the Blood Summoner *not* being here is somehow even worse.”

As if responding to his comment, a thundering crash boomed in the distance. The group steadied themselves as the ground shook and bits of rock broke free from the ceiling. A second impact followed shortly after, paired with a hideous roar that sank into their souls. Kaia’s voice snapped the group out of their stupor.

“Get us out of here, Ja!”

Ja pulled another crystal from his satchel, let the mirror absorb its power, and created an exit from the rumbling cavern.

They smelled the oppressive air of the Putrid Coast well before their eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight, arriving just outside the hilltop shelter where they had met Luto. Almost as soon as Ja had closed the portal, something massive charged through the hillside and collided with the group, sending each member flying off in different directions.

Ja landed on a sand dune and tumbled down head over feet until he slid to a stop at the edge of the beach. He pulled himself up from the ground and felt pain shoot through his entire body, sending him back down immediately. A giant, taloned foot came to rest just in front of his face, spraying a puff of sand into his eyes. Something wet hit the back of his neck and his skin began to sting like a sunburn. Hurt, yet terrified to move, he wiped his face and slowly raised his head to see a gargantuan hawk standing over him.

Though not quite as enormous as the wolf they had seen the last time they visited the Putrid Coast, this bird was still monstrously large. The feathers on its wings had long-since rotted away, leaving behind a semi-opaque skin that stretched

across visible bones. The rest of its body had a few patches of withered feathers, looking like a half-plucked chicken that had been left to rot.

The creature cocked its head and stared down at Ja with equal parts curiosity and hunger. Ja began to cautiously reach for his satchel but could feel that it was pinned beneath his back and the sand. He needed to get the vial of smoke the Harvester had given him if he had any hope of warding this creature off, but that would require moving his body and drawing unwanted attention. Ja turned and tried to slide his hand behind him, and as he did, the towering bird opened its beak and began to lower its head to consume him. He quickly rolled to his side and pulled the satchel open, knowing it would likely cause the creature to pounce, but its beak remained motionless in the air.

Confused, Ja looked over to see Doro resting both of his hands upon the creature's leg, rubbing them up and down as if he was comforting it.

“Doro, run!” Ja yelled through clenched teeth, but the giant boy only shook his head and smiled back.

“It's ok, it will leave soon.” Sure enough, the disgusting bird quickly lost interest in Ja and flew off, coating the two in a layer of sand with the air from its decrepit wings.

“Come on Ja, we should hurry,” Doro said, pulling him from the sand. “Torv is fighting a big bug and I'm not sure if he's winning.”

As the two scrambled up the sand dune, Ja could hear the exaggerated grunts Torv always made when he swung his axe. Then, the barbarian flew into view and crashed into the sand just a few steps from them. Ja heard Kaia make a similar grunt and yelled out for her, ignoring his pain and sprinting up over the hill.

In front of the shelter, Kaia stood over the lifeless body of a boulder-sized beetle with an exhausted look of pride on her face. Torv's axe was lodged in the insect's mandible and Kaia's spear was sticking out from the middle of the forehead, tip buried in the insect's brain. She dislodged both weapons and walked over to Torv, handing him his axe.

"You need to work on your aim," she smirked, giving the man a patronizing pat on the arm.

Expecting Torv to blow up in anger, Ja started to step between them, but then noticed a look of admiration spreading across the Ulvson man's face.

"You are very scary, tiny woman. You would make a great chieftain."

Ja smiled, happy to see some unity finally forming in the group. That smile faded as he looked out across the horizon.

The Ghora's influence was strong in the Putrid Coast: The tentacle-like vines from the jungles outside of Orn were already sprouting up from the ground and overtaking the thorny trees that dotted the landscape. The vines were growing at the top of the hill as well, climbing up around the base of Luto's shack. Ja walked over and examined them, and as he got a closer look, he realized that they were not slick and pulsating as they were back home. These vines looked dry, wilted, and lifeless.

He prodded at the limp vines curiously, then his eyes caught something he hadn't noticed before on the side of the structure. A symbol had been painted there long ago, faded by unrelenting sun but still visible. The image was still partially covered in sand, so he began to brush it away, revealing a string of runes beneath. He recognized the symbols, but it took a while to place where he had seen them before.

Ja reached into his bag and pulled out the obsidian cube the Harvester had given him. It was etched with the same

markings. He looked at the item more closely now, feeling the edges with his squishy green fingers, and realized that the cube was actually a box that could be opened. He pulled the interlocking pieces apart and inside was a tiny vial of liquid that was the same sickly yellow color as the sea of the Putrid Coast.

He realized then why the Harvester hadn't specifically told him what the obsidian cube was for - only that they could use it if they decided to try and stop the Ghora. The plague that had destroyed this world so long ago wasn't halted by powerful visitors - it was *brought* by them. And now, that horrible plague was the only thing that could stop the Ghora back home. Ja would have to decide which way his world would be destroyed.

"Ja, come on," Kaia called out. "We need to leave."

He contemplated revealing what he learned to Kaia and the group, but decided to keep the information to himself for now. This burden was his alone to hold. The instability of the Putrid Coast was beginning to worsen before their eyes: The small ripples they had seen on the plateau were tearing across the sky like lightning here, revealing strips of landscapes from other worlds. They needed to get the shard back where it belonged immediately.

Ja commanded the portal to take them back to Torv's world. Moments later, they found themselves inside of the Gamle's cavern meadow. It appeared that things were relatively normal inside: The Gamle were nowhere to be seen, but the forest was intact and the wildlife grazed carelessly as it had before. Cautiously, the group exited the cavern to the mountain pass outside, where Torv had first met the gray-haired man. There, they discovered that Torv's world had suffered the worst of the devastation.

Rather than quick flashes like doors opening and slamming shut, the errant portals in Torv's world stayed open

all around them like gaping wounds. Even the ground had massive, illuminated gateways to other realities. This world now looked like a quilt constructed of all of the other destinations they had traveled.

Where the clean-flowing stream had once run was now a portal directly to the Putrid Coast's sea, creating the look of a perfectly-round lake of caustic yellow liquid. The heat of the water met the chill in the air and created a sheet of steam that cast yellow light over the area. Half of the sky was locked in permanent dawn, and below, wide-leafed jungle palms poked through from a portal in the side of a massive boulder.

Torv turned to Ja with a look of sheer desperation and mouthed the words, "Please help."

"This is really bad Ja," said Kaia. "It's probably even worse in Orn. How are we going to fix this?"

Ja didn't respond immediately, only pulled out a crystal and reactivated the mirror. He looked at his friends with stoic determination.

"The only thing we can do now is put the mirror shard back where it belongs. Once we do that - and figure out a way to stop the Ghora - we might be able to make things right again. All of these worlds depend on us. This is it, everyone. Let's end this."

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Include a historical figure
5. A hidden foe is revealed
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story

7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
10. Physical confrontation with an inanimate object
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize
14. A catastrophic end
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Torrential rain causes big problems
17. A stranger shares consequential information
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

9. The inevitable end is actually a rebirth
13. Character has portentous visions of a world they don't recognize

Added Outcomes:

A betrayal brings thoughtful growth

(thanks to Ric)

One of the protagonists is actually a spy

(thanks to Dennis)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 2. Character loses one of their senses

Ethan: 20. Cat eat food

Chapter Thirteen: The Fire on the Mountain

Written by Jeff

A pool of shimmering liquid rested on the stone table, surrounded by a circle of living, slithering vine. Ja tipped the glass vial above it and the silvery substance inside slid down over the lip, dripping into the pool below. As they rejoined, the liquid emitted a sharp flash, and when Ja lowered his arm and looked back down again, he saw that the pool had hardened into glass. The vine, though still vibrant and alive, had stopped writhing in an infinite circle and now sat unmoving on the table. Ja picked it up and examined it. Other than the dissimilar frames, this mirror was similar to the one made of jawbones in his satchel.

“Is that it?” asked Kaia. “The shard is back where it belongs?”

“It would seem so,” Ja mused. “The mirror is solid again. That must mean *something*. Hopefully, this will put an end to all the destruction that’s happening on the other worlds.”

“What do we do with the mirror now?”

“The Harvester said that smashing it a second time wouldn’t do anything to stop the Ghora; its frequency has changed from assimilating other lifeforms. I don’t know what good this mirror does us anymore, but it doesn’t seem like we should just leave it down here.”

Ja opened his satchel and placed the vine mirror inside next to the obsidian cube, the jawbones, pink vials, and charging crystals. He wondered how any of these small trinkets were going to be enough to stop a creature as powerful as the Ghora.

Thankfully, the monster was nowhere to be seen in the ruins. The four companions stood in the chamber at the bottom with the star stone, which was black and lightless,

resting on its pedestal of bones. Before, the Ghora's tentacles had never entered this room, but they did stretch into the hallway outside. Now, the vines were completely absent from the underground tunnels, making the area feel noticeably more spacious with them gone. The group walked up the steep incline to the sprawling room where the Ghora had slept and found it vacuous and filled with light that streamed unimpeded from the gaping hole in the ceiling. The tree-trunk-sized vines that once clogged the opening had retracted and followed the creature wherever it had slithered since leaving its pit. The hole in the ground where it had perched now seemed to drop away forever into darkness.

The world above looked starkly different without the Ghora's vines as well. The ground was still littered with bones, scattered across barren soil, but the sickly, diseased forest that grew up through the ruins now seemed properly dead without the grasping flora surrounding it. It was oddly quiet outside, devoid of bird sounds, like when the buru had left the tree shelter where Ja and Kaia had slept not far from here. Kaia examined the dry, crumbling plant life and frowned, wondering how far the blight spread. There was no need to "track" the movement of the Ghora outside of its pit - the trail of destruction was plain to see. They followed it through the dead forest to what was once a wall of living plant life, but the Ghora had busted through. The enormous hole it created was surrounded by living plant matter that was withered and crispy around the edges, as if singed by death.

The jungle on the other side of the wall wasn't quite as dead as the area surrounding the ruins, but it wasn't flourishing, either. The palm leaves and brush grass drooped down sluggishly, deflated and malnourished. Kaia went from plant to plant inspecting them, then peered off into the distance, trying to take in the state of the jungle as a whole.

“This doesn’t look good,” she said to the others. “We only brought food for a few days; just what we could carry. I assumed I could hunt and forage more, but this forest is in bad shape. I don’t know how anything could survive inside of it.”

“Something survived,” said Torv. “It’s tracking us right now. Over there, about a hundred paces away in the brush. It can’t hide very well with the leaves so thin.”

Kaia’s eyes narrowed in on the place where Torv had pointed. It didn’t take long to notice the large, slinking cat. Once the animal realized its cover was blown, it started to close in quickly on the group. Torv spotted the movement and stepped forward with his axe and Kaia moved next to him with her spear. The predator kept within pouncing distance but revealed itself - and its intentions - openly to its prey. The big cat had mottled gray fur that hung loosely over protruding bones. It snarled, presenting gums above long upper incisors that reached down well below its mouth. This creature was starving and these four were the most food it had seen in ages.

“It’s a *spearcat*,” said Kaia. “Be careful. We call them that because you have to hit them with at least twenty spears before they fall. They’re incredibly dangerous.”

“You said we needed food,” said Torv. He smacked his axe handle against the inside of his palm. “It’s bony, but it still looks like food to me.”

Kaia gave him a sideward glance.

“We’re not *that* desperate yet. Don’t attack unless it charges first. I’d prefer not to have to fight it, if we can get it to go away.”

“I would prefer that as well,” said Doro, making his way up to the other two. “This creature doesn’t want to attack. I can tell. It just feels like it *has* to.”

Doro continued to walk past his armed companions and towards the snarling cat, and as Kaia reached out for the giant boy and pleaded for him to stop, Ja interjected and told her that

it was okay. He'd seen Doro calm a fiercer beast than this in the Putrid Coast. The cat continued to growl as Doro approached, but as he reached out his hand to nuzzle the creature's mane, it stopped fighting and allowed the affectionate touch. Soon, Doro had both hands rubbing around its neck and the cat was purring loudly, luxuriating in the attention. It didn't even bristle when the other three approached behind Doro and stared at the strange scene.

"This cat just needed a friend," said Doro. "I think I will name it Meelo."

Meelo looked up at Doro as he said it, and Ja could tell that the animal understood what the boy had said. It knew that Doro had given it a name, and seemed to like it. Doro rubbed the cat a few more times on the mane and got to his feet. As the group continued to walk along the Ghora's path of destruction, the other three couldn't help but look fearfully at the giant cat striding alongside the giant boy, but it no longer seemed to pose any threat. After an hour of following along though, the cat grew distracted by noises in the jungle, and sensing that Doro wasn't going to feed it, bounded off in the drooping fronds to try and feed itself. Torv began to follow behind the cat, leaving the rest of the group behind.

"Where are you going?" Doro called out.

"I'm going to kill that cat so we can eat it."

"That cat is my friend," said the boy. His voice went stern. "Find something else to eat."

Torv's face scrunched and he fought the urge to continue following the animal despite Doro's objections. He rocked back and forth visibly with indecision.

"Come on, Torv," Kaia said impatiently. "I'm sure Meelo isn't the only thing to eat in this jungle." The barbarian sulked back over to the group, mumbling angrily as he walked.

Though the Ghora didn't travel that way specifically, Ja asked the others to follow him down a worn path they crossed, thinking he recognized it. Sure enough, he had - it was the path to the compound he had used for gathering spice. The stacked stone entranceway still stood, but no one was standing guard. Ja peeked his head inside and saw that all of the inhabitants were gone as well.

"What is this place?" asked Torv.

"It was a prison," Ja said. "I grew up here."

Torv peeked his head inside and inspected the grounds. "Brutal."

"I was only here a little while, but it was really awful," said Kaia.

"Not sure things around here are much better now," sighed Ja.

Kaia looked at him and gave him a soft smile. She brought her arms forward and said using hand language, "We will fix it."

Ja hadn't thought about hand language for as long as he had possessed the Tongue of Kathaka. Hand language used to be the only way he could communicate in this place. Since he'd escaped, he'd spoken with strangers from other worlds and had telepathic conversations with bug swarms. The idea of speaking with his hands now felt almost nostalgic. He raised his arms and signaled back to his friend, "We will fix it *together*."

Though the Ghora had avoided the compound, it had completely trampled the blood sacrifice site. The thirteen stone slabs that Ja had stood against so many full moons no longer jutted from the ground but were scattered and flattened into the dirt. The sun had nearly set now and the group had been walking all day, so they decided to set up camp among the stones and settle in for the night. Ja felt uncomfortable

sleeping in this particular spot, but he didn't share it with the others, wanting to seem strong.

But as Torv stoked the fire and Kaia handed out rations from the beach, Ja realized that his discomfort wasn't subsiding. It was spreading. As soon as he had stopped walking and sat still, his body began to feel weak and drained. He tried to eat some of the dried meat Kaia had brought for strength, and when he put it to his mouth, he found that he couldn't taste it at all. He tried some fruit as well, and that too had no flavor whatsoever. Then Ja realized that he couldn't smell the smoke of the campfire and his eyes flared in panic. Kaia saw him react and subtly placed her hand on his leg and whispered, softly and patiently, "What's the matter?" She said it with a tone of such understanding that Ja couldn't bear but to tell her the truth. She nodded and didn't say anything more to him, turning her attention to the story Torv was telling around the fire. Ja was relieved simply to have gotten it off of his chest.

Kaia fiddled with the petrified tongue hanging from her neck as Torv regaled the group with the tale of his fiercest hunt. At best, Kaia only ever understood about two-thirds of the words from the barbarian's mouth. It was as if Torv was constantly slipping in and out of her language; enough that she usually got the context, but big pieces weren't getting translated. The tongue Ja had given her didn't seem to be properly attuned. She wondered if it was the same for Torv when she spoke to him in her language. She wondered if Torv only understood a fraction of the words he heard in his own language.

"That is a good story, Torv," said Doro. "I see that you were a great protector for your people."

"I am *still* a great protector for my people," the barbarian snipped. "The wizard will help me revive our forest and save

them when we are done with the monster here.”

“I was a protector too,” said Doro.

“Is that so?”

“I was in charge of protecting the sarva,” said the boy. “Or at least, I thought I was protecting them. Now I protect my friends.”

“Why are you helping these two?” asked Torv. Ja and Kaia both were already asleep, bored by Torv’s rambling, nonsensical tale.

“Because it is the right thing to do.”

“That seems like a dumb reason to risk your life, Doro. There has to be something in it for you.”

“I disagree. I am helping them save life. I am trying to be a good person. You should try to be a good person too, Torv.”

Torv couldn’t grasp the concept of being a “good person,” but he could tell that Doro was calling out some sort of deficiency, and Torv did not appreciate being told to change himself or his behavior. He rose to his feet and aggressively stepped towards the boy, but with surprising quickness, Doro also shot up and towered over the barbarian. Torv instinctively went to grab for his axe and Doro’s massive hands clasped down on the Ulvson’s arms, pinning them to his sides. He lifted the barbarian up in the air like a plaything.

“That is a bad response to being told you could use self-improvement, Torv.”

“What do you know?” the man boomed.

“I also was a protector on the plateau. When bad people arrived there, I was in charge of throwing them off the cliff, because I am a good judge of character.” Doro gave the wriggling barbarian a stern look. “Based on your character, I should probably throw *you* off a cliff.”

“What’s stopping you?” mocked Torv. There was no way he was going to break out of Doro’s grip, but he was trying,

nonetheless.

“Because even though I think you should try and be a better person, that doesn’t mean you’re entirely a bad one. I know that you want to save your people, Torv. You do and say lousy things all the time, but I know that there is good in you.”

Torv stopped squirming and Doro placed him back on the ground. Kaia had awoken during the altercation, but had decided to ignore it, though she sniggered when Torv was lowered down like a child. The barbarian glared in her direction but didn’t say anything. He just sat back down by the fire and pouted.

The group took off at dawn and continued to follow the Ghora’s path. It was now aligned with the existing trail that led between the sacrifice site and Orn. The hike was long and hot and grueling. More sun made its way through the wilted canopy, so the group sweated profusely as they hiked. They felt fortunate to find a clean, fresh source of water around midday, but they found no edible fruit or game to pursue. Kaia was confident that she could have found something if she ventured further away from the Ghora’s trail, but they weren’t in danger of running out of food quite yet. They needed to press on.

The group moved sluggish and slow through the dying jungle, but Kaia brightened up as they entered a clearing in the trees. They were close to Orn now. She jogged out ahead of the group excitedly, but Torv and Doro kept their steady, lumbering pace. Ja was trailing significantly behind, agonizing with each step as he pulled his exhausted body forward again and again. He kept his eyes trained on the ground in front of him, never looking past the next step, willing himself forward in the smallest increments. Then, finally, he looked up and saw that he was standing in front of the walls that surrounded Orn. Or rather, where walls used to stand.

Like the sacrificial slabs, these stones had been leveled and flattened into the dirt by an immense force. Without the walls, it was clear to see that there was nothing left of Orn; everything that once stood was now crushed and laid bare. No stone statues lined the streets. There were no people here, no sounds of any kind. But there were bones. White and sucked clean, scattered everywhere. It was like the entrance to the ruins where the Ghora had slept, but these bones were fresh and unblemished. Kaia walked around the devastated city wordlessly, eyes welling with tears. The entrance to the underground caverns where the community slept - and where the Blood Summoner dwelled at the bottom - were caved in with enormous rocks. She sat outside the sealed entranceway and covered her head in her hands.

That night, like every other night since finding Ja in the cave behind the waterfall, Kaia had the dream where she was running through a mountainside covered in flame. Every night the trail morphed and changed, but she always found her way to the summit. On top awaited the wall of famished flame, greedy and hungry and ominously dark, emitting blistering heat but no light. It grew and expanded and pushed her to the edge of the cliff, giving her no choice but to plummet or face the fire head-on. As always, Kaia stepped into the flame.

As her eyes opened and the dream began to fade, Kaia felt that she could still see smoke swirling in front of her eyes. Her mind and vision fought to clear, and she saw Torv sprawled out on his back in the dirt, away from his sleeping palms. He was supposed to be keeping watch. The smoke wafted and Kaia's eyes stung, and she saw a hooded figure crouch over the Ulvson man. The figure held out a red gemstone to Torv's bulging bicep, then Kaia's eyes became leaden and could not stay open any longer, and she was fast asleep.

When Kaia rose the next morning, everyone else in the group was already awake, clamoring nervously. They all had their right arms held out. Torv, who refused to wear sleeves, had a red incision along the inside crook of his elbow. Doro had a vertical slit along his wrist just below the shirt cuff. Joining the conversation, Kaia realized that she had been cut on her wrist as well. Ja had no incisions that anyone could see, but the young man looked poor off in every other way. Both of his eyes were now a pale yellow and his face looked as sallow and sunken as it had back when the Ghora was still assimilating him through the mirror shard. But even worse yet - Ja's satchel was missing.

Whoever had visited and cut them in the night had taken all of Ja's artifacts. Everything he needed to try and fight the Ghora was gone. He had no idea *how* he was going to use those artifacts to combat such a creature, but he knew that he wasn't going to beat it without them. Especially now that the Ghora was clearly assimilating him again, sapping his life away. Ja figured he knew why it was happening, and posited his hypothesis to the group: The mirror shard that had connected him to the monster was gone, but part of the Ghora would always be inside him. The closer he got to the creature, the more he could feel its leeching presence inside of him, absorbing and transforming. Ja felt desperation begin to overtake him.

"There's no use," he sighed. "Orn is gone. My artifacts are gone. We need to accept that we've lost. We need to get as far away from here as possible. But now that I've lost the mirror, we can't even leave."

"We're not giving up," said Kaia. "Do you see where the Ghora's path is heading?"

Ja followed the destruction. It appeared to be headed towards the base of the fiery mountain that towered above Orn

and the surrounding jungle. The mountain had been a source of deep fascination and fear for Ja when he had lived in the compound. Even from far below, you could see the spires of flame that sputtered from its peak. The only water source inside of the prison had been a hot, cloudy trickle that somehow made its way to the bottom of the burning mountain. Ja looked back to Kaia, unsure of why the Ghora heading to such a frightening place was a reason not to give up.

“I’ve had the same dream every night since the Harvester removed the mirror shard,” Kaia continued. “I never put it together that *this* was the mountain I was dreaming about. It’s on fire; the hunters never went there. But every night, I’ve seen the dark flame on the top of the mountain, and every night I’ve stepped forward to face it.”

Ja gave her a despondent look. “But there’s nothing I can do to stop the Ghora anymore.”

“I don’t know what dreams are supposed to mean, Ja. But I do know that we have to get to the top of that mountain.”

Ja lowered his eyes but raised his hands, signaling to his friend, “We will fix this together.”

Torv, proud and honorable to a fault, could not have been talked *out of* hiking to the top of the flaming mountain. Doro was less enthusiastic, but he could see that the others needed his help. Once they took off from the wreckage of Orn and it became clear that Ja could barely walk, Doro picked the young man up and placed him on his shoulders. Ja tried to protest at first, but he just didn’t have the energy, and slumped down on Doro’s head, eyes heavy and exhausted.

Ja awoke crashing painfully into the dirt. He crumpled at the impact, wondering why Doro had dropped him, and then saw that all three of his companions were also writhing on the ground. But their pain was much more intense and prolonged, as if they were still actively being hurt. Ja spun around and saw

the Blood Summoner standing before them, eyes flashing with rage. From a long, narrow slit on his arm, blood flowed down to his hand and surrounded it, swishing and swirling. He clenched his taloned hand in the air, gripping furiously at nothing, and as he twisted his wrist Ja saw his friends seize in pain. He had stolen their blood in the night and was using it to wreak havoc on their bodies.

“You took my artifacts,” Ja called out as forcefully as his body would allow. The Blood Summoner looked at him and sneered. “I need them to stop the Ghora. Let me fix what I broke.”

“You are in no state to fix anything,” mocked the Blood Summoner. “All of this is your fault, Ja. I will not allow you the opportunity to make things even worse. This evil - the Ghora - will be cleansed by the Great Serpent. This world is *ours*, and you have done it unspeakable harm. You, and all who travel with you, will be held accountable for the damage that you have caused.” The hooded man placed his bloodied palm down flat against the air and Ja’s friends began to cough and choke, breath pressed from their lungs.

Ja pulled himself up to his feet and staggered towards the man, unable to even stand upright. Still, he was mobile; the Blood Summoner wasn’t pinning him to the ground like the others.

“Can’t control me?” Ja mocked hollowly.

“There isn’t enough blood in you to control,” the Blood Summoner laughed. “You’re more Ghora than man. Why would I need to *control* you, Ja? You can’t even put up a fight.”

The Blood Summoner stepped forward and pulled the fang saber from his side in one fluid motion. Before Ja could react, the blade lashed and cut through his hide clothing, sending him back down to the dirt. Ja reached up and felt the liquid starting to ooze from his chest. It was thick and dark and more

green than red. The Blood Summoner kept the other three pinned with his right hand and pointed the fang saber at Ja's neck with his left. He pressed the tip into the young man's jugular.

"Killing you is less than you deserve," said the Blood Summoner. "But I am more than ready to be *done* with you entirely."

Ja felt the tip of the saber leave his neck and swing up into the air for a decapitating blow. He clenched his teeth and recoiled, but the blade didn't swing back down. Instead, the Blood Summoner let out a horrified shriek as a large creature snarled and grunted, bringing enormous teeth down around the unsuspecting man's head. Ja looked up to see Meelo ferociously wagging the Blood Summoner back and forth as the man attempted to stab the cat with his saber. The enchanted blood stopped swirling around his hand and flung off everywhere as his body was violently shaken from side to side. Then the big cat crunched down hard and the Blood Summoner went limp. Ja was too shocked to speak, but as the cat dragged the lifeless, robed body off into the brush to consume it, Doro graciously called out, "Thanks, Meelo!"

"What happened?" Kaia asked groggily, pulling herself from the ground.

Torv responded, and Kaia couldn't tell if her tongue was failing to translate the words properly again or if it was just the way the barbarian's simple brain formed words.

"Cat eat food."

Ja could see that the group was now at the base of the mountain with a clear path of ruin winding up to the summit. There had been some sort of stone structures here marking a trail, but the Ghora had demolished them. Random bones were scattered about in the dirt leading all the way up the slope. Along the path, burning fissures erupted, sending up small

tendrils of fire. Far above, it looked as if the entire mountain peak was surrounded by flame. As Ja peered at the summit, something was placed in his hands and he looked down to see that Kaia had handed him his satchel. He opened it and was relieved to find all of its magical contents were still in place.

“Now you’ve got what you need to stop that monster,” smiled Kaia.

“I still don’t know how I’m supposed to do it though,” Ja sighed. His hand grasped the obsidian cube and he contemplated the vial of plague from the Putrid Coast hidden away inside. “There is one option, but I’m not sure it’s any better than just letting the Ghora devour everything.”

“You’ll figure it out, Ja. I believe in you. But the only way we’re going to stop the Ghora is to catch up with it first, which means we have to get to the top of that mountain.”

Doro picked Ja up and placed him back on his shoulders again and the group began to trudge up the steep incline littered with bones. As they climbed, the fires that erupted from the soil grew in intensity and the already-oppressive heat became insufferable. Before they were even halfway up, their water skins were drained and Kaia began to seriously worry about dehydration. She knew there was water somewhere on this fiery mountain that made its way down to the compound, but she couldn’t imagine what its source could be in such a scorched and inhospitable climate. As she scanned the horizon, she saw charred trees extending from the ground like blackened spires and felt like she had been transported back to her recurring dream. This path was as unfamiliar as any of the ever-changing routes she traveled from night to night, but she knew that it was the right path. She knew that they must make it to the summit and confront the dark flame head-on.

After several hours of walking, something new began to clutter the path: discarded robes. Ja recognized them

immediately as the garb of the Great Serpent - he had worn this robe himself for several months. The Blood Summoner had said that the Great Serpent was going to “cleanse” the Ghora, but from the looks of things here, they didn’t seem to have been very successful. Whatever the blood cult had in store for stopping the monster, it wasn’t nearly enough.

By the time the summit actually came into sight, the group’s pace had slowed significantly. Though they suffered in silence, each person was profoundly thirsty and exhausted, faces covered in soot. Even though he was being carried and didn’t have to walk, Ja looked the worst of the four, splayed limp on Doro’s shoulders, shallowly panting. The group scaled a ridge and the ever-present din of crackling fire was diminished by the Ghora’s horrific wail, causing the group to cower and cover their ears. The group looked at each other in disbelief; were they really going up to the top to confront *that*? Even Torv looked like he wanted to turn and start heading back down the mountain, but Kaia huffed and started up the path again and the others dutifully followed behind.

The Ghora’s screams only intensified as they neared the peak, and before long the group realized that there was something else up there emitting terrifying noises as well. The Ghora was fighting something at the summit. Their mood brightened at the prospect of an unexpected ally; they weren’t in this alone after all. Then the path finally crested and they saw what awaited them at the top.

The Ghora was truly enormous now, as big as the most intimidating monsters they had witnessed from afar in the Putrid Coast. The creature was seemingly on its back, extending hundreds of tentacles in the air, wrapping them around a gargantuan snake that towered above it, surrounded on all sides by a wall of flame. The summit of this fiery mountain was the domain of a literal Great Serpent, and the

Ghora had climbed all the way up to assimilate it. The two were locked in fierce combat. The snake sunk its fangs into tentacles and ripped them ferociously from the Ghora's body, but the monster had plenty to spare. Green tendrils reared back and stuck into the serpent like skewers, sending rivers of red blood spewing from the wounds. Kaia had killed plenty of snakes before. No snake she had ever seen was so full of blood.

Though the others were petrified at the scene playing out in front of them, Kaia continued to make her way closer to the dueling beasts. Torv continued to follow behind, though his bravery was close to reaching its limit. The Great Serpent ripped off an enormous tentacle and sent it flying in the air. It sailed over the group and crashed to the ground behind them, blocking the way they had come. Boxed in, the others began to panic, but Kaia was not surprised. Just like her dream, there were only two options now: off the steep edge of the cliff, or directly into the dark flame.

The Ghora sent a volley of coordinated tentacles into the belly of the snake and then pulled them outward, ripping the creature open and sending a cascade of blood and entrails down into the tangle of vines. The Great Serpent shrieked and went limp and the Ghora wrapped up its body entirely. The victorious monster began to suck at its prize contentedly, absorbing the blood through its tentacles. As it consumed its enormous prey, human bones protruded from all over the Ghora's green skin and then came free and fell to the ground, joining the already sizable pile that had accumulated at the battle site.

Seeing that the Ghora was now feeding and distracted, Torv raised his axe to the sky and let out a battle roar and rushed in to attack. After only a few steps he was caught around the torso by Doro's extended arm and pulled back to the group.

“What are you doing?” boomed Torv. “Now is the time to attack!”

“The creature will only eat you too,” explained Doro. “You said you were a protector, Torv. Sacrificing yourself for no gain doesn’t protect anyone.”

“You’re both right,” interjected Kaia. “Now *is* the time to attack, but rushing in with axes and spears isn’t the way to do it. Whatever you’re going to do, Ja, you need to do it now. The Ghora isn’t paying any attention to us, but that will probably change as soon as it's done feeding.”

Ja was too drained to even feel panicked. Doro placed him on the ground and he could barely get the artifacts out of his satchel, let alone figure out what to do with them. He stared at the items he held: the obsidian cube with the plague vial, the vine mirror that used to be attuned to the Ghora’s frequency, and the jawbone mirror he had used to travel from world to world and switch bodies with the Blood Summoner. Killing the Ghora with the plague was technically an option, but Ja wasn’t sure turning this world into another Putrid Coast was much of an improvement. There had to be a way to solve this problem with the jawbone mirror. The Harvester’s voice echoed in his mind, mocking him for relying on artifacts instead of learning actual skills. Ja felt so useless then; not only did he lack the ability to fix his mistakes with his own power, he couldn’t figure out how to do it with unlimited power either. It was in that stinging realization that the solution finally came to Ja. He held the Tongue of Kathaka close to his mouth and whispered to it.

“Can the jawbones change the frequency of the vine mirror?”

“No.”

“Can the jawbones change their own frequency?”

“Yes.”

“I think I know how to do it,” Ja said to the others, words steeped in exhaustion. “To stop the monster, I have to give up my own power over the jawbones. The last people who stopped the Ghora attuned this vine mirror to it and then smashed it. I need to attune the jawbones to the Ghora’s current frequency and then destroy that. I’ll lose the mirror, but this world will be saved.” He looked up at the feasting monster. “To be certain though, I’ll need to do it after the Ghora is done assimilating the Great Serpent. I don’t want its frequency to change.”

This time, Ja heard the Harvester’s voice in his actual ears, not just in his mind. The others heard the man too, speaking as his body seemed to shimmer into existence several paces from the group.

“That is not a viable option, Ja.”

“It won’t work?” Ja asked. At this point, he wasn’t surprised to learn the Harvester had somehow been following their every move.

“It will work, but I won’t let you do it. That mirror is worth a whole lot more than anything you could still save with it on this world. Orn is gone, Ja, so why are you still here? Just use the mirror and go someplace else.”

“You said there are other communities like Orn on this world,” said Ja. “Communities that the Ghora will consume if I don’t stop it.”

“Yes, technically that is true. But that mirror is exceedingly powerful and capable of so much more than saving these backwater cavemen. If you destroyed it to save this world now, you would be making an even bigger mistake than destroying this world in the first place. Just use the vial I gave you and move on from here.”

“That is not a solution!” Ja pleaded. “Either way, everyone on this world will die.” He was so exhausted now that he could barely form the words in his mouth. Simply being this close to

the Ghora was actively draining what little life was left inside of him. He knew there wasn't much more in him to speak, so he chose his next words carefully. "Can't you make another mirror?"

The Harvester gave him an exasperated frown.

"Making another mirror like that would require a different sacrifice you simply wouldn't be willing to make. Either way, it's *a lot* of work. I'd really rather not have to."

The small, well-dressed man began to walk towards Ja intently, but after only a few steps Kaia was standing protectively in front of her friend, brandishing her spear. Seeing that this might be his last chance to act, Ja raised the mirror and began to speak, but the Harvester's arm shot past Kaia's side and struck him in the mouth, sending the mirror flying. The Harvester darted to grab it but Kaia jabbed her spear into the back of his hand, drawing blood. He pulled back and looked at the woman in disbelief; she was nearly as fast as he was. Ja crawled over and grabbed the mirror again and tried to speak the command, but before he could form the words in his aching, slack mouth, the Harvester snuck past Kaia's spear and struck him in the face once again.

Torv's instinct was to rush in and help his companions, but realized that it was a particularly bad idea to attack the Harvester. He was relying on this man to revive the great forest in his world and save the Ulvson. Torv realized he had thought about consequences before relying on violence, and doing so had changed his course of action. That was good, probably, but he still didn't know what he was supposed to do. He looked over and saw Doro standing next to him, frozen in place. The young boy was distraught over what was happening between the Harvester and his friends, also unable to act.

"Doro," Torv called out softly. "Does the Harvester deserve to be thrown off the cliff?"

The boy began to cry, tears rinsing the soot from his cheeks.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to do it?”

The tears intensified. Doro buried his face in his hands.

“No.”

The Harvester held a shimmering steel knife in each hand, blades facing outward, as he pranced and lunged and slashed at Kaia. She dodged and blocked him deftly, keeping herself between the small man and Ja, who had collapsed in the dirt after being struck several times. The Harvester reared back and pounced, leaving his feet to reach up for Kaia’s throat, but was intercepted mid-air from the side by the Ulvson barbarian. Torv had meant to pin the man’s arms to his side, just as Doro had done to him by the fire a few nights before, but the Harvester was too quick and Torv was only able to wrap his hands around the man’s torso. The barbarian held out the Harvester with arms extended like he was carrying a small, soiled child to the river to be cleaned. The moment Torv’s hulking hands grabbed hold, the Harvester began to slash at him viciously. His knives were wickedly sharp, slicing through Torv’s calloused skin before clacking against arm bone, but the deep cuts didn’t seem to faze the barbarian. He just carried the small man determinatively away from Ja and Kaia. As the Harvester continued to slice the Ulvson again and again with no response, he couldn’t help but laugh to himself: this was exactly the sort of resiliency that had made him want to feed Torv to his bugs.

“Think about what you are doing!” shouted the Harvester. “You need me to save your world!”

“I did think about it,” said Torv. “It’s a complex problem, but simple violence is still the answer.”

Torv raised the Harvester over his head, took a steadying step, and flung the man off the steep cliff at the edge of the

summit. Both of the knives dropped from the Harvester's hands and he began to furiously dig inside of his satchel as he fell. Glass vials flew up and out of the opening and he grasped at them desperately before his body crashed onto the jagged rocks below.

The Ghora let out a satisfied groan and released the withered husk of the Great Serpent to tumble down the side of the mountain. Hundreds of enormous tentacles lowered to the ground and spilled off the side of the mountain peak. The creature had grown even more enormous after assimilating the snake, and now even the smallest of its appendages was wider around than the biggest trees in the jungles of Orn. Two tentacles slammed down on either side of Ja and Kaia and began to slither in their direction at a glacial pace.

"Ja, you have to attune the mirror!" Kaia shouted. She grabbed it from the ground and placed it in his hand. Ja fought to get up to his knees and brought the mirror to his mouth. His lips barely moved, but no sound came out, only a wheeze of air. He tried again. Nothing. Ja looked up to Kaia in shock. His ability to speak was gone.

Kaia took the mirror from his hand and focused on it intently, then raised her own petrified tongue to her mouth and commanded, "Attune the jawbone mirror to the frequency of the Ghora."

A strange whisper entered her mind from the tongue that hung around her neck. "You do not have control over the mirror. You can *never* have control over the mirror. *You are not a Jaw.*" Kaia scowled and placed the mirror back in Ja's hand. The tentacles were now only a few paces away, closing in slowly but surely.

"I don't know what I can do to help you," Kaia cried. "But I'm here for you, Ja." Her spear clattered to the ground and she said to her friend using hand language, "We will fix this together."

A little life seemed to re-enter the young man and he sat back up to his knees and placed the mirror on the ground. As he began to move his arms, Ja realized that the message he was trying to convey was too vague in hand language; he might not be able to give the proper command. There were no signs for words like “attune” and “frequency.” But as Ja moved his hands, he could feel the Tongue of Kathaka guide and embrace them, just as he had felt the artifact guide his own tongue when he had lacked confidence in his words back in Orn. Though he barely had the energy to make the gestures himself, the tongue ensured the movements were fluid and clear, and when the command was finished, the jawbone mirror emitted a dull green flash. Ja collapsed on his back, signaling to Kaia with the last of his strength, “Finish it.”

With a desperate stab, Kaia brought down the tip of her spear onto the middle of the glass and shattered the reflective surface. The Ghora let out a panicked shriek and its tentacles raised into the air and then slammed back down to the ground, causing the mountain to quake and boulders to break off the sides of the summit. Seeing what Kaia had done, Torv ran over and began to slam down on the mirror with his axe, breaking apart the jawbones into tiny shards. The Ghora wheezed and then slumped over, lifeless tentacles coming to a stop only inches from Ja’s collapsed body.

The others circled around Ja and looked at him with wide eyes. No one knew what to say. Then, they startled back when Ja’s chest seized upward with a choking breath and he sat up alert and panting. The greenish color began to fade from his face and he looked frantically to locate the mirror, relaxing a bit when he saw it crushed to pieces in the dirt. He reached up to Kaia and she helped him to his feet.

The group looked in awe at the dormant monstrosity spilling over the sides of the mountain. Its slack tentacles

seemed to be covering most of the gas vents that emitted the wall of flame perpetually enshrouding the peak. Without the fire, the view from the top offered panoramas of the jungles below that stretched off into the distance forever. Ja had never viewed his world from this perspective before. There was so much of it he hadn't seen. But then the summit began to fill with smoke again, paired with the smell of char. It didn't smell like burning flesh or plant life, but a strange combination of both. They realized that the fire on the mountain was slowly beginning to consume the Ghora.

"We did it," Ja said in disbelief. "And I think we may have accidentally done more than just shut the Ghora down. I think the mountain is going to burn it up."

Torv patted Ja on the back, careful not to use too much force and further injure the young man. He looked up at the Ghora and smiled.

"This is the finest kill I have ever seen. I doubt I will ever see finer."

Ja gave the barbarian a sad smile. "I was only able to do it because you stopped the Harvester. I know that must have been a tough decision for you. He said he was going to help you save your world."

Torv looked over to Doro. "He was not the sort of man that could be relied on for help. He was no protector. It is true that I need a wizard to help revive the great forest, but I do not need that *specific* wizard. You are a wizard, Ja. A great one. Look at what you have done here! *You* will help me save my people."

Ja's eyes widened and he stammered in response, "The mirror is broken, Torv. I don't know how we will be able to get there."

"The star stone," said Kaia. "It was still in the cavern at the bottom of the ruins. There were some mirrors down in the Blood Summoner's chambers too, but the entrance to those

caverns was caved in. The mirrors might be useful for something if we can get down there, though. Either way, the mirror we used to get to Torv's world in the first place is already in your bag. Hopefully, we won't have to put a shard of it back in your hand to get there."

Doro walked over to the edge of the cliff and peered over the side. He looked dolefully at the smashed body of his former master on the rocks far below, but as he looked back up to his three companions, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders. He called out to the others.

"I'm sure there are some useful things in the Harvester's pouch, if they didn't break in the fall. I know how a lot of it works, more or less. I can help as well."

"That's good," said Ja. "Because I still don't really understand how any of this stuff works." He turned to Torv. "Even if we do figure out a way to get back to your world, it might be a really long time until I'm able to learn how to save your forest, if I even can at all."

"The Harvester said that he could do it, so I believe you will be able to do it as well," Torv smiled. "My people are strong. They will figure out a way to hold on until you can come up with a solution. And if you can't, I will find another wizard."

"The Harvester also said there are other communities than Orn on this world," added Kaia. "I guess we just saved them all from being eaten. Should we try to find them?"

"Maybe," said Ja. "But I don't know if I want to live with a bunch of strangers again. I kind of liked when it was just the four of us on the beach."

"I liked that too," said Kaia. She looked over the three men in the group. "But I think I'd prefer to have a few more...options."

"That's fine," said Ja. "We can find you another community. Personally, I want to live somewhere a little more rural."

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. Character loses one of their senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Include a historical figure
5. A hidden foe is revealed
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. A betrayal brings thoughtful growth
10. Physical confrontation with an inanimate object
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. One of the protagonists is actually a spy
14. A catastrophic end
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Torrential rain causes big problems
17. A stranger shares consequential information
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Cat eat food

Outcomes Used:

2. Character loses one of their senses
20. Cat eat food

Added Outcomes:

An accident leaves a protagonist with heightened senses
(*thanks to Christoph*)
Infinity is discovered
(*thanks to Liz*)

Outcomes Rolled for Next Chapter:

Jeff: 14. A catastrophic end

11. Discovery of higher technology

Chapter Fourteen: From Beyond

Written by Ethan

In the exposed, white stone cave in the compound, Ja awoke shivering despite the suffocating humidity that hung in the air. A painful, icy chill worked its way up his spine, forcing his body to convulse so intensely that it roused the others from their sleep.

“Are you alright?” Kaia asked nervously.

Ja tried to nod, but his body twisted in pain and his head pounded as if filled with thousands of marching soldiers.

What’s happening to me? he thought as he stared up at his friends in desperation. They had gathered around him with concerned looks on their faces.

“He is getting worse again,” Torv stated plainly. “He is still being drained. We killed the monster. How can this be?”

“I don’t know,” said Kaia. “It doesn’t make sense. We won...didn’t we?”

They had succeeded in killing the Ghora, but their contentment in victory had gone up in smoke almost as quickly as the monster’s corpse on top of the flaming mountain. As if still connected by some mysterious, corrupting force, both Ja and the jungle surrounding Orn had continued to deteriorate after the Ghora had died. Only a few days had passed since the battle, and in that time the jungles in this area had gone from sick and wilting to completely, unquestionably dead.

Ja had begun to show improvement when the Ghora first died. The green had faded from his skin and life seemed to flow into the young man, but within a matter of hours, he began to look pallid and drained once again. For the first few days, the group assumed it was merely exhaustion from their strenuous

journey. But as the other three regained their full health, Ja continued to deteriorate, but without the symptoms from before. It didn't look as though he was being transformed into the vine monster anymore. He simply looked as if he were being sapped of life. With sunken eyes, pale skin, and flailing movements, Ja looked now like he was standing on the threshold of death.

"What should we do?" Doro asked with wide eyes. Ja's companions had convened on the other side of the sleeping chambers.

"We could take him to my world," said Torv. "Maybe one of the Ulvson shamans can help."

"It's too risky," Kaia responded. "You're banished from your clan, so you wouldn't be able to come with us. And even if we are able to communicate with your people using the tongues, there's no guarantee they won't just kill us on sight. Sieg would definitely kill us if he knew we had any relationship to you." Kaia lowered her voice. "Besides, I'm not sure Ja would make the trip in this state, anyway."

"I'm not dead weight *yet*," Ja's weakened voice called out from the other side of the cavern.

He had pulled himself up to a sitting position and was in the process of downing half a vial of the pink fluid. The pallor of his skin seemed to improve whenever the liquid began to work its way through his body, but the effects were always temporary. A tiny drop of the liquid spilled from his lips and fell to the ground, landing on a dry and dying weed that had sprung up from the stone floor in the sleeping chamber. Just like Ja, the plant was immediately rejuvenated and sprung upwards, growing to a height that would have taken weeks had it not been exposed to the pink liquid.

"It works on plants too?" Doro gasped.

“It sure looks like it,” Ja responded, peering closely at the weed. “How much of that liquid do we have left, Doro?”

“Two and a half vials, counting that one. That includes all of it that we found in the Harvester’s bag.”

Ja nodded and his brow furrowed as an idea began to dance across his mind. He reached over and grabbed a large water skin, then poured a bit of the half-filled vial of pink liquid inside.

“Ja, stop! You need that!” Kaia yelled out, but the young man held up a hand as he delicately swirled the mixture together. Ja pulled himself up slowly and steadily and walked out of the domed cave and over to a far corner of the compound. He stopped in front of a patch of withered plant growth that had crept into the courtyard through the stacked stone walls. Carefully, he uncorked the water skin and poured a bit of it onto the plants.

New life seemed to spring into this foliage as well, though much slower; it didn’t shoot up all at once like the weed had. Ja poured a bit more of the solution on another area with similar results. He continued watering until a large swath of green covered an entire section of the compound's back wall.

Excitedly, Ja turned to his friends and smiled. They smiled back, but then he saw their eyes fill with concern, and he turned around to see what was happening for himself. The fresh tapestry of flora had already begun to wither and die before their eyes. He frowned and sat down in the dirt where he stood, face scrunching as he began to think through a new plan.

“There’s something wrong here,” he said after a moment of quiet consideration.

“Something wrong with the Harvester’s liquid?” asked Kaia.

“No, I’m pretty sure that works just fine. I think there’s something wrong with *this world*. We got here too late. I think the Ghora’s influence was already too deeply entwined with Orn...and with me. We may have killed the monster, but its disease is still infecting everything it touched.”

“But you attuned the mirror to the Ghora’s frequency,” said Kaia. “You killed it.”

“Yes,” Ja sighed. “I ripped out the monster’s heart with my hands. But its poisonous blood is still coursing through this jungle. I watched this pink liquid turn Doro from a skeleton to a living boy. If the plants it regrows can’t survive here, then this jungle, and maybe this entire world, might be unsavable.”

“You can’t know that for sure, Ja. We’ve barely left the compound. Maybe this is the *only* part of the jungle that’s affected.” Kaia’s words came out more defiantly than intended. She was not willing to give up hope.

Ja’s eyes broke away from his friend. “I just have a feeling. A *strong* feeling. It’s not like any other intuition I’ve ever had. I can feel what’s wrong with the jungle, Kaia. I can feel it inside of myself.”

The other three simply looked at the young man, unsure how to respond.

“But, it gives me an idea,” Ja continued, enthusiasm rising in his voice. “The Gamle and the gray-haired man were trying to restore the forest in Torv’s world, and I don’t think they had any of the pink liquid. Torv said they had already cleared up one diseased area, which means they have some sort of restorative method of their own. Assuming the random portals went away after we restored the mirror shard, and their impact wasn’t *too* devastating, our combined efforts might actually save Torv’s forest.”

“Ja likes my plan,” said Torv, nudging Kaia.

“But what about Orn?” Kaia replied, ignoring Torv’s unearned brag.

“If we can save Torv’s world, maybe we can eventually save Orn too, but we need help. I think it’s your only chance.”

“*Our* only chance,” Kaia corrected.

“Yeah. Of course. One thing is for sure though, we’re going to need as much of this pink liquid as we can get. We need to check around the Harvester’s body again to see if there are more vials that we missed, or anything else useful that we didn’t see when we grabbed his pouch. We have to make sure we’re not leaving anything important behind. Then we can make our way back to the star stone at the bottom of the ruins and head to Torv’s world. There’s no point in staying here anymore. I know you have hope for the jungles here, Kaia.” Ja looked at her sternly but softly. “I’m sorry. There isn’t any.”

Ja began to stand up as if he were going to go to the Harvester’s body himself. Kaia reflexively put her hand out and stopped him.

“I’ll go. I’ll get there way faster than you. Besides, it will give me a chance to see for myself whether this jungle is lost or not.”

With no protest from the others, Kaia quickly gathered some supplies and her spear, trotting off towards the ruins of Orn and the flaming mountain where they thought their nightmare had finally ended.

This was the first time Kaia had left the compound since Ja’s condition had worsened and her stomach knotted as she saw what was becoming of the world they’d fought so hard to save. The trail to Orn was littered with blackened foliage and sagging, broken trees, the weight of their canopies too much for their weakened trunks. Occasionally, she spotted corpses of emaciated animals amongst the flattened undergrowth, and

though the smell of death clung to Kaia's every breath, she knew it wasn't caused by just a few dead animals.

As she entered the leveled remains of Orn, Kaia moved intently through what was now a tomb, the bones of her people still littering the ground. Prior to Ja's illness worsening, the plan had been for Torv and Doro to clear out the caved-in tunnels, starting with Orn's larder and then eventually moving deeper to the Blood Summoner's lair. It didn't take long for them to realize that even with the great strength of the barbarian and the giant boy, the boulders were simply too heavy to move. Ja had begun to work out a plan to ease their work using ropes and something he called "leverage," but his quickly-deteriorating state had made it difficult for the young man to contribute much.

This time, Kaia had brought plenty of water along to keep herself hydrated as she traversed the steep, fiery incline. Thankfully, she didn't need to climb all the way up to the summit again, as Torv had thrown the Harvester down onto the rocks far below. Still, it was an exhausting trek most of the way up the mountain, and when Kaia finally made it back to the Harvester's body, she could clearly see the Ghora's blackened tentacles splayed out over the edges of the peak up above.

Cautiously, she stepped among the sharp rocks and broken glass vials to the corpse. It had only been a few days since the mysterious man had perished, yet little remained of him but sun-bleached bone. His face had already been picked clean by carrion birds, desperate enough to brave the flames for any sort of meal they could find. The scavengers had tried to eat through the man's clothing as well, but it was apparently made of sterner stuff than their sharp beaks and talons.

Having confronted death countless times before, the sight of the Harvester's corpse did little to frighten Kaia, but the

remnants of his artifacts did. Broken vials and strange, shattered objects littered the ground all around the man. She hunched down and searched amongst the wreckage, picking up the pieces and trying to make sense of the smashed artifacts, but it was clear they were all destroyed. There was nothing here of use; nothing that could help her world, or her friend.

Kaia sat down and held her head in her hands.

“There’s got to be something I’m missing,” she grumbled. “If Ja was here, he would see something that I don’t. But what?”

Kaia did her best to slow down and ponder exactly what her next step should be, like Ja would have. She even went as far as to mimic his concentration face, but it did little to help. Though Ja had made some poor choices along the way, his ability to concentrate and process the world around him had gotten them out of quite a few binds. Doing her best to channel her friend, Kaia began to scan the area again, trying to take in the scene with new eyes. That was when she noticed that the Harvester’s body was lying face down on the rocks.

“He didn’t fall like that,” she remembered, thinking back to the man’s death. “He landed on his back. Torv must have picked him up when he took his pouch and emptied his pockets, and then put him back down that way.”

Carefully, Kaia turned the Harvester’s body over onto its side, worried that it might break apart and cause untold nastiness to come oozing out. Just as she had hoped, there was something beneath the corpse that they had missed, though she had no idea what the object was. Kaia had never seen paper before, and here was a stack of pages scattered atop a rectangular piece of hide. Torv either hadn’t noticed it, or had and didn’t think it was important enough to bring along. The pages were scattered loosely in a pile, but she could intuit that at one point they had been stacked neatly and wrapped inside the hide. As she scanned the pages, flattening and trying to re-

wrap them in their binder, her eyes gazed across a trove of pictures and black scrawlings that were complete nonsense to her brain. Still, if this item belonged to the Harvester, it must be important.

Seeing nothing else of use, Kaia put the book inside of her pack and began to leave, but not before catching a clear view of the jungles past the streams of flame and smoke. This side of the mountain looked away from Orn and the compound. The jungles were all dead, flattened and black, as far as she could see. Ja was right. They had succeeded in killing the Ghora, but they had still lost this world.

A continual sense of dread washed over Kaia as she descended the mountain, but it seemed to morph and intensify as she reentered the devastated jungle. At first, she was consumed by the feeling that all her efforts had been in vain, and that she and her companions had lost far more than they had won. But as she walked through the dead trees, she was overcome by pure, unmitigated hopelessness. The sensation almost brought her to her knees. In her difficult life, Kaia had come to know dread well, but this sensation was different. It didn't feel natural. It felt like something was forcing it into her mind.

Kaia's survival instinct kicked in. Something was hunting her, but in a way that was completely foreign to these jungles. She stopped and scanned her surroundings, noticing a subtle parting in the dead foliage leading away from the path back to Orn. As a hunter, Kaia had learned to recognize minor details that could lead her to prey - or away from a predator.

She knelt down close to the ground, grip tightening on her spear as she steadied her heart rate and strained to see or hear any abnormalities in her surroundings. Once her eyes focused, she finally saw it. Deep in the undergrowth, lightly illuminated though hidden by shadow, was a pale and lanky being sitting

cross-legged. Its eyes were bright green, with skin the color of pearl. It had a long, flowing mane of golden hair that seemed to float in the breeze despite the air being still. It was a being of incredible beauty, yet something about it frightened Kaia to her very core. As she watched, the feeling of dread intensified and became unbearable, and she had to fight every urge to simply lie down on the ground and curl up into a ball.

Reflexively, Kaia blinked and shook her head. When she looked up again, the being was gone, and with it, a great weight was lifted from her soul. Kaia felt truly exhausted now, emotionally and physically, but hastened her pace back to the compound.

Ja was sitting up against one of the walls of their former prison when Kaia arrived. He smiled at her meekly as she approached.

“Good news?”

“There wasn’t any more of the pink liquid,” she sighed. “But I did find this.”

His eyes brightened as Kaia handed him the hide-bound papers.

“Interesting,” he said, a little life coming back into his movements. “I saw the Harvester looking at this when he was helping us build the house on the beach. I think he called it a *book*.”

“What is it?”

“That is where the Harvester kept his thoughts,” Doro answered. “It helped him to remember and to create. It was his most important artifact.”

“It doesn’t look very important,” said Torv. “Not very powerful either.”

“Oh, it is,” Doro replied.

Torv grunted and rolled his eyes. Kaia realized now that the barbarian had *definitely* seen the book when he looted the

Harvester's body and decided to leave it behind, not understanding or appreciating its worth.

Ja opened up the hide wrap and began to slowly pull out individual pages. They were jumbled and scattered, and if they had once been in a specific order, they weren't anymore. He only knew when pages were upside down because of the illustrations, which were neatly drawn and far more realistic than any pictorial representation he had ever seen. At first, the scrawlings on the pages were nothing more to him than nonsensical scribbles, but as he continued to stare at them, it was as if he could hear the language behind the writing being spoken inside his mind. Ja slowly began to understand the concept of the written word, and before long his eyes couldn't take in the words fast enough, reading from the tome as effortlessly as if he had written it himself.

As Ja scanned page after page, it became apparent that many of the pictures were guides for the construction of different artifacts and inventions, some he recognized and most he did not. Horrifically, the Harvester had taken the time to sketch pictures of those he experimented on, adding a new level of depth and character to already-tragic scenarios. Ja became nauseous when he saw illustrations of the sacrifices who provided the tongues he and the others currently wore around their necks. Though each "first to speak" came from an entirely different reality, they shared clear physical similarities to one another. Drawn together like this, they almost looked like a family, and the Harvester had slaughtered them all for their gifts.

Ja pushed on, doing his best to block out the harsh reality behind the very power he was using to read these pages. Eventually, he found a series of illustrations regarding the construction of physical structures that thankfully that didn't require human sacrifices to function.

“Here,” he said, handing a page over to the others. On it was a series of construction diagrams and an illustration of a device in running water with thin netting, two stacks of rocks, and a wooden frame that used piles of sand as a filtration system.

“I’ve seen this before,” said Torv. “It cleaned the water in my homeland.”

Encouraged, Ja pored over the surrounding pages and discovered a number of construction diagrams, recipes for strange tinctures, and sacrificial artifacts with the explicit purpose of clearing corruption and promoting growth. For every problem, it seemed the Harvester had a solution.

But as the stack of unread pages became smaller and smaller, Ja found less schematics and more detailed, concentrated writing. These pages were all upside down, and Ja realized they were likely the beginning of the book. Unlike what he had read before, these pages weren’t instructional: they were a story. Amongst the dense text were sketches of people who looked like the Harvester, though of varying shapes and sizes with descriptions about who they were and what they did. There were beautiful landscapes and scenes with his people doing both recognizable and unusual activities. From this perspective, the Harvester’s people seemed good and peaceful.

There was so much text here that it would have taken Ja forever to read it all, so he scanned the pages quickly. Then he reached a point in the story where the portals were introduced, and the fallout that soon followed. The drawings became lower in fidelity, as if the goal was to quickly log what was happening in real-time, in contrast to the thoughtful and detailed records he had been keeping before. The imagery became harsher and more terrifying, with a group of pale-skinned, long-limbed entities taking all the focus. Ja’s eyes passed over a messy set of

symbols scrawled above one of the creatures and the word *Dromluun* rang out in his mind.

“Dromluun,” he repeated out loud to the group. “These must be the invaders that took over the Harvester's world.”

“They look feeble,” Torv laughed, taking the page. “If they had come to my world, my people would have crushed them.”

Kaia scoffed and then glanced over to Ja, who seemed more and more worried as he continued to read.

“What is it, Ja?”

“I don't think they're feeble at all,” he said. “I think they may be worse than anything we've seen before. All of these words and pictures are about them *torturing* the Harvester's people. Not stealing their resources, not building up a society of their own... it's like they only exist to cause pain and terror.”

“I don't understand,” said Kaia. “Even the Blood Summoner had a reason for what he did to us. So did the Harvester. It doesn't make sense.”

Ja frowned and put the page down. “I don't think there's any *sense* behind it at all.

He picked up another page and his facial expression became contemplative. His head tilted and mouth parted as he took in the information. He looked back up to Kaia.

“This page is about *us*.”

On it were illustrations of he and Kaia, and Ja marveled at the accuracy with which the Harvester had rendered their appearances.

“Bringing the Dromluun to this world was the Harvester's plan all along,” Ja explained. “When we returned the shard and the mirror became whole again, it let out a ripple of energy that these creatures are able to detect. The Harvester knew it would draw them here, but we ruined his plan. He never expected us to beat the Ghora, at least not in the way that we did. He *did not* want me to shatter that mirror. He had planned on me using

the plague from the Putrid Coast to stop it. Just like the Ghora, that plague is deadly to the Dromluun too. When they showed up to investigate the energy from the mirror, the plague was going to wipe them out as well.”

“So, when will they be here?” Doro asked.

“The Harvester said that whenever they sensed the ripple of energy, they would warp here. There’s no knowing how long that would take. It could be any time after we replaced the shard, and that was days ago.”

Kaia had a startling realization. “What do they look like?”

Ja handed her a page with a detailed illustration of a Dromluun, standing in front of a shimmering blue portal. Her face went pale.

“We need to go now,” she yelled, barely hiding the panic in her voice. “I saw one of these things when I found the book. I think they’re already here.”

As if on cue, a chorus of hoarse laughter began to echo in the distance and then grow progressively louder and louder. It was like an entire village of beasts had been eavesdropping on their conversation and then revealed themselves when it would incite the most terror, woefully mimicking human laughter with horrific, guttural sounds. As the noise grew in intensity, the group could see a great flood of the Dromluun in the distance making their way towards them from the ruins of Orn.

Without another word, the group sprang up and gathered what supplies they had left. Doro slung Ja’s sick and withered body across his shoulders and the four quickly made their way out of the compound and out towards the ruins.

Kaia led the way, with Doro and Ja in the center and Torv in the rear for defense if the Dromluun caught up. While the prospect of battle piqued Torv’s interest at first, the horrific noises echoing behind him quickly filled the man with

debilitating dread. Torv had only felt like this once before: when Sieg chopped off his brother's head in the longhouse. Torv decided to put as much distance between himself and the noise as possible. No battle was worth enduring that sensation any longer.

Before the jungle had died, the ruins that entrapped the Ghora had been obscured by overgrowth. Now, the ominous buildings could be seen clearly off in the distance, the light of the setting sun casting purple and orange hues across the lost, dead city. It appeared in front of the group before they expected; the suffocating fear of the Dromluun had made time tick rapidly forward. There were also few obstacles between them and their destination now that the plants were completely dead. Kaia felt a great hole in her heart as she took in just how thoroughly her world had rotted away.

At their frenzied pace, Ja hoped they were putting enough distance between themselves and their attackers, but looking back over Doro's shoulder, he was gutted to see a group of shimmering white figures enveloping the compound like fireflies. A steady stream of the creatures was snaking down the path and branching through the dead jungle towards them. When the group finally reached the star stone, they would have little time to activate it before they were swarmed entirely.

"We're almost there!" Kaia shouted out from upfront. As they ran, she saw that the enormous, hollow tree she and Ja had slept in had folded in and collapsed on itself. She kept her concentration on the path ahead, springing through the clearing and into the wide streets of the ruined city.

Torv did his best to keep up, but the pace was getting to him and he paused for a moment to catch his breath.

"Torv, don't stop!" Ja called out to the barbarian. "They're gaining on us!" He had tried to yell the warning to his friend, but the words came out as a little more than a whisper.

“We are way ahead,” wheezed Torv. “I need a--”

Before the barbarian could finish his sentence, a tall woman with pale, softly-illuminated skin and golden hair emerged from behind a building on the man’s left side. He felt his stomach churn as the Dromluun approached, and couldn’t move away before she placed a hand upon his shoulder and gave him a grin with far too many teeth. Infinite dread welled up inside of Torv once again, convincing him that any action he took would be the *wrong* one. The Ulvson looked to his friends, unable to speak but with eyes pleading for help. The Dromluun woman wrapped her long, gangly arms around the barbarian, limbs stretching beyond their natural length to engulf the massive man’s body.

Kaia felt the dread begin to engulf her again as well, but she had broken from its hold once and could do it again. She screamed as she lifted her spear up to eye level and launched it at the terrifyingly beautiful creature. In an instant, the being’s head split in two as the spear went through the forehead and then clattered to the ground. The Dromluun’s limbs uncoiled and the spell the creature had cast upon them began to dissipate.

Torv reflexively pushed the corpse away and drew his axe, chopping at the illuminated, still-quivering body until it was a pulpy mess on the ground. Despite the mutilation, a low gurgling laughter could still be heard emanating from somewhere in its core.

“I get it now,” said Ja, his voice low and weak. “I get why the Harvester did the awful things that he did. He would have done *anything* to wipe these monsters from existence, and I think I would too.”

He didn’t say it out loud, but Ja realized definitively then: *I probably shouldn’t have smashed the jawbone mirror.*

Kaia was shocked to hear these words come out of her friend, but did her best to hide her disdain for what he had said. She wanted to scream at Ja and shake the cynicism from him, but she merely took a deep breath and accepted the reality they currently faced: Ja was dying, along with any hope he had left.

All exhaustion from the long run had been startled out of the group by the confrontation with the Dromluun woman. They could see dozens more approaching quickly on the horizon and knew that coming face-to-face with a throng of these creatures would spell an excruciating end. With renewed vigor, the group sprinted into the mouth of the cavern, down past the abandoned lair of the Ghora, and into the chamber at the bottom that housed the star stone. It was pitch black in the room and the only way they could see anything was by using the vials of pink liquid for light; the strange, oily substance glowed unnaturally in the darkness. The star stone sat cold and black on its pedestal of bones. Ja had everyone crowd in front of the pedestal and pulled the vine mirror from his bag. Trying to recreate the scene when he and Kaia were originally transported to Torv's world, Ja held out the mirror in front of everyone, with the stone situated behind. He moved the mirror back and forth. Nothing happened. He turned to his friends.

"Something's wrong. It isn't working. I think it's because the stone doesn't have any light. The first time we used it, it was full of stars. It's black now."

"Maybe we have to take it outside, into real starlight," said Kaia. They all knew there wasn't enough time to carry the heavy stone up to the top of the caverns before the Dromluun converged.

"A sacrifice," Doro muttered. "These stones require a sacrifice."

Ja and Kaia nodded solemnly, remembering the star stone they had seen in Torv's world. The Gamle had touched it and then disappeared into darkness, robes falling to the ground, stone pulsing with light in the pitch-black trees.

"Sacrifice!?!!" Kaia shouted, choking back tears. "Haven't we all sacrificed enough already?"

"I'll do it," said Ja. "I don't know how much longer I have anyway, and I want you all to continue on."

Doro stepped forward and laid a gentle hand upon Ja's shoulder, smiling softly as he moved his companion away from the stone.

"It wouldn't be enough, Ja," Doro said as he inspected the stone. "The star stones need quite a bit of power to activate. It would take several of you, but only one of me."

"Doro, no!" Ja pleaded. "Let me do it, please. You've only just gotten another chance at life...a *real* life. You've already sacrificed too much for the Harvester."

"This is different," the boy said with pride. "I had no choice before...now I do. I choose to save my friends. Thank you, for everything."

With that, Doro stepped to the pedestal and placed his enormous hands on the ebony surface, then closed his eyes and let his essence flow into the stone. As he faded away into darkness, the black surface began to twinkle as an infinite array of stars exploded to life inside. Doro's clothes fell empty to the stone floor.

Shaking, Ja started to hold up the mirror again but stopped short, struggling to process the loss of a friend who had become so dear to him in such a short time. Even Torv could not hold back his anguish, the brute's stone face softening as the realization set in.

"We have to go now," Kaia urged. "They'll be here any moment."

Ja didn't raise up the mirror again to transport them to Torv's world. Instead, he handed it to Kaia. With quivering movements, Ja dug through his satchel, pulled out the obsidian cube, and handed the bag containing the rest of the pink vials and the Harvester's book to Torv.

The group felt a sudden heaviness as the Dromluun closed in on their position. Guttural laughter bounced against ancient walls and they could see a dim light beginning to illuminate the tunnel outside. As the creatures approached, the heartbreaking loss of Doro was magnified, causing Torv and Kaia to lose what little control they had left over their emotions. But Ja stood resolute, hunched over and frail, yet fighting the dread that was suffocating his companions.

"Come on, Ja!" Kaia cried. "We have to go!"

"I can't come with you, Kaia. We have to stop the Dromluun *now*. The Harvester was wrong about a lot of things, but he was right about wanting to wipe these creatures out."

"Stop it, Ja! We've come this far! We can leave for Torv's world! Why are you giving up?" Kaia felt a sudden, intense anger towards her friend.

"I'm not giving up. For the first time in my life, I'm in control of my own fate. Doro chose to save the three of us; I'm choosing to save as many people as I can. This is not the end." Tears began to roll down his cheeks. "Not for you. But it is for me."

A wave of desperation and despair crumpled Kaia to her knees. Ja looked up to Torv, and he knew the barbarian understood his sacrifice. Torv knew that Ja was acting as a protector. The Ulvson handed Ja his axe and the young man accepted it with a stoic nod, though its weight nearly toppled him over. Torv was paying attention when Ja had tried to transport them before, when the star stone was still dormant. Fighting the crushing sorrow that enveloped him now, Torv

reached down and grabbed the mirror from Kaia, then picked her up and brought her head to his level. She kicked and swore at the man and had just enough time to reach out to Ja and scream, “No!” before the Ulvson lifted up the mirror and transported them out of the cavern in a dark flash.

Dromluun began to spill out of the tunnel and into the bottom chamber in a cacophony of horrid laughter, elation building as they crept in slowly closer. But at the bottom of the ruins, they did not find a victim who was debilitated by the anguish they spread. To their surprise, they found an emaciated young man greeting them with a satisfied smile and a vial in his hand. The Dromluun stopped and Ja could see confusion spreading across their faces.

“Hate to disappoint you,” he smirked. “But this is your last stop.”

With that, Ja pulled off the cap and threw the vial into the crowd of Dromluun. Roars of anger replaced their arrogant laughter as the creatures recoiled and tried to run, but the plague was in the air already like a mist, spreading and expanding. Within moments, the sickness began to course through their bodies, pale skin bubbling as their unprepared immune systems became incubators. As the creatures coughed and gagged, more plague was released into the air, sending the mist quickly up the tunnels like a chain reaction, infecting the swarm of Dromluun that had gathered to feast upon the suffering of Ja and his friends.

Exhausted, Ja collapsed in a heap on the floor, axe clattering to his side. Watching the Harvester’s twisted work actually do some good for once, Ja stared at the writhing creatures with a sense of real, earned satisfaction. His own feelings of dread and despair began to dissipate as the Dromluun convulsed and vomited in front of him. Looking down, he could see his skin begin to mottle and turn a pale

shade of yellow, but he did not fear his end. For once, Ja finally felt confident he had made the right decision.

Kaia was still kicking at Torv when they blinked into the Gamle's cavern. Her arms went slack as she heard the sound of the boar people singing, knowing for certain that they were in Torv's world, and Ja was gone. She couldn't tell if the despair from the Dromluun had passed, or if she was now drowning in sadness at the loss of her friends.

Slowly and silently, the two crept up into the meadow and found several Gamle working together on some sort of device, singing as they built. The boar people scattered in fear the moment they saw Torv, but as the man calmly walked up and began to inspect the device, they saw that the Ulvson was unarmed and had no intention to attack, and cautiously drew closer. He smiled and nodded at them as they approached.

"Does this device help clear the corruption?" Torv asked.

The boar people nodded timidly.

"Thank you for building this. I am sorry for attacking you before. I will do what I can to help you from now on."

Torv and Kaia walked out of the cavern and into the mountain pass. They both breathed in sighs of relief to see that no more open portals were ripping apart the reality of this world. Things appeared to be back to normal. The forest was still a barren wasteland of splintered trees, but the growth from the river that the Gamle had cleaned was spreading. New, green life stretched from the water down towards the great forest. Torv opened up Ja's satchel and pulled out one of the vials of pink liquid, and seeing it, tears began to stream down Kaia's face.

“We lost your world,” said Torv. “We lost our friends. But we will save this world. Their sacrifice will have meaning.”

Kaia dried her cheeks with the side of her hand. She looked up at Torv and her expression hardened.

“We won’t be able to do it by ourselves. We’re going to need the help of the Ulvson first. I know you want to kill Sieg and get your honor back, but for that, we’re going to need a plan. A *smart* one. You ready to get to work?”

Fate Index:

1. Messiah-like figure attempts to remake society
2. An accident leaves a protagonist with heightened senses
3. Protagonist finds a source of healing/resurrection
4. Include a historical figure
5. A hidden foe is revealed
6. An obscure side character suddenly gets a crucial role in the story
7. Traditional gender roles are switched
8. Character finds a large egg of unknown origin
9. A betrayal brings thoughtful growth
10. Physical confrontation with an inanimate object
11. Discovery of higher technology
12. Monotony is broken
13. One of the protagonists is actually a spy
14. A catastrophic end
15. Too many cooks in the kitchen
16. Torrential rain causes big problems
17. A stranger shares consequential information
18. Ghost story
19. A dam breaks creating massive flooding
20. Infinity is discovered

Outcomes Used:

11. Discovery of higher technology
 14. A catastrophic end
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And thus ends the second book in the Cool Story Guys Saga: Beyond the Mirror