

## Pit

### *Chapter 1 - From the Void*

Small, meek, hungry. Beautiful white feathers. graceful.

It was a dove. To the avarice, it was prey.

Worms, bugs, small rodents

were

things a kind of prey might eat. If things went well.

Brown feathers ruffle, brown wings spread wide. Lean, fleshy legs projected forward the avarice.

The mighty avarice.

There was a scream. A throaty, glass-shattering war cry. A scream that gave children in the nearest village

night terrors.

Feathers fly. The dove is gone.

Long live the mighty woodland Avarice.

She inspired passion.

Seven foot eleven inches, thin, fragile, with deep, wavy brown hair framing her square cheekbones.

Her clothes were raggedy and she wasn't nearly as muscular as most gra - a race of human looking giants

women.

Morathu Sturge found meekness attractive, and the poor always served as his meat. Who but he cares for the poor?

He monitored her, following silently from the rooftops. There was something irresistible about those wide, glistening brown eyes that beckoned Morathu on even from such a distance.

He leaped down from his final roof as the woman reached her humble little house. A house shared with five others, probably owned by her father. Lights were on inside, so Morathu had to work swiftly, quietly. He threw his hands above his head and landed lightly on the rough medieval cement behind his victim.

Although she did not sense her stalker's presence, the woman had a very sudden urge to run. In doing so, she brought Morathu's attention to a trait he had noticed before: powerful legs. The woman had little real muscle anywhere, except on her legs.

Any ordinary stalker, even any ordinary vampire, may have been troubled by this sudden burst of speed. Morathu had forced the flight, to play.

*Help!*

The woman tried to shout, despite being ignorant of what was chasing her.

When she found her voice missing, she ran harder, turning into a familiar alley. Whatever it was that pursued, she would lose it soon enough. She knew those streets better than anyone.

That didn't comfort her.

Rational thought left her.

Nothing except fear remained.

A growing, inescapable fear of the unknown.

She began to run

ever faster as a rush of adrenaline and something previously dormant surged through her.

The fear didn't fade. She could feel it growing closer stronger she wouldn't stop running. She wouldn't stop accelerating. At that moment she didn't control herself and neither did anybody else. There was just the power.

It felt scary. It felt new. It felt wonderful.

She was a fading blur rounding building after building disappearing into one trashy alley to emerge and disappear into another because a wildness struck forces beyond herself were at work she didn't stop wouldn't stop couldn't stop if she wanted to, any more than she could escape the terror.

This worried Morathu. If the woman continued to accelerate at such an unnatural rate, she would be running faster than he could fly. This could not be allowed to happen. He outstretched his arms and his cape spread like the wings of a raven.

She was going faster and faster still couldn't stop still didn't want to stop something was inside her powerful inebriating heavenly bliss glorious and she had to get away she was scared quivering flesh trembling something was back there something was getting closer she couldn't keep going much longer the stuff inside was running out she was losing energy and could only go so far before...

Morathu was there to catch her.

## ***Chapter 2: Mountain Heights***

8'5" tall,

a dark figure leaned into a distant, scarlet door frame. His lips came into focus first, thick and grinning, lined with a red crust.

As her eyes continued to focus, she noted his bare, muscular chest, his broad shoulders, his casually crossed ankles, and... the crust.

Her eyes went back to the crust.

The red stuff went all the way down to the dip in his chest, no cuts in sight. It was a thin trail, but blunt in its contrast to pale flesh. When she touched the tips of her fingers to the side of her neck, she found two holes.

Morathu laughed. He expected tears, angry screams, wide-eyed fright. He expected *something*. In his newest bride, he found nothing. She didn't care. That was hilarious.

The throaty cackle caused her to flinch, to experience a fleeting sense of shock. It was just blood, after all. She had only lost a little blood. And what a comfortable bed.

The leech left his brave little captive alone in the room, fading into his own shadow. He had long-term plans for this one, yet his thirst was sated for the night, he had other business to attend.

Left alone, the woman cast aside the thin silk blankets surrounding her and leapt to her feet in search of her clothes. She did not dare to dwell on why they had been removed. It wouldn't be prudent to dwell on the unpleasant details, unless they would aid in her escape.

A pair of clothes had been left out for her, over the arch of a decorative oaken chair. They were yellow and blue, infinitely more valuable than her own. They were too revealing for comfort.

She sighed and slid on the loose garments

sensual clothes preferred over

no clothes at all.

As she left the room to enter a dim, musty hallway, she noted a chilling current of air. In the scanty raiment her captor had forced upon her, this draft was uncomfortable. She traced the hallway to the source, trailing her fragile fingertips along the far wall for guidance.

The path led her to a door slightly ajar, with dim starlight filtering through the crack. She found a metal bowl on her side of the door, filled with dirty water. A few scraps of meat floated atop the bowl. She pulled it away from the door and slipped outside.

Cold.

The bitter wind cut into her smooth, sun kissed flesh.

It blued her wide, lush lips.

It reddened her leathery cheeks.

It chilled her insides.

She wandered on, even when the harsh, rocky ground drew blood from her bare feet.

She wandered,

blinded by the wind,

she tripped more than once. Eventually, she fell into a low wall, no more than six feet high, and, grabbing the edge to rise, she leaned into it. She forced her eyes open against the attacks of the stinging wind and looked over, playing witness to the high, steep cliff falling just beyond the wall.

There was no escape outside. Even if she found a way, and the cliff convinced her that such a way did not exist, the cold would surely kill her. She had to return to the mountaintop house. For the first time in her life, in her lust or impatience for freedom, she had passed up free food.

The entrance was not reached without some peril. Moving toward it, she fell forward, further than before, and scraped away layers of flesh on the unforgiving mountain ground. Her continued incline was desperate and labored.

As she made it back inside,

Laughter hit her like water. She shot up instantly. Alarmed, eyes wide, she looked to the source, and noted that it was not Morathu. The unnatural laugh and the warped physique prevented her from regarding such pleasantly.

Sunlight crept through the slight crack in the door behind her. It was still a little cold. The opening turned severe mountain winds into irritating little breezes. Why in Caerg's name hadn't she closed the damned door?

The smell of rancid flesh clung to the creature. This was not as disconcerting as the bumpy, slime-covered finger it used to wipe chunks of food from her chin. As she recoiled it grinned, quickly taking hold of her wrist.

*This one is Morathu's property*, creature thought.

The master would not return for days, and in the meantime - excepting Morathu's stipulated policy restrictions - the woman was Dingie's to play with.

When Morathu obtained his new bride, Dingie was the first to be consulted. Dingie was always first. No injuring, feeding on, or lusting after the slave. Dingie was not to leave the mountain,

neither was the master's fresh meat. Those restrictions had to be emphasized with every new bride. Dingie,  
Otherwise trustworthy,  
was forgetful when convenient.

Her skin crawled as a muddy hand clung to the back of her neck. She shivered and shook as if covered with ants, and couldn't help but cry out.

Dingie was careful not to injure the screaming woman as he dragged her back into her room. She had done herself some harm. Then he realized that, as battered as this one already was, a few more cuts, scratches, and bruises would go unnoticed.  
A fluid laugh again assaulted the woman's ears.

Dingie could feel the shaking and the struggling, could sense the screams, the tears. All these things interested him. Dingie actually *touched* her terror, soaking it up like a sponge.

He ran his blackened tongue over the greedy green of his front teeth, glaring appraisingly. For the first time in a long while,  
Dingie's hunger would be sated.

"Meriandril," Morathu said, as the woman awoke. Shadows parted, retreating from his form as his pet slowly managed to prop herself up on her pillow.

Morathu hissed when he noticed wounds that were a little fresher than they should have been. He gently pulled Meriandril from beneath the covers, forcing her to stand up straight next to the bed. He did not touch her to accomplish. He held his palm outstretched before her eyes and she followed it.

The ritual had been completed. Morathu had drank of the peasant and he had given her a name. Morathu could command his bride to do anything, without even speaking, and she would not have the willpower to resist his desire.

At that moment, he willed her still while coldly ripping off her clothing with a single sweep of his bony fingers. His bright yellow eyes traced the cold and fleshy statue for any defects. Something was not right.

Morathu had walked the cliffs since his return. He knew about the little dry sprinkles of blood scattered about the rocks. He even guessed with fair accuracy what had caused the spills. All of this in mind,  
Morathu intuited something amiss.

Too many wounds. And what sort of fall could cause such odd, perverse mutilations? The answer came in the form of a fool:

Dingie.

Dingie thought a few minor cuts would go unnoticed and lost control. Many of these new wounds were quite deep. Additionally, the placement of the cuts was monstrously deliberate. How close had Dingie come to extinguishing this flame?

Insubordination of this nature was rare, annoying, inconvenient.

Morathu could go out. He could hunt. He hadn't planned on it, yet he could hunt. He couldn't feed on his bride. That would negate the healing process. Maybe he would find another. There weren't many like Meriandril. It couldn't hurt to build up a small harem of fresh tolerables.

Slowly, as Morathu dragged his fingers over every inch of Meriandril's quivering flesh, the woman began to stir. Aroused from the paralysis that had overtaken her.

She was free, free to think for herself. And she was aware of what was being done to her. Dried blood loosened. Flesh closed in on itself. Other injuries began to heal, to fade. It was a defiling kind of regeneration.

The villagers, the superstitious villagers, had stories about Morathu's sort, nobility. The creatures were reputed to be strong beyond stature. Meriandril cautiously minded folklore and hearsay. Meriandril's powerful legs attempted a swift kick to Morathu's groin. He caught her foot mid-snap, twisted, and threw the upstart forward.

This sort of thing had happened in the past. Morathu was finally growing weary of all these assertive, spirited young women, constantly trying his patience. What force was pushing these peasants?

She might be too much to deal with. Strong, beautiful, innocent. Too strong. Too much willpower. What trouble would she cause?

Impulsively, one might say instinctively, chaotically, Meriandril complimented the "fine silk threads" framing Morathu's head. Maybe the vanity practically inherent to all of the Sturge bloodline saved Meriandril from further, possibly fatal, injury. Maybe there were other influences at work.

Morathu knew it was a compliment made in desperation.

The bride was bowing down to  
her groom,  
learning her place. Submissive,  
as befit Morathu's latest fetish.  
Perhaps he would beat her later,  
anyway. When she deserved it. At that moment,  
he had something far more important  
to consider.

Tending to Meriandril's wounds

had dehydrated Morathu  
 somewhat.  
 He would feed.  
 And he would discipline a servant.

Dingie kept his greasy arms wrapped tightly about his legs, resting his exaggerated forehead on the slight dip between his knees. He held the shadows of his corner close, making him invisible to human eyes. Darkness would be of no use against the approaching foe, or any foe resourceful enough to reach him  
*here.*

He held a small, itchy black bird close to his rotted thigh,  
 like a teddy bear.  
 The bird would die  
 soon, Dingie knew.  
 It was sick.  
 All the more reason to keep it  
 close. The bird  
*needed*  
 Dingie,  
 if only to comfort it into the afterlife.

The master was home. Dingie could sense him. He was home and had recently fed. Part of him wasn't sated. The master had discovered Dingie's indiscretions. That was the only possible explanation for the anger radiating from Morathu.

Of course Morathu had found out. Of course. The master would always know.

His master would not feed on him. No, oh no, not Dingie. Not unless he went weeks without, and even then only when completely overtaken by the Great Thirst. Revolting, abhorrent, loathsome; these were some of the milder names Morathu knew Dingie by. And, although neither would ever speak of it, Morathu feared Dingie almost as much as Dingie feared Morathu.

The fear and the love went hand in hand.

Grimy little brown and white mice fluttered across the floor as Morathu, draped in flowing shades of purple, glided into the room. Insects fell from the smooth gray ceiling above, one landing on Morathu's bare foot. He ignored the thing, Towering over his squalid, servile little pet in mock admiration, false appraisal.

"My finest accomplishment,"  
 Morathu was proud to say.

The simple joke was lost on Dingie. Was he misreading his master's emotions? Impossible. Had something else disturbed the man? Not likely, but, considering this surprising attitude, Dingie was hopeful. Slowly, he looked up, forcing open his swelled eyelids.

"Did Daddy see a pretty girl tonight? Daddy see a pretty girl? Daddy Daddy went out tonight. Daddy kissed a pretty girl. Not like the other. Not like the new. Daddy Daddy kissed another girl."

Morathu rolled his eyes, slammed his foot down on a rat.

Morathu was carrying a large sack,  
a sack Dingie had seen before.

In fact,  
the pitiable creature had actually spent many past days  
asleep within the sack,  
some vile animal gnawing away at his regenerative flesh  
all the while.

Dingie was not overjoyed,  
the sack had eventually become something of a tame torture.

A craved torture, maybe.

An escape from routine.

Something to misbehave for because he was addicted  
to the pain.

Morathu's hand struck out like a snake,  
or a lightning bolt,

wrenching away Dingie's dying bird. Into the sack it went.

Pretty soon, rodent, insect, and avian began devouring each other.

Morathu

left the sack on the floor,

so that Dingie could use it as a pillow. He would bury his face in it and hope to drown himself.

He wouldn't dare open it.

### *Chapter 3: Infancy*

***BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!***

The knocking had come again.

***BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!***

It probably wouldn't stop this time.

***BOOM!BOOM!BOOM!BOOM!***

No, this time, it wasn't going to stop. The whole bloody door would fall down first.

***Shhhriek...***

"Glad you finally managed to recapture your senses, woman."

Morathu.

Of course.

Who else would it be?

Dingie?



Meriandril couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen Dingie. It had been months, at least. Sulking about in his little cave, no doubt.

"Yes," said Meriandril. "I don't know what could have possibly come over me. I felt this insane urge to be alone for a little while."

"Don't be arrogant, dear. I leave you alone for Lupiero's sake, don't think the pregnancy makes you invincible."

Morathu paced back and forth a few times,

then spun on his bride,

looking into her eyes,

summoning the fear.

His glare could roast fire.

"And don't think you will be left unmonitored. Ever again."

Meriandril winced.

Most supernatural influences Morathu held over her had dwindled with time.

He would always have fear.

Meriandril grudgingly admitted to herself that Morathu probably didn't even need preternatural metafaculties to give her the creeps. He was just that kind of fellow.

Morathu grinned at her reaction. "You do think that, though, don't you? You're thinking of maybe... killing yourself, and the baby? Maybe that would be better than bringing another like me into the world, yeees?"

"I would never endanger my child!" shouted Meriandril, without looking Morathu in the eyes. She found it best to avoid those disturbing piss yellow orbs, especially when telling a half-truth.

"That is correct," Morathu said.

He did his very best to meet Meriandril's own eyes,

it made her uneasy

it made her easier to read.

Those watery brown spheres reflected Meriandril's very being.

"You would never put your future child in any danger, because I would not allow it."

Meriandril fell back,

sinking into the thin, silky covers of her bed. Her eyes closed and she let out a tense sigh. Small tremors ran through her body.

"I suppose you've found a way to stay awake full time,"

she mumbled.

It took Morathu's keen ears a mere moment to decipher the jumble of words. He glided toward the bed, smiling down at her, and said, "Dingie very rarely sleeps, now. I do hope you won't see him, he will be watching. When my eyes look to other things, his eyes look to you."

After Morathu left for the night,  
Meriandrill slammed the door. Dingie? Stay with her? Not likely. Another escape attempt would probably kill her. What other choice did she have? She had very nearly made it the last time.

*Quickly now, she thought, while Morathu is on his way away.*

*Drip.Drip.Drip.*

That damned, incessant sound.

*Drip.Drop.Drip.*

Always the same, never changing.

*Drop.Drop.Drop.*

Wait, it *was* changing.

*Drop. **Thunk. Thunk.***

Little yellow gobs squirmed down against the rough stone floor, spreading gradually, like cooling lava. Quantity made up for speed as new holes opened up all over the roof of the chamber, so that the thick yellow ocean fast consumed the entire floor.

Dingie withdrew further into the chamber, unable to reach the wide toothed exit, the path already blocked. He could have attempted a jump over muck. What would happen if he didn't make it?

The ceiling no longer leaked. There were no new cracks that Dingie could see. He wanted to bury his face in his thighs, cling to his ankles, and rock back and forth like a baby. He found himself drawn to the ceiling. The flat, flawless gray ceiling.

Flawless except for the insect.

Insects.

There were two.

No, three.

Four.

Seven. Twenty. Thousands?

How could so many insects cling to one surface?

The little critters rained down on Dingie even as the yellow slime was gathering about his feet.

The wall touching his back felt suddenly smooth, comfortable, rather than rough and jagged. He actually felt himself sinking into the muck, deeper and slowly deeper.

The insects explored every nook and cranny of his rank physique, literally getting under his skin.

Birds emerged from the wall behind him,

landing on his knees,

his shoulders,

pecking at the narrow slits between his swollen lids.

Sight left him, he could still hear.

The insects quickly took care of that,

but he could still smell.

The birds quickly took care of that, but he could still *feel*. Feel the rats beneath the slime, consuming his toes. Feel the birds on his knees and shoulders, consuming his face. Feel the insects beneath his flesh, consuming everything else.

The yellow pool was not deepening. Still, he sank. His head would go under soon. His demons would drown him. Then it would all be over.

The sinking stopped. The slime disappeared. The insects disappeared. The birds, the rats. The false ceiling, the false walls, all of it. All interrupted by a single overpowering image: Meriandril, running.

The plain muddy floor, the drooping stalactites of the ceiling, the musty cave air, and even the repetitive *dripdripdrips*, came as a great relief. Dingie thought he had finally been defeated. He hadn't even fought *them*, this time.

There were more important things for him to consider. Meriandril could not be permitted to escape. Dingie no longer feared Morathu's wrath as much as that of the spirits. Disobeying the master was the catalyst that had created the spirits.

It was Dingie's fault his pets had been slain. He had let it happen. He had forced it on them.

There was real danger in Meriandril's escaping. Dingie had nothing to lose now, except his creator. He could not disappoint Morathu a second time.

Could he?

Meriandril ran, unafraid. She was cold, determined. Untouchable.

This was not for the baby.

The baby, as important as it used to be, had become something of an object lately. It had no future could only bring pain. The baby wasn't even *alive* yet, was it? This wasn't for the baby. This was for neither love nor compassion. Nor even fear. This was for Meriandril and Meriandril alone. She had been submissive, responsive,

even considerate:  
 all maternal inclination toward stomach bulge.  
 All over.  
 From now on, she would act in her own best interests.

She could not go outside. Too cold and steep. On top of the mountain sat a house, and beneath that house a maze of tunnels. Many passages led to more convenient exits. All Meriandril had to do was find the part of the house that linked to the cave system. Just reach the damned tunnels and disappear. She would never be seen again. Not by Morathu, not by cruel, wretched lapdog Dingie. Comfort was waiting for her, right at the end of a tunnel.

Meriandril gave a disgusted shudder and a reflective pause after passing Dingie's old room. Dingie avoided that room like the plague, the room where he used to sleep. Morathu must have done something cruel to instill permanent loathing in a Dingie thingie. Meriandril had no room in her heart to pity either of them. As the shudder passed, she pressed on. This hallway kept going for an eternity, only to lead to a longer hallway that veered off to the right. There was a door to the left of this second hallway's beginning. It would not budge. She let the fingers of her left hand trace the wall, eventually noticing a change in texture. The decline was very gradual, at first, then very sudden. The important thing was that she was going down.

Light was scarce. The most powerful light source faced her back. A rare assortment of dim candles lined the walls, stopping some distance ahead.

Meriandril had given light even more consideration than food and water. She had brought the torches that brightened her room and pinched a candle along the way through the halls. Such things could not be safely implemented for quite a distance. but what would she do in the meantime? Light would soon run out, she would be left to stumble.

Something raised the tiny hairs on the back of Meriandril's neck. Cold like a breeze, yet not really there. It instilled in her a sudden urge to turn around and run, all the way back to her room. Just forget everything, climb into bed and sleep soundly. But for Iffang's sake, do so quickly!

She was determined. She knew danger was near yet continued on, walking deeper into the shadows. Her urge was replaced by desire, *need*, and dizziness. She was determined. Every thought she had was of turning back. She was beyond thought's power. She kept moving.

The light was quickly fading. Even with the wall as a guide, she tripped several times. She was near to passing out.

The dizziness was gone.

She reached for one of the candles, a blurry, flickering candle on the edge of an abyss. Her fingertips brushed up against something slimy instead. Another something slimy grabbed her around the shoulder.

A smell of vile familiarity.

Rather than scream or even fight against Dingie's hold, Meriandril fell limply into his powerful hands. She felt as if she should be terrified, sick, and desperate.

The sickness came. The sickness came hard and wouldn't go. It came and it came, and soon Meriandril smelled about as pleasant as her captor, with far better breath.

As expected.

Desperation? Terror?

These things were there

*before* Dingie's presence had become obvious. The emotions had filled her ...

And now

she was empty. Sucked dry.

The night ended in pitiable apathy.

Little white feet

descended

from atop the great gray blankets

of a characteristically small bed.

Some tumbling ensued, innocent giggles.

The display

contrasted

damp ambient depression.

"Lupiero!" Meriandril shouted, smiling brightly.

Such a sweet child,

with no more than a cosmetic resemblance to his father.

Perhaps

Iffang

one of two moons

had taken pieces of Morathu's physique and Meriandril's soul to forge this child. Maybe

Iffangie

a violent sphere in the night sky

defended the boy's heart from the suffocating corruption of the caves.

What did the circumstances of his existence matter,

so long as such joviality persisted?

Lupiero's joy was

contagious, and only the strict quarantine enacted by Morathu kept it from spreading. Meriandril was perfectly content to suffer the disease with her son in isolation.

Morathu did not take the sinless bliss of his son anomalous, as he might feel inclined to take anything benign. He took the behavioral oddity with self-inflicted gullibility. The practicality of spirit would be marked by a state of physical stagnation that could be expected within Lupiero's first thirteen years.

Lupiero ripened without a father figure. He saw Morathu rarely, dreaded the brief visits as much as he longed for them. He grew at the accelerated rate attributed to the gra and matured with an even greater rapidity. Morathu was not forced to wait thirteen years to be disillusioned by Lupiero.

"Lupiero!" Meriandril shouted again, as the overgrown toddler rolled from his back to his pinkish belly, squirming to his feet. He held out his meaty little arms and stumbled forward, giggling without pause.

#### *Chapter 4: An egg rolls off the nest to crack.*

It was late, cold. Meriandril was half awake, busy.

Morathu would not bother her. He had always spent some nights away. Leeching, tending to what influences he had over the outside world. Influences Meriandril dared not ponder, except to guess that some recent change had instilled urgency, for Morathu's presence had become scarce.

This was a welcome respite, an opportunity Meriandril intended to use.

She had learned to write. Morathu had taught her, inadvertently, as he instructed Lupiero. His pride would not allow for an ignorant child.

Literacy was Morathu's second gift to Meriandril. She had almost hated the first, Lupiero Sturge, before it had even been born. She had been determined to spite whatever abomination would surely come from the union Morathu Sturge inflicted. This resolve quickly faded when her baby looked into her eyes.

Once past the initial shock at the color, what power she found! Confusion, helplessness, longing. The soul, written in the pupils. She was released from trance by an other miracle: Lupiero's first smile.

All these things she pondered and transcribed

with her son's pen and her son's parchment.

She went on to describe

the first encounter,

when her heart saw what her eyes could not,

and she ran; her first escape attempt, when her spirit was still wild and strong, and submission was just an act; the beginnings of her darker moods, when escape no longer seemed worth trying.

Most of all though,

she wrote of and to Lupiero.

Oh,

the comfort the mere sound his heavy rhythmic breathing brought her at that very moment! It kept her sanity intact, as she walked the darker side of memory lane. It scared her that it granted Morathu a way back into her soul.

What future could Lupiero hope for, within the dark house over the tunnels? What family business would he inherit from the Sturge?

Best to deal with older problems, she decided,

leave the rest of the parchment blank.

The letter was far from complete. Maybe she would finish it another night or another day. Maybe Lupiero would be ready to read it.

The flame of Meriandril's reading candle flared up,  
the parchment was no more.

"Awake, child!"

-Morathu early one night.

The command came utterly unexpected and was answered accordingly.

Lupiero's lids widely parted. His brows twitched nervously, his hands pulled the covers up over his nose.

"I said awake!"

Obviously, Lupiero *was* awake, and Morathu knew it. Who could miss those slanting yellow eyes? Consciousness would not be enough.

A cold hand wrapped around Lupiero's neck, an impossible strength forced him to his feet. The hand pushed forward, propelling him through the opened door. Before he could turn around, the hand was on the top of his head, and there was a nauseous sinking feeling. A black sheet surrounded him, then passed through him, so that he was in a liquidy darkness beneath it.

A sojourn through an inky sea.

Pressure gathered beneath him and he emerged within another black sheet.

A spitting sensation came

as Morathu released. Lupiero went flying forward. He caught himself by pressing his underdeveloped palms against

a moist brick wall.

"Your real lessons begin," Morathu said  
from behind him

, the words did not come out as clear. They sounded like a series of jumbled echoes. And Lupiero could not have been certain that it was Morathu talking, because the mumbled words came from the mouth of a fumbled figure.

The world was spinning, Lupiero nauseous. As if his stomach would be expelled from his body. His first journey through the Slipping had not been pleasant.

Morathu stared down at his son  
with a vicious, gleaming smile.

"The sickness will pass."

Lupiero was shoved.

Into a room smelling of sweat and other, more puissant things.

*"The sickness will pass," he says. After disrupting my sleep, shouting at me, even physically pushing me, only to drag me along through some damned shadow.*

*It will pass. I feel it passing now. Will I keep down my last meal in the meantime? That last shove didn't help, and where am I now?*

*Ugh... The Slipping made me sick, this odor will keep me sick. Blood, piss, rot, feces. It seemed like a rich neighborhood outside. I can't imagine any well-bred gra living under these conditions. It's like visiting Dingie's layer.*

*The complete lack of illumination, that I don't want to actually step in this crap I'm smelling. Good thing Dad's got me by the shoulder. I'm sure he knows the way. He wouldn't let me step in anything gross.*

*We're entering a whole nother room, aren't we? Best not to ask. I hear voices. Dad wouldn't take me anywhere dangerous. It's best I don't disrupt the voices. The screams, the shouting, the chanting, the chattering.*

*Downward pressure on shoulder. And I think that's a bench pressed against the back of my legs. Guess this is where I sit down. Good. I'm feeling pretty tired. I wouldn't have stayed up to watch the sunrise yesterday if I knew Dad was going to get into one of his odd moods. Take me on this little field trip.*

*I want to tell him to let go now. He's hurting me, he doesn't mean to. He would stop if I told him, my voice doesn't belong. My voice wouldn't fit in with the other voices. Maybe it's good we're in the dark.*

*Hot breath hits my face. It's not Dad's. It can't be Dad's. I've never known him to breathe, he couldn't make anything so warm. Not that it's a pleasant warmth. It has the smell of the room, and feels solid.*

*There's a glow ... From a candle. The light is dim. I'm more afraid of the candle than the darkness. That and whatever is looking down at me. I'll be fine, as long as I keep my eyes closed.*

*I don't like it here. Too many people. They're crowding me out, even though I can't, won't see them. I have to get out. If Dad wasn't holding me down, I'd run. I'd run faster than I've ever run before. I'd be alone, that's what I need right now.*



*Isolated all my life and now that I'm around people, I want to be alone.  
Shit.*

Meriandril paced back and forth by the foot of the bed, her arms crossed under her breasts, her brows creased toward the top of her nose. The dome of her lips wrinkled her cheeks. Her fingernails dug into the loose flesh around her elbows.

Lupiero was gone. Morathu was gone. Lupiero and Morathu were alone, and together. Meriandril could do nothing, except sit and wait. She had slept through what might as well have been an abduction and she was powerless to go after the kidnapper. All roads out of the mountain had fallen apart. She knew nothing of where her son had been taken.

Where, Why? What could Morathu have in mind? How much *worse* would she feel, if she knew the answers to such questions?

Dingie might know something. Slothing about in his tunnels and halls, he may have overheard. He would not have been asleep. Dingie could know something. Who else was there to turn to?

Meriandril walked a path filled with old confusions. A trembling preyed on her body, and the chill of the caves was not responsible. The walls seemed closer together than before. Before, the roughness of the floor had not so severely pecked at her feet. The path felt very much the same, except for ambiance.

When Meriandril entered Dingie's layer, she was trembling.

Afraid in Dingie's presence  
for the first time in a while.

Not of Dingie, of his absence.

The room was lifeless.

Her eyes had not adjusted to the darkness, she had no chance of detecting the limp heap of decay sprawled out across the far right wall. The potent scent she took to be a mere residue of Dingie's constant residence.

He was probably gone. He was often lurking about, and rarely slept. She should not have expected to find him there.

She turned, shaking more bluntly than before.

"Meri... merry... Mary."

She twist-spun around like a top. Her eyes had adjusted just enough that she could see the humped form on the floor, weakly crawling to her. She would not say a word, even as a dusty breath caressed her naked ankles.

"Meri come to visit... Mary comes to visit... "

The creature grappled her thighs. She refrained from pushing its hands away, afraid that doing so might cause them to crumble. A patch of hair pressed against her knees as Dingie's head drooped between them. Still Meriandril did not resist the contact.

"Where is Lupiero, Dingie?" she asked, suddenly as rigid as a statue. Her fears were fading fast. She had found a way to at least learn something. She told herself there was nothing more to it than that. "Dingie? Dingie?"

He did not respond. Except to release what sounded like a blissful sigh, close his eyes, and lay down in front of Meriandril's feet. He seemed more relaxed.

"Damn you, Dingie..." She kicked him. Little chunks of his shoulder rubbed off on her toenails.

"Damned Dingie..." said he, without moving. "Damned Dingie."

"Make some sense, you idiot! Where the hell is my son!?" Meriandril was tempted to kick again. She wiped her toes off on her ankle.

She breathed deeply as assailed by a chill wind, a sense of urgency, the need to get away.

She turned and she ran.

**"Make sense! Make sense! Make sense, IDIOT! IDIOTIDIOTIDIOT! Idiot, MAKE SENSE! DAMNED, damneddamned IDIOT, Make Sense!"**

Shouts and heavy footsteps followed her. The shouting grew louder and louder, the footfalls closer. Endurance propelled her into the safety of her room. She shut and locked the door between heartbeats.

***BAM!***

Dingie chunked rotting flesh to dent the door.

***BAM!BAM!***

Energetically,  
he failed to injure  
the enclosure.

***BAM!BAM! BAM! BAM!BAM!***

He eventually stopped trying.

And fell to the floor.

Meriandril leaned into the door. She held her ear to it and she listened. She could hear deep, throaty breaths. She waited. Dingie stayed.

"Dingie..." Meriandril said through the iron, pleading. "Dingie... Where are they, Dingie, where are they?"

"Where, idiot, where? Idiot, Dingie's always the idiot. Yeah, he's always the idiot. Until you need me."

"Dingie ... "

***BAM!***

Wild, hysterical laughter came from the other side of the door. "That's right, ha! You need me now, don't you, yeah? Yeah? I'm here, *Meriandril*, HA! I'm here for you. Piss all over Dingie, then ask him for a fucking favor. Well that's what he's there for. Ready to serve. Ready to serve."

"Tell me, please, just tell me."

"Right. You want to know about your bloody *son*. The newest branch in the Sturge family tree. I'll tell you, sure, Dingie's always telling secrets. He knows, because he was there before."

Silence.

"I'm sorry ... "

"Damned right you're sorry, Meriandril. We're all sorry here. You're sorry, your son's sorry, the master, Dingie's master, DaddyDaddyPops yeah, he's sorry, and so am I. We're all sorry. We're all pathetic. And Morathu ... Oh! The master, yes, the Master, Dingie's master Daddy Morathu. He'll damn us all. Like he damned me, like he's damning your son tonight."

Quiet.

"It isn't ..."

"I know, you want to know. No worries, I know you want to know. Dingie knows. Dingie's damned, the secret finder, damned by the secrets. He'll tell. So listen. Listen, and shut up. Just shut the hell up, and stay the hell quiet, and he'll tell you. He'll tell all, because he's here to serve. I just want to be left alone. A little solitude's too much to ask."

Long seconds passed. Then long minutes.

"I've been crawling lately. Crawling, because they keep dragging me down. Pulling and pulling and they won't let go. Even now, I'm drowning. They're under my skin, they're in my head, they're everywhere, and I can't get away. And I deserve it.

"I loved them. But they don't matter anymore. I just want them to let me forget, and they won't! I deserve it, I guess. And at least I'm not afraid of Morathu anymore. Heh. HA! He doesn't know I'm not afraid anymore. He's still afraid of me. HA!

"So I guess I can tell you. Why not? It's what I want, it's what you want. Hell, it might even be what *they* want. Far be it from me to keep a secret anymore.

"Your boy Lupiero's in for a terrific time. There'll be folk like me and folk like Morathu and that won't be the worst of it. He's nervousnervousnervous methinks so he's starting Lupiero in early. It'll be different for him, than it was for me.

"Sicksicksick! you'd say, if you could see it. Dingie now, he's used to bad smells and bad people. He didn't have a pretty mommy keeping him sheltered and cozy in the monster's den.

"Yeah, Morathu's nervous. Scared, maybe. I've never known him to fear anything except Duram and me. That's the thing, though, isn't it? Dingie and Morathu are connected. Just like Morathu and Lupiero, only not as close. Maybe it's closeness that Morathu's most afraid of.

"Not to fear, though. Morathu wouldn't kill a son. At least not until he's old enough to tell. No, Morathu's really unsure about this, so he'll just expose the kid a little bit. He's got high hopes, so he won't just kill. He'll just expose."

More tormenting quiet.

"Expose to what?" Meriandril finally asked.

More tormenting laughter. Dingie retreated into his tunnels and halls.

---

Lupiero was sleepy, so exhausted from the night's energetic revelries. The sun would soon rise. Why wouldn't Morathu take him home?

The things Lupiero had heard, seen, endured!  
 He'd been held by cruelly slobbering nobles, made to monitor preoccupations of ancient adrenaline junkies high on love of blood addicts and artistic justification to depravity.

To Morathu,

it was a good experience for the boy. Lupiero was eleven, almost full-grown.

His mind would have to mature with his body.

It was necessary that he be shaken and purified of love simplicity.

That the child's subconscious suspicions be gradually guided to addiction.

Morathu was a devil, a selective plague.  
He wasn't alone.

Nobles locally sucked down peasants like bourbon, injecting identifications of fear, draining the bloodstream, and chunking the dead bodies into stinking alleyways. Habitually throwing the poor into fits gallivanting sado-sexual escapades to spread horrifying mythic rumour. Whispering night terrors into Lupiero's subjective childish psyche.

An obsessing hate festered in Lupiero. A chaotic mana, growing inside him.  
He suspected it had been planted by his mother.

Morathu approached Lupiero.

"Now you know, my boy."  
Morathu smiled.  
"Now you will be ready."

"What have you done to me, Father? What have you let them?"

Morathu slit his nails across the ropes tied to Lupiero's wrists and ankles. He grabbed Lupiero's hand to help him off of the bed. When the boy shivered, he let go.

"I will rest now," Morathu said. "My chambers call."

He slammed the door shut before fading into his shadow, leaving Lupiero to chew on a slab of raw Chielvin goat meat.

---

Meriandril spent furious splashes of ink on pages she would later burn.  
Pages and pages.  
Venting,  
subconsciously releasing into her heart's focus  
rage and sorrow.

Going after Morathu directly, suicide mission, wouldn't help Lupiero. Trying without tactic was temptingly easy... and painless to discard.

She didn't know where Lupiero had been taken, what had happened to him. Morathu had returned several nights ago, without Lupiero. Had the boy failed some kind of test? If Lupiero was dead, she would kill Morathu. She would find a way. There was some magical emotion inside her, crackling.

She could vaguely sense Lupiero.

Meriandril hadn't attempted escape lately,  
becoming too old.

Nearly thirty-five, and uvang. gra.

Her skin was loose

her bones were brittle.

Walking out the door,

incline entrance of the house on the top of the mountain,

climbing down to the edge of the cliff, then over the wall at the edge of the cliff, it was unconscious. Jumping from the edge of the cliff was certainly unconscious.

Falling

falling

falling

the wind in her hair the biting wind against her loose skin it hurt oh it was shocking not what she expected also thrilling wonderful hideous nauseous and neverending. When would the fall stop maybe never it didn't matter because she knew where she was going and nothing could stop her not now not ever she was all she had power she was invincible let Morathu come she was prepared he couldn't follow.

The ground was coming closer

closer

and closer, clear flat dirt approaching from below with rocks here and there rocks from the mountain sharp jagged rocks rocks that could impale. She lifted her arms like a bird they stuck to her sides her clothes stopped rippling they were gone she would die maybe die naked impaled by the rocks

it wasn't to be couldn't happen now.

The ground kept coming wouldn't stop moving upward as she moved downward wouldn't stop 'til she hit it and then it

parted

parted by the power she could feel it she trusted it it was hers ever so deeply hers. And she was slowing,

falling,

sinking,

floating down through the roots the moisture the dirt down through the ground.

The dirt bubbled beneath her,

wild ki transporting her thru the soil as if it were a liquid,

as raised a rocky grayness a kind of floor a blurry floor growing clearer

larger

clearer beneath her until she was in it.

And through it.

And falling again.

"Umph!"

"Mother!" Lupiero leaped up from beneath his coarse sheepskin covers and wrapped his arms around her.

And they swirled.

And they faded.

Morathu Sturge extended his arms and closed his eyes. A purple cape flickered out around him. Tendrils of his long black hair lashed out at the surrounding nothing. Thin blue lips sucked at the chilled air as if an old habit had been revived.

Morathu's closed eyes augmented empathic psychic witness of warm ignorant specks herded or available, and cold ones emanating auric geography.

He kept rising,  
 expanding his perception.  
 Higher ever higher,  
 until he had gone too far.  
 And then he waited.  
 Searching,  
                   searching,  
                           searching.

They were out there, somewhere.

*I can still feel them, somewhere*

## **Chapter 5: Nature's Trap**

Proud. Long feathers. Bold chest. Rich Tail. Yellow Eyes.

Strong. Powerful. Evil.

It was an avarice. To the leaves, it was nothing. And the leaves were nothing to the avarice. Soft things on which to walk.

Slow, confident advance towards the meaty scraps hanging over the leaves. And who would challenge an avarice for its prize?

Leaves slip, suck down, bury the avarice. gravity pulls. Pulls the avarice down into the pit.

There was a scream.

Flying feathers. Consuming shadows. The avarice is gone.

Long live the mighty Pit.

Wide, round ears twitched to the intimidating sound of a roar. Muscles tensed for a moment.

Muscles that had grown large,

firm.

Muscles forged in the heat of the sun  
and the test of the wilderness Meriandril's chaos ki had transported him to.

The roar sounded again,  
louder than before.

Closer.

He was running out of time.  
Lupiero was running out,  
so he ran.

A light breeze sounded the music of the leaves. He did not hear it, because he was the wind. The only whirlwind in the forest. Sending up clouds of dirt, squishing pinecones and insects with the cracked bottoms of his feet.

The roar was gone. He kept running, forging a circular path.

Where had the bloody lizard ended up? Had it abandoned the chase, this time? Like it had abandoned the chase, the last occasion?

The last instance, there had been no roar. Just an attack. Swift and stealthy. And there had been as swift an escape.

He stopped.  
He rubbed a bit of sweat off the back of his neck,  
and he listened.

There it was,  
right in front of him.  
A red speck  
hiding  
within a thick patch of pink grass.  
Not crouching.  
It hadn't been waiting long enough to crouch.

Fine scarlet scales glistened as they took in the full light of the sun. Sizable claws slammed into Lupiero's chest and threw him onto his back. Jagged teeth dug into his arm as he held it across his throat.

There was a scream.  
A high-pitched outcry to shatter eardrums,  
ending in a scratchy yelp.

The red beast of the forest cared not. It had its jaws on something and that was where they were going to stay.

Clenching maw  
pulled and shook,





She had taught him so much, the woman he remembered as Mother. About history and folklore, finding food and roasting meat, pride, religion, and adaptation.

Lupiero and Meriandril had escaped into an unsettled area in proximity to Meriandril's home, she regularly visited her loved ones until Morathu caught her, Meriandril felt Morathu staring at her on her way into her old house under cover of darkness, she sent Lupiero the thought to flee, her heartrate accelerated her magical energy flooded her brain with love and adrenaline Lupiero looked back toward her she was too terrified to think of other than he as his mother began to teleportal him into the safest isolated location she could, Lupiero noticed Morathu snap Meriandril's neck the instant before Lupiero vanished.

*But why do you leave us so little time, Iffang? Lupiero thought. And your wife. Where is your mercy now, wife of Life? I have been faithful. Anything I haven't eaten, I have given to the two of you. And my mother served you as well. Will you leave me now?*

Lupiero kneeled.

*I have given all and received nothing. Maybe there isn't anything to receive.*

He used his good arm to grab a low, thick branch and pull himself to a stand. He had never suffered such severe wounds before. It was good that the worst of them had healed as he dreamt. Iffangie's mercy?

He had learned enough about forest plants to treat what minor scratches remained of his grievous wounds. Enough to speed the healing process and protect himself from infection. After attending to this, there was nothing left except to check the pit.

The small green marble in the sky reflected little light. Much less than when Shaanshi, the big red moon claimed by the gra as theirs, was in the sky. Let the humans have Rhaavid, Shaanshi's little green servant. Let the humans have what is small and insignificant.

Yet that night he depended on the little green marble's meek glow. He was too hungry to sleep, and too far from his slipshod little cabin to sleep safely. Luckily the gra are adaptable. More adaptable, said his mother, than were the other uvang. Which is why his liquid yellow eyes so swiftly adjusted to the darkness. Which is why only the gra remain of the uvang.

Lupiero had seen nothing of the gra. Nothing except his mother. He remembered vaguely a father, more a corruption of than an actual gra.

After carefully navigating the forest for half an hour, he came to the pit. It was easy enough to locate, since the roof had caved in. Always a good sign.

He could detect no movement at the bottom of the pit. Not a sound pierced the tranquil darkness. Yet, as his wide nostrils flared, he knew he would not go hungry.

He had never caught an avarice before. Many strange creatures had fallen prey to his tantalizing gravity-operated trap. *None*, he decided from in front of a warm fire, *with meat so rich as that of the avarice.*

And so dense and filling!

This one's legs would satisfy his bottomless stomach for days.

He went to sleep full of meat, awoke refreshed.

Gay, myriad bursts filled Morathu's chamber. A rainbow silhouette filtered through at the center, giving off a swirling, misty light that drowned out the small explosions. Colors solidified as a great, opaque globe. All shattered into a fading pool on the floor, allowing for the return of the room's tenebrous placidity.

And from this emerged Duram. Standing still like a statue, split in half by a shadow. Laughing at everyone and everything from behind the glaze of his yellow eyes and the slight arch of his lips. His thin, moist orange lips. His pretty feminine lips.

Morathu could hear the laughter. He suppressed a cringe. "Must you?" he asked, glancing toward the quivering, fleshy mass in the corner.

"Dingie knew the grownups were going to play tonight," Duram said. "If he can't hang, he shouldn't hang."

Morathu stared out over Duram's shoulder, toward a blank wall. "Pity my eyes then."

Duram pulled at the purple edge of his cape, wrapping it about himself as he fell into his own shadow. He reemerged buried beneath the fuzzy brown covers of Morathu's kingly bed. When he was good and comfortable, he let his damned unspoken laughter fill the room, judging it enough of a reply to his father's request.

"I call you here," Morathu said, "to answer a debt. You were--"

"--Born. And if I don't do you this favor, you'll take back that one. You've fucked up again. You need me to fix things. You don't trust me so you're sending Dingie along. Get to the important shit."

Morathu outstretched his hands, let his fingers coil in one at a time. A hard cloud encircled and tightened around Duram's neck. This silenced all except the unspoken. The laughter.

"You will find for me one of our line. Your only brother, or his remains. I suspect he did not inherit the Thirst after all, or I would have found him by now. I have called you, son, Duram, because you are so very good at sniffing out rodents."

The cloud around Duram's neck dissipated. He looked to the rotting hump in the corner, burying its head between its knees, shaking, maybe crying. "'Only brother'? That must hurt, huh, little guy?"

Dingie looked up. There was a red glint to his envious green eyes that neither Duram nor Morathu had ever seen.

Duram casually looked back to Morathu. As soon as he turned his head, Dingie's glint disappeared.

---

"What do you have for me today?" he asked, looking down at the pit. "Something big, maybe?"

He smelled nothing.

The animals were reacting to his presence. Slowly, they were learning to evade him, to defy him. The pit had served him well for many years. Finally, suddenly, the animals knew to stay away.

Had it been a full week now, since last the pit brought him food?

A furry bipedal beast leaped down at him, a gray-brown blur. It landed on his neck. Two rubbery palms came smashing in on his temples. He fell.

"Eep! Eep!" screamed the creature, lifting and slamming Lupiero's head into the ground. After two goes, his neck tightened. Dazed, he rolled out from under the fanatical chimp.

He felt the adrenaline coursing through his body. He came to his feet in an instant, and in less time had his rough hands around the hairy creature's neck. He was about to impale the animal on a tree branch when another landed on his shoulders. And another, largest of all, dangled down in front of him, showing off its fangs, giving him a mocking upside-down smile.

"Eep! Eep!" screamed the chimp. "Eep! Eep!"

Again, his temples took a direct hit. He stumbled, didn't fall. *These things are strong*, he told himself. *They are not gra.*

The first ferocious fur ball he discarded, casting it into a wide tree trunk. He quickly grabbed the other by the armpits and dove forward, lifting it off his shoulders to slam its head into the ground. *Snap.*

He spun to address the other assassin, by then dropping down behind him. Its jaguar-like teeth invaded the flesh of his upper arm, ripping into cloud to call the sanguine rain. As the teeth jerked free, he had the thing by the ankle. He swung it like a doll, bashing it into a tree over and over again.

The first to fall, the one cast aimlessly into a trunk, staggered now, screaming aimlessly. Raging as chimps rage.

It would not prove much of a threat,  
how many more were in the area?

He ran.

*Huff. Huff.*

Why now? His mother dies, nature attacks. Are no solitary forces welcome in the forest?

Iffang and Iffangie had forsaken him, obviously. If they had ever been there for anybody. He had only scars and the pit. And now the pit was useless.

Time to move on.

He gathered his crooked wooden spear, his lizard hide water pouch, and enough melon to keep him fed for at least a few days. The melons he kept in a leathery sack taken from a particularly large and feral yaga boar. To fill the water pouch, he visited a nearby pond.

Which way to go? He had not *entered* the forest, as might a traveler. He had not searched it out. He had merely arrived. Any direction would bring him as close to the center or the outskirts of the forest. He needn't even choose a path, then.

*I will just walk.*

"Smell as well as you smell, Dingie?" Duram asked, pinching shut his own nose. Which was more revolting, Dingie, or the peasant shit floating around in the sewers?

"Dingie smells something here," Dingie said. Without warning, he splashed on forward through the muck.

Duram was shocked.

Dingie was told not to wander ahead.

Was this decaying half-thing acting without being instructed?

Was it running away?

Could it run?

What a waste, this sojourn into the city's filthy underground. Why had Morathu demanded the search begin in this wretchedness? The disobedient servant just added insult to insult. No Sturge should be subjected to such senselessness.

*AAiiiiieeeeegh!!!*

Duram's ears  
traced instinctively  
the distance between himself and the scream.  
He faded into the black,  
arched ceiling  
above him,  
emerging from a shaded patch of wall a few steps ahead of the sound.  
He hovered there, looking out across the gurgling greenish-orange river of the tunnel.

There was the screamer,  
back propped up against the wall,  
hands hiding somewhere under the river.  
And there was Dingie,  
holding the screamer by the wrist.  
As the screamer sat there, shivering in fear, the screaming faded.  
Gradually,  
the shivering halted as well.

"What is this?"  
Duram asked.  
"A free human, here? How lucky we wandered into you!"

"Daddy will thank Dingie for the treat," Dingie said.

Duram shook his head. "Daddy won't be seeing this one."

Odd, this sense of calm that had come over the human. A human in gra territory had reason to be afraid, no matter the circumstances. This one was being held not by the gra, by something with a body that should have been buried years ago.  
Was there intrigue to this human?  
One of the buli Weavers?

No matter.  
Duram would know everything in a moment.  
All he needed was a telepathic taste.  
He took much, much more.

Dingie did not resist. In fact, after Duram reduced his catch to a pale corpse, Dingie looked down at it and he smiled. "Daddy will be pleased."

Duram himself did not look pleased.

### **Chapter 6: Woodland Civilization Frolicking**

Trudge trudge trudge  
 through thicker and sharper barbed vines.  
 Reach the clearing and the blue grass.  
 Light is failing.  
 Tonight is a night of no moons.  
 Rest soon.  
 For now, be comforted by the soothing singsong tree songs.  
*Chirp chirp. Chirpchirp.*  
*Caw!*  
*Eeii! Eeii! Eeii!*  
*Chirpchirpchirpchirp.*  
*Tweet. Tweet tweettweet.*  
*Thwack!*  
*Swoooooosh.*  
*Eeii! Eeeiiii...*

At the introduction of alien music,  
 Lupiero's spirit soared. Civilization!

The only regrettable thing was what sort of bird it was that got shot.  
 An excellent songbird, when it wasn't irritated.  
 He knew,  
 too,  
 how far away the bird was.  
 If he ran,  
 he would be there before the forest was pitch.

He did.  
 The hunter and the bird were both already gone.  
 Maybe tomorrow, he would find a village.

Dingie ascended the bottom of the mountain smiling like a royal fool.  
 He had made amends with Morathu.  
 He was full.  
 And he had come to grips with his bleeding spirits.

They wouldn't be torturing him for much longer.  
 They promised to release him.  
 Soon.

Duram.  
 Death.  
 The Mad Prince.  
 Would he enjoy his new chains?

Dingie didn't feel the icy wind beating against his flesh.  
 He didn't feel the jagged rocks biting into his hands.  
 He could climb all day,  
 comforted by the renewed pulsing,  
 the pumpumpump that meant power.  
 How unfortunate the cave entrance to Morathu's layer wasn't higher up.

Father and Son were arguing vigorously,  
 by the time he reached Morathu's private chambers.  
 They didn't stop on Dingie's behalf.  
*Oh no, don't stop on my account. Please, feel free to fill my ears with your secrets. Dingie always knows anyway. Yes, Dingie knows, and Dingie never tells.*

"You dare bait *me!*? You subject a Sturge, your own brood, to *this!*? This damned disease! The Murkdi Father will be told."

"You haven't the guts to go to another of the ancient families. If anything, you'll report to that marvelous sister of yours. She cannot cure you. She will not help you at all, if I so much as forbid her interference."

"You infected Shiarin too, Father? I won't even have to tell the Murkdi about that."

"Loyalty, Duram. Not everyone need be spanked to be kept in line. Now find your brother. Sudden stagnation sets in within the year"

"How, Father?"

Dingie knew how to find Lupiero.  
 Dingie knew.  
 She told him.  
 She told him, she knew Dingie could keep secrets. What would Dingie do when the time came?

---



Sunlight filtered through the still green canopy overhead. Warm, renewing sunlight. Yellow eyes fluttered open to witness the giant orb, blinking to the pain of adjustment. When they opened again, they were rescued by a silhouette eclipse.

A narrow pointed boot jabbed him in the ribs. "You get up," said the eclipse. Lying on the ground, watching this uncertain shape, he couldn't tell if the lips moved.

He stood and started walking. Felt like the right thing to do. His captor's features came into focus as they walked.

A small,  
small, small man.  
Six feet tall,  
dusty green skin that fit,  
the man was made for the forest.  
Eyes nearly all pupil,  
and clothes.

Woven twig sandals, gold threaded through a silky green shirt, threads that would sparkle designs when he turned around, subtle bronze threads lining dark brown pants.

"What have you come from?" the man asked.

"Just the pit," Lupiero said. "There was only the pit."  
No gods or ghosts.  
No companions.

The man nodded.  
He didn't move his lips when he said,  
*I am Mort of Mort Zugat. I'll be taking you to see Appraiser.*

He did not expect a courtroom.  
He didn't even know the word.  
If he had, he might have stayed away.  
How could he be judged before others  
if he didn't know enough to judge himself? Then again, maybe he just wanted to be told: *This is what you are.* Maybe being told is easier.

They tramped thru no courtroom, similar dimensions. Spectators rather than a jury, a special kind of judge that looked only at character. Lawyers of a sort, psychologists specializing one in the positive and the other in the negative aspects of intelligent thought and emotion. It had the sense of isolation and an odd, potent, musty smell. All a courtroom would require, except for walls and a ceiling.

He sat on a rock.  
Jagged texture,

except for the smooth, cold groove in the middle not quite large enough to engulf his arse. Probably not made with the uvang in mind. It was difficult, resisting the urge to rebel against the discomfort by standing up. This place had unwritten rules that kept him in place. He could sense some of the unwritten rules.

He looked ahead, concentrating on the miniature crossbows being pointed at his chest from either side, watching with his peripheral vision. He hoped the Appraiser would meet his gaze, take it as a sign of respect.

The Appraiser sat atop a great jeweled throne, several yards ahead. Rainbow rocks lined the throne's arms, and the woman's feet, encased in velvety brown boots, rested upon the top of a small black diamond staircase. She was propped high enough in the air to tower over even the tallest of the uvang.

A stern look complemented her shadow-cast face. This woman ordered executions for a living.

"I hear you come from 'only the pit'," Appraiser said. "That is what we will call you, should you survive your appraisal. You are Pit."

"I have a name."

"Your name is Pit," she replied. "You are only Pit. Now stand."

*Her lips aren't moving either*, he realized. Why did it take him so many moments to realize? The way these people talked seemed natural. As natural as anything. You didn't think about it until you thought about it.

Pit raised himself off the pinching rock chair. He raised his arms and began turning around. It felt like the thing to do.

"Enough. Face me still. Where is your tribe, Helvite?"

He quickly shook his head, throwing dirt from his long black hair. "I don't know what you're talking about." The name, Helvite. It did sound familiar.

Appraiser frowned. "You are telling the truth. Yet what other uvang people has ever dared inhabit the Forbidden Forest?"

"There are only the gra now," Pit said.

"I came with... I am alone here."

She nodded. "Just as well. The Helvites were never very kind to the Forest, when they were around. How have you survived Her, all these years?"

By "Her" Appraiser was obviously talking about the forest. Pit wondered why it was obvious. Something to do with the way these people talked without lips. Without sound? Yet there was voice.

"I adjust," he said.

*Perhaps you can adjust to us. I will ask your analysts. Close your eyes now. You feel relaxed. You want to sleep.*

He did. Pit fainted into a heap on the ground.

Two women dressed in form-fitting red scale clothes stepped past his body, glimmering as they approached Appraiser's throne. The three would argue for half an hour's eternity.

Duram knew people. Uvang in New Kevianquitte. Powerful humans in Bylveria. He didn't like dealing with humans. A weak and annoying race occasionally tolerable as a source of sustenance. Egotistical idiots that should have been exterminated at the conclusion of the Small Hills Uprising.  
Weak.

The best contact for the job was a human.

A man named Freyadt Geickar.

A buli with a necromantic bent.

Considered something of a renegade by other Weavers: a rule-breaker, a trouble-brewer, a sinister little fellow with no respect for his elders.

Yet the sitters on Council Watch,  
the Watchers of the buli Weavers,  
let Freyadt slide.

"So long as he is subtle,"  
they would say.

"So long as I am stronger,"  
Freyadt would reply.

Duram considered Freyadt tolerable.

He had squeezed more use out of that one,  
over the years,  
than any other.

And his pride prevented him from posing the question: Who really manipulates whom, when Vampire meets Necromancer?

"There it is," Duram said to himself, snatching an obscure wooden statuette from atop one of the many bookshelves lining his manor's musty library. He held the thing between chilled fingers, rubbing the face fondly with his thumb. Smooth. Perfect.

He pulled his silky purple cape across his face like a scared bird hiding behind a wing, he faded into its shadow. The cape was the last to disappear, vanishing into a slurry swirl.

"Gladdened you're back," Dingie said, after Duram had completed his usual gaudy entrance. "Gladdened more by your point of return. Duram's visit lightens the darkness of Dingie's lonely room."

"It's a hole, not a room. And I'm not visiting you because you're a sexy beast, so don't get your hopes up. We're in a fix, need to hurry."

"As you say, me brother." *You are the one in a fix.*

Dingie pulled himself away from a particularly relaxing groove in the rock to stand next to Duram.

Duram crushed a roach beneath the rubbery heel of his puke green boot. "Don't ever call me your fucking brother, you slipshod Sturge."

Dingie cringed at the mess on the floor. "As you say," he said.

"Damned right. I'm not going to drain myself Slipping you half way across the continent unless we understand each other."

"Dingie understands."

"Good." Duram's cape coiled around the both of them, they were gone.

The Pit awoke atop harsh wool, rolling naked except for the leafy transparent sheet shielding him from a cool current of air. A light breeze, filtered through the window in the hay roof of his sunken hut.

He could hear people moving outside. People! And he remembered.

He massaged his throbbing temples with the bottom of his hands. It took him a minute to stand, disoriented and nauseous as he felt.

When he did,

he could hear a wordless song. The sickness passed and the throbbing eased. The soothing music tugged at him, dragging him towards the door.

Pit gently pushed open his hut's thin wooden door,  
stepped forward,  
and ascended the stairs of dirt that led to level ground. He knew he would find the source of the song if only he answered the tugging, even though it seemed to be coming from everywhere.

That was where he found it. Turning in a circle,  
everywhere he saw the green people,  
busily at work or leisurely walking,  
all open-mouthed.  
It was the first time he had seen any of them open-mouthed.

The ground was mostly bare,  
the fine dirt unbearably cold.  
High trees and exotic greenery sucked up the majority of the moisture.  
Many people worked on high,  
aided by  
strange contraptions  
attached to the trees,  
picking fruit  
or some other such nonsense.  
They were almost hard to see,  
changing colors like so many chameleons.  
Pit didn't pay them much attention.

The people working the ground were a little more interesting. Less people worked the ground because there was less to work. He saw a few mushroom gardens, what he took to be an outdoor elementary school, and several sunken buildings of ambiguous purposes. The mushroom gardens were what interested him. He could smell something cooking near the mushroom gardens.

All this time exploring, the song had been ongoing. It was as if the song were designed just for him, to be set off as soon as he sat up in bed. A very friendly gesture, he thought. If that was what it was.

Then came the scream. Melodic yet abrasive, singular yet louder and more powerful than the entire perfect communal tune. An angry, defiant contrast to everything. An ugly beautiful outcry against solidarity.

It lasted all of thirty seconds. Long enough to shatter the hypnotic power of the other song. Long enough for Pit to fall in love with a sound. Raw emotion made almost tangible, yet infinitely, tantalizingly intangible. Nothing mattered except the source.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes?" he said, turning around. He found Appraiser, all dressed up in silk robes and golden necklaces. Her yellow-streaked red hair was weaved into a kind of v-shape behind her head. Her little round nose was crinkled up between the shaded slits of her eyes.

"You're naked," she said, careful to look him in the eyes. To keep her attention on his eyes.

Pit nodded.

Suddenly,  
he felt a little uncomfortable.

"You're living in a society now," Appraiser said. "You % know what it's like to live in a society?"

"I woke up without any clothes," he said. "In a hut. There was singing..."

"The Welcoming Song. We sing to all newcomers, once they have been appraised as valuable to the community. Please forgive that horrid noise at the end of the song. It wasn't supposed to happen. The culprit has already been detained."

"Can I talk to this person?" he asked.

"I don't see what good it would do, yeah fine. Your schooling isn't scheduled for a few hours yet. Once we get you properly cleaned and dressed, you can use your free time to do whatever you please."

Pit ran a hand through his tangled mess of hair. Dangling down behind his head, below his shoulders. Little chunks of dust rubbing off on his fingers. "Where is the 'culprit' being held?"

"I'll tell you that when we're finished," Appraiser said. "Welcome to Mort Zugat. Follow me please."

---

Duram had Dingie covered in a heavy burlap robe. The kind worn by lepers and plague victims, so nobody would get suspicious. Not that anyone awake and about at that hour would notice. Or care.

Rowdy drunkards could be heard raising mugs inside the local pubs. Shouting and singing as unlicensed bards. The obnoxious singing, inaudible and consisting of idiot human lyrics not worth hearing anyway, carried to the cobblestone streets as a constant creak of the dull bastards trickled outside. It was their mission to bother people with their aimless wandering until ready to pass out in an alley.

"You'd never see Heylegruv like this," Duram said.

"Dingie knows," Dingie said. "Duram's village, Heylegruv. Duram's charge. Even the alcoholics hide from the shadows."

Shaanshi's scarlet light enhanced Duram's smile.

A rainbow of butterflies evaded depths of clinging gutter trash, swarming from out of place a few meters ahead of the pair. They were free of the garbage that never should have been allowed to bury them. It happened like an illusion or a dream. Dingie knew it was real because he never hallucinated anything so beautiful.

"Freyadt amuses himself at our expense." Duram's smile had faded. That happened sometimes.

A spot in the gutters cleared where the butterflies had come from. A simple wooden door emerged from the cobblestone there.

"Open it, Dingie."

"Yes, he's always opening doors," said Dingie. He put his hand on the knob.

The gutter faded. The alley behind the gutter faded. The chorus of the drunkards ended. The door was connected to a building.

A house that Duram recognized.

"A convenient amusement, anyway. Why is it I always forget how to get here?" Duram put his hand on Dingie's shoulder. "Open it now."

The dying dead-thing Dingie expended little effort. Not even a creaking sound, as open swung the door.

What disembodied head decorated yonder shelf? Whose maggot infested sockets decorated yonder head? And what was with the gelatinous blob wriggling around on its shaven scalp?

The visitors entered the necromancer's three-room castle house. The door shut itself discreetly behind them.

"Really, Geickar. The butterflies and now this." Duram's smile had returned unilluminated. He waved a casual hand, but turned away from the head.

Cold blue lips parted. A voice came from the bookshelf. "Butterflies..."

"The spell reveals the love you most fear or the fear you most love. I think your companion set it off. He is closest to both emotions."

"You don't know my fucking 'companion'. Why aren't you here in person, Freyadt? Scared I'd react violently to being exposed to fear and love?"

"Oh no," said the head. "You're more used to that than you think. Does it smell musty in here?"

Large nostrils flared.  
Out oozed a morbid kind of snot,  
a substance not unlike the blob substituting for hair.

"Why then?"

Dingie approached the dusty shelf. Duram wasn't watching the dusty shelf.

"I'm not like those other Weavers."

"Deary me, deary deary me," said Duram. "I knew that, honey. That's why I'm here. They finally ready to do something about it?"  
Wretch deserved whatever was coming to him.

"Ah yes. They've finally gotten bored with me and now I'm being hunted by magical assassins. Magical assassins! No, no, Duram. I meant that I'm eccentric. Hehehehe. I'm such a card..."

Dingie looked into the maggot sockets. His shriveled black tongue extended to warm the dry blue lips. Up went its moist tip, absorbing black slime and power.

"A gift from your ghosts," someone said. Dingie fell to his knees and he wept.

***Plop!*** The head disappeared.

"What have you done to the abomination?" Duram asked. He kicked Dingie. "What have you done, Geickar?"

A very small hand took a very firm grasp on Duram's shoulder. They were all very small, the hands of *them*. "Easy, Mr. Sturge. You needed my help. I've given it to you."

Duram retreated into his shadow. As fast as decision can translate, he was behind the arrogant buli. "What do you know of what I need?"

"Everything," Freyadt said, without turning around. "Leave your brother be. He'll recover shortly and then you'll leave my house."

Duram grabbed Freyadt's neck. So soft... White powder slipped through his fingers and his host was gone.

For lack of anything more interesting to look to, Duram stared up at the ceiling. "What do I trade in return for this 'help'?"



Duram thought he could hear a strikingly familiar silent laugh. In any event, he heard nothing more from Freyadt Geickar.

---

"What is it?" asked Keys the jailer. A coarse twig of a man, with a narrow head topped by bushy blue curls. He carried scars on naked shoulders and across his throat, scars that told the same tales as the heavy softness of his silent voice.

Keys had been sitting meditatively on a soft carpet of orange and yellow leaves. His beady eyes were rolled back under his lids. His burly chest was heaving slowly. Everything had been calm. Then his ears twitched.

He heard the slight squeaking of polished leather, pulled himself away from his prayers to investigate the source. The pants smelled freshly made, the man freshly bathed. And Keys recognized him as the newcomer.

Pit fought to keep his hair off his face, casting back his head and shaking. He held his hands inside those things called pockets. Pale red sandals softened heavy footfalls as he passed the jailer by, without answering.

"You can't open that door," said the jailer. "I asked you what you wanted."

The 'jail' was simply a small circular building made of sturdy wood. A sophisticated key lock held fast the building's only entrance when Pit tried the handle.

"I'm obviously here to see the prisoner," Pit said. "Put here because of me. Appraiser told me it would be all right."

"I'll forgive you for not answering right off, since you're still kind of a mute yet. I guess you can see her. She'll be let out tomorrow anyway. Here, take the key." And Keys handed it over.

Pit didn't entirely understand about being a mute, was happy to accept the cold, glittering object. He opened the door immediately, letting in the light and blinding the dirty fetal thing in the middle of the floor. Her initial expression was not a very grateful one.

"Sorry," Pit said.

"Ah, the gra." Words. Hard and gritty like jagged metal, cast out from deep within the throat. So delightful to hear, to hear! the words formed by those moist ivory lips.

"You sing well."

"Too well, apparently. Is that all you came to say?"

"Yes," Pit said. He turned around and tossed the key to Keys. It hit the jailer in the back of the head. "I think I have school now."

*Study hard*, she said,  
as Pit walked away from the open door.

---

"Dingie darling, where in the world are we going?"

Dingie had been walking without pause all night. Tracking the prize over a thousand-mile gap. Through plain and wood, and now across the southern Lassitus mountain range. So far, no interference. A lucky thing. Those mountains were crawling with scattered, barbaric human settlements.

"Far," Dingie replied.

"More specific."

"Far," Dingie replied.

Better crossing these mountains than the range in New Kevianquitte. The winds didn't cut here as they did up north. One of the reasons Morathu liked the north.

"We have to stop soon, Dingie. Unlike you dying things, I need sustenance. And you can't be expecting me to pop one of yours."

"People below, Duram. Shut up now. They're armed. Nervous about something." Dingie grabbed Duram by the shoulder and ran ahead to a sudden cliff. He pointed over the edge, then pulled back.

"Hand off, wretch!" Duram whipped his shoulder forward, taking with it a bit of Dingie's palm skin. He noticed the glimmer had returned to his would-be brother's eye. No more was said that night.

Duram, arms going stiffly down his sides, outstretched his hands. Small twigs, roots, patches of grass, and bits of dirt rose up from the ground to encase him. Nature's coffin surrounded him, and he rested. Let Dingie spend the day out in the open.

---

Mr. Know paced back and forth in front of his students. He dragged his feet a bit. His mood, it showed in the dusty clouds surrounding them. It showed in the way he had his fingers clenched around that big jagged rock, and in the way his veins were popping out of his neck.

"Okay children, please don't mess with me today. If you do, you know how I'll reply." He tossed the rock into the air. His hands clasped together behind his back. Would he catch the thing? Yeah, he caught it.

"You've noticed our new student by now," said Mr. Know. "You will treat the child with respect, even if he is a little slow at first."

"Child'?" Pit wanted to thrash the man. Was that stupid little rock really supposed to be intimidating?

***Woosh.***

"Ouch!"

"I'll nip more than your ear next time, Mr. Pit." The rock was sliding across the ground. Eventually, it hopped back up into Mr. Know's hand.

"If there is a next time, Mr. Know, you will be the one to suffer."

***Woosh. Crunch!***

Pit landed on his back, the rock stuck to his chest. He wondered how many ribs had broken. It didn't matter. There was a sudden rush inside, the rush that means more than anger. He quickly recovered his footing, and as he was dashing forward at the offender, the rage was all that was known to Mr. Know.

***Woosh. Crunch!***

*"Gagh!"*

Pit hadn't even seen the man lift the other rock. He didn't notice until it struck his upper ankle, collapsing his leg from under him. He fell, he stared at the nasty piece of bone sticking out.

"Yes, I'm the one suffering now. That hurt me much more than it hurt you, I swear."

Mr. Know was a master of sarcasm.

"Mrs. Tinker, take Mr. Pit to Mender after the lecture."

The plan was to let him bleed until then.

"Now then, the ego boost. You are all here because you are all very special. A potential has been detected. A potential to develop a gift, a gift I happen to specialize in. That the newcomer shares this potential, I find hard to believe. However..."

Far as Pit could tell, he too would one day master the art of rock throwing. A thing worthy of broken bones, no? Too important to interrupt, no? Just ask Mr. Know.

Tinker looked about five by uvang standards. More mature, maybe. She didn't look strong enough to do what she was doing. She was what, almost five feet tall? And she was carrying Pit to Mender.

Awkwardly but effectively.

Tinker gently laid her burden out before the trunk of a veteran tree. She turned around and merrily skipped back on off to class.

Pit experienced a strong sense of perplexity, which was shattered by the blunter and lesser confusion of a loud *thud* striking the ground some distance to the left. He was almost curious enough to turn his head and investigate.

He closed his eyes.

"Yuck. Mr. Know's spanking harder than ever, these days."

A voice.

More direct than sound.

More internal.

Personality came through.

The process was indeed quite personal.

Personal enough to seem like talk, if you aren't used to hearing talk. Pit had recently heard beautiful talk. He now knew the difference.

"Right then, let's take a look."

Fingers pushed through his hair. A palm pressed down on his forehead. A soothing warmth emanated from there, spreading down and further down... Everything went black.

When

Pit awoke, he was alone at the foot of the tree. He had fully recovered.

There was a man approaching from the foot of the mountain, leading ahead smelly goats. The black head of his gnarled pine staff arched over the wrinkles of his brown-baked arm. His mouth was buried beneath black curls. He was returning from a long, lax day in the sun.

The children would greet him soon. They would be out looking at the stars, and they would see his head dipping up over the edge of a hill. "Rashi's home! Rashi's home!" He smiled. Yes, I can almost hear them now...

What stench haunts the mountain tonight?

The goats were uneasy. It was difficult keeping them together, harder to keep them quiet. They knew before he did. And when Rashi saw, his heart went thumpthumpthump. An unnecessary beacon.

Rashi ran with the goats. They were his passion, they would protect him. When I am weak, carry me.

Rashi could not keep his footing amidst the furry riot. He was trampled by his passion. His was trembling and eating dirt. Oddly enough, he felt calmest just before the *twist* and *snap*.

"Why do I always imagine it would be cold?" Dingie was watching Duram accept the gift. Duram too busy, too enraptured to form a reply. Dingie wasn't really talking to Duram anyway.

"I have felt the warm gushings of open wounds. I have opened my share. When Morathu kissed me late one night, I felt rushing warmth. Why, then, do I always imagine it would be cold?" Dingie was feeling deep that night. Murder does that for some.

When Duram had finished, he said, "Thank you, my sweet."

Dingie said, "Oh my love is like a blue blue tulip." The rest of the night was silent journey.

Three weeks passed before Pit made any progress in his studies. He was expected to speak without speaking, to throw without touching. As an arrogant trouble-brewer, he was always visiting Mender. The kids, the really little kids, they made fun of him. It didn't matter anymore, he had just caught sight of *her*.

*Squeaksqueaksqueak*

he heard,

and when his eyes wandered to the source,

he saw the filthiest brown leather boots.

It seemed strange, that a Child of the Forest would have squeaky boots.

His eyes wandered up the ankles and found glorious green, almost white, skin. Long legs that tensed slightly with every step, to show the hard beneath the soft. His eyes kept ascending the trail to find loose black shorts that used to be pants, cut off mid thigh on the left and below the knee on the right, in tatters. In long seconds, he discovered the deceptively fragile-looking muscles of her naked stomach, the small dip beneath the short, pale tower-neck that supported her head, her small, angular chin, full unpainted lips - a source of sound, a small rectangular nose hair like magma teeth like pearls and eyes that...

He was walking towards her. His own sandals didn't squeak. He had to talk to her, he had waited so long and she was right there and damn it what could stop him? This was important more important than people more important than learning more important than everything before because this was his life, something in his life that might make life more like *life*.

A rock struck Pit in the back. Mr. Know doesn't know affection. Mr. Know knows the know all students need to know. Mr. Know knows what is important. When he talks, his students are to listen, not walk away.

Pit didn't think. He didn't have to he had been thinking but now he couldn't. He had been interrupted in the middle of a lesson more important than any taught in outdoor classrooms the lesson that teaches many things the lesson so fragile so fickle so hard so soft too intangible for structure smart bastards to understand unless forced to understand and only such-and-such can force the lesson...

Mr. Know was unconscious. A light trickle of blood streamed out from the place the rock had struck his head. Pit wouldn't be the one to carry him to Mender. Pit had something important to do. A woman to chase.

She found him before he found her. Who knows trees better than the people that live in them? It was so easy for her, turning and climbing, disappearing. Even with her squeaky boots, she managed to disappear.

Pit thought. Of what, he knew not even then. He thought confused and fanatical fanatically searching something near something to find something disappeared... He thought unclear, unreadable things. What mattered was not thought or know or understanding he understood he knew he just knew not what he knew he could not completely grasp didn't want to and... He could sense a presence, an object a thing a heart a goal a kind of prey that always defeats the predator and up there, in the trees.

His head turned too slowly. Surprise, surprise, she was falling. Did she giggle, just a little bit, when she landed crouching right in front of him?

"You behave, do who you should, it all comes rushing fourth."

Soft and serious, distinctly not uvang. She was never boring when she talked.

Pit was walking with her, into unsettled lands. They walked together a lot. That night was a special one. The moons were touching.

"You never told me your name," Pit said. He noticed a smooth without a soft, as she locked together their hands.

"Seehera," she said.

It did not surprise Pit to learn she lacked the simple, standard name-of-being. Why should it? Her purpose was to clash, and somehow *Clash* was not here an acceptable name. And then he wondered, asking, "Is Mort like you?"

She laughed. Short, sweet, mocking laughter. "No, Mort is just an arrogant leader. He thinks he *is* what he rules."

"He didn't seem arrogant, when he discovered me. Cold, maybe. You know he's the one that dragged me in to be appraised?"

"It doesn't surprise me." Smooth, near-monotone. Full. Filled with what? "We don't get many visitors. Was he wearing his royal headdress?"

"He was well dressed. Nothing on his head."

She nodded. "It doesn't matter. They don't really matter. If I could know there's something better, I would be chasing the something instead of living here."

"Life is comfortable here," Pit said.

"Comfort. What else is there?"

Pit stopped walking. Seehera stopped, too, because she was still holding her hand.

"You must know there is at least one thing for me here," he said.

She asked, "One is enough?" Before he could answer she pulled him down by the neck, and she kissed him. And for the first time, Pit could read thoughts. Sweet, erotic thoughts, transmitted via warm saliva.

## Chapter 7: the Chase

Dingie and Duram, hunting.

Finding for a mutual master, maybe

Following a scent only one of them cares to observe. And arriving at the dreaded northern edge of the

Forbidden Forest.

"A dead end," Duram said. "Damn your nose."

"Inside." A whisper, sure and calmly crazy.

Duram considered, crossing one ankle over the other and falling into one of the smaller surrounding trees. A bald spot in a dying pine. And he said, "Then we may report his death as surely as if we had the lovely stiff."

"He lives." The whisper didn't change, eye glimmer was there.

Duram dropped his head so that his angular chin touched the crease in his chest. Even so, looking down, he was looking at Dingie. "Shit, my sweet. We can't go any further."

Dingie's head shook once, violently. He went further, Duram followed. How could they act otherwise? Was not Morathu pulling all the strings?

"The Hyr live here," Duram said, as they were moving, as Dingie walked. Duram stiffened and glided forward, staying a few inches above the ground. He was afraid of what he might step on, there.

Dingie showed no concern. "A Hyr spirit protects us," he said. "We walk with *Op Iall*."

Duram was less sure of Dingie's sanity than usual, until he found himself surrounded by flies and locusts, unharmed. If this had not occurred directly after the uttering of the words *Op Iall*, it would have been attributed to the queerness of the forest.

The swarming was unpleasant, yet somehow safe-feeling. Nauseous, protective.

They wandered for what remained of the night. Duram wasn't sure what day would look like, under the thick leafy roof of the forest. He felt sure he would miss the sunrise and be struck by a single ray just clever enough to get through. His fears changed when Dingie grabbed his wrist and called soil.

They slept soundly, the both of them, within the same earthy womb.

---

Two people, one big one small. Brown-skinned, green-skinned. Both hard, in different ways. And they fit together.

Appraiser saw this when she watched them walk the Zugat paths. Together, always. She was hurt and displeased, and legally bound to a decision based on a lack of information. The analysts had read more than what was there, and even then hadn't read much. Regrettable.

The big one,  
 he had talent.  
 So much potency inside.  
 Enough to hurt Mr. Know.  
 Too much to waste, surely.  
 If only he would do something right,  
 or even something wrong.  
 Contribute to the good,  
 no problems.  
 Contribute to the bad,  
 Appraiser could make him contribute to the good.

Hurting Mr. Know was neutral. Mr. Know hurts. Those that hurt should sometimes hurt.

Appraiser would wait. Pit would slip. The child-without-a-name always did. They would trip over each other.

"Bring me the water."

He looked from her, his ice queen, his fire, to the bucket. The bucket lifted, water swishswashing as it flew forward. Into her hands, delicate fingers' firm grip. She drank, letting little drizzles down the round of her chin.

He grabs her by the tattered waste of what used to be a tunic. Cloth that suits her. She is lifted, the bucket falls. He lets it fall, drinking from a sweeter moisture. Tongues tangle through lips that burn. She lets the kiss linger before protesting, pushing off his naked shoulders.

He drops her. She finds the bucket, throws it at his head. His hard head shatters the fragile wood of the bucket. They laugh.

"We need more interesting surroundings," Seehera says.

"Sing to me," he says.

"I'm not supposed to sing," Seehera says.

"Sing to me," he says.



She sings low. His heart goes *thumpthumpthump...*

---

When a star disappeared and two dead things rose, they found themselves standing amidst a swarm. Duram decided it must have stayed there, waiting for them. He was more curious about Dingie.

Dingie began forward as always. He did not wait to answer the questions of a superior. He was getting so very close to the end of the line. And what would he find at the end of the line? Was he curious or did he already know or somehow was it both?

Dark things sometimes have bright eyes. Would they be scarier if their eyes too were dark?

Two short things, skinny sunkissed humans with spinning staves, approached from ahead. They had ponytails, baggy eyes, and spikes passing through their bottom lips. They knew the significance of the bug cloud, yet they were sure of themselves. Two of Baakii's wisest, most faithful.

Duram thought he might like to taste them. Dingie sensed this. He suggested that it wouldn't be a very good idea.

The two tribesmen spoke, simultaneously. Words, so many words. The cloud kept coming. The two tribesmen pointed forward the curved heads of their staves.

Dingie stepped through the cloud.

"Op Iall hss i! Op Iall hss i!" shouted the two men.

Dingie bowed before the pair. He said a few words Duram couldn't understand. His voice was pleading, humble. When he stopped talking, he sucked a maggot out from under his bottom lip and swallowed. There would be more baby flies to nourish soon.

Staves dropped. Each of the men, each with his right hand, grabbed one of Dingie's shoulders. They both said, "Op Iall i nkkt. Shffi, l'i n l'i, wa se. L'Baakii, et ha!"

Dingie looked up when he said, "L'Baakii, et ha!"

The two men released Dingie, retrieved their staves, and gave swift bows. No more of Baakii's Hyr priests would come between Dingie and his goal.

An old man of the Dark Green waited daily for death on his little bamboo chair in his withered, rubbery aekjal tree. His house in the tree was apart of the tree, with a deck of extending little branches that coiled around each other like serpents breeding. The old man himself would

seem also apart of the tree to any ignorant observers. An observation not far from the truth, for with flesh and life, soul and spirit, the old man had earned his home.

The aekjal tree was the giant centerpiece to the Waterute family village. A village, like all the villages surrounding Mort Zugat, with eyes. And on that day when Old Man Aekjal left his chair to step out into the light, and on that day when the young ones of Waterute began a drumming, and on that day when urgent songs were sung, all the Children of the Forest knew the eyes saw trouble.

Even Seehera was deeply concerned.

So Old Man Aekjal sadly parted ways with his trees to give one last gift to his god and his people. He walked with the aid of a cane that seemed to grow from the twisted fingers wrapped around its head. The leaves cleared a path before him.

### ***Dum Dumdumdrum Dumdum Dumdumdrum Dum Dumdumdrum Dumdum***

Aekjal's family played his song, the wind sang his song. A dark chant to suit the occasion, a respectful chant to suit the man. He wore well that forest song. When he entered Mort Zugat, an interruption cut through the rhythm. Rusty, grinding, almost painful to hear. Old Man Aekjal was the only one that smiled.

And the song was over. And there was Mort.

"Please forgive the terrible interruption," thought Mort.

"Please refrain from insulting my daughter," thought Aekjal, "and welcome me properly."

Mort could not hide the sudden sting of shame. He bowed low, clasping his hands behind his back as he did so. "May your roots never thirst, may your leaves never fall before their time."

"Summon council," thought Aekjal. "We have much to contemplate."

Mort concentrated, sent a little tug into the mind of every key official. Appraiser came with her analysts, Mr. Know came with his knowledge, and half a dozen others came as well. Most were already waiting nearby when they felt the tug.

Council began in a circle with a holding of hands. Aekjal's eyes closed. All other eyes closed after. A moving image, of an insect cloud surrounding tall figures, turned on inside Aekjal's head. The image flickered on throughout the minds of the circle. Unity was found.

*gra.*

*With a Hyr power? Must be Helvites.*

*Study the physiology of the whole one. Strikingly similar to that of our guest.*

*And Helvites never found favor with the Hyr spirits.*

*gra, then. How? So strong, these two.*

*Carrying death. Or is that just the spirit?*

*The spirit, too.  
 We send the Rootbreaker.  
 Too great a sacrifice. And it wouldn't work. They can fly.  
 Sacrifice. We give them what they seek.  
 We have to send something first. The rules cannot be broken.  
 No, they cannot. Wake the Ancestor.  
 Can we risk it?  
 We must. We are obligated.  
 "Then I wait."  
 "Yes, Aekjal. You may go back to waiting."*

Council and unity broke. Old Man Aekjal neither wanted nor received another song on his way home. He grimaced when he felt Mort send for the Ancestor. There was some relief in that the matter was no longer his concern.

He had been standing there watching her for hours. She had been pacing contemplating other things for longer. Little streams of sweat poured out the roots of her hair, wetting her brows and her pale green tower neck. Flesh lids covered her window-globes.

Pit wanted to do something.

When he had reached out to touch her, his hand was slapped away reflexively. When he attempted a connection, there was a wall of urgent solitude. So he stood there, watching with his piss eyes.

Window-globes were suddenly revealed. Her lips twisted and her chest heaved a single time as she made a gulping gasp. Pit could sense that she was going to fall. He was there to catch her.

Seehera stared up into the piss pools of her beloved.  
 Her fingertips, icy cold, dragged across the side of his jaw  
 then fell.  
 She whispered, "Let me rest."

Pit sent one of his so strong arms down under the knees of his lovely and he carried her. He walked into his sunken hut, laid her out across the center of his bed. She clumsily pulled the oily covers around herself and she closed her eyes. And he waited some more.

Hours passed. What did he care for hours past? He would wait. She would wake.

When she did, she sat immediately. She threw the covers to the floor. She seemed instantly energized. She said, "I saw your brother."

Pit said, "What?"

"Your brother Duram. Another I can't read is leading him here. Both smell like worm food."

Pit nodded, surprised, accepting. He sat down, with his back to her, at the foot of the bed. He said, "How?"

Seehera ran a hand through the lava.

"Dad gave me his power and experience.

We communicated for a while. Really not as bad as I used to think he was.

He's gone now, and I'm stronger than ever for it."

Her eyes were watery with repressed tears.

They always looked that way.

Pit said, "How do they know where I am? What do they want?"

"You know what they want," said Seehera. "They are your father's hands reaching out to strangle."

"How?"

"I don't know," she said. "Something to do with a necromancer from outside the Forest. I don't think Duram really knows. I looked pretty deeply."

Pit nodded. He asked, "Do they know if my mother is dead?"

Seehera nodded. "And they're expecting you to be older. It's that thing inside you that's kept you young.

*I feel it, she added, when we're together.*

"Not like them," he said.

"No, nothing like them. Something like what your mother had."

Seehera slid her little fingers between those big rough fingers of her beloved. She slid smoothly off the foot of the bed. "Let's walk."

They walked.

It was cold out that night. They leaned close to keep warm.

"What should I do?" Pit asked.

"Wait," Seehera said. "Something is being sent. Maybe we'll all be fine. Tragedy averted."

"Yeah. Look at the stars. Aren't they pretty tonight?"

"Pretty."

Somewhere isolated, men poke at barren soil with spears. They soften dried clumps, and they dig. *Digging...*

One of the men is too enthusiastic. Hurried, sloppy.

He is smacked, inside, and sent home.

His spear drops,

his head falls.

He walks home.

They are honored, these men, at having been chosen. Some of them are afraid. Those with some understanding of what is being dug up. The rest are too brave to be afraid.

They draw nearer to the treasure. One of them thinks he sees the soil move. He says so. Some of his companions laugh.

"Run."

Everyone looks at Mort. Everyone runs.

Everyone but Mort

There is a terrific yawning scream as dried pink lips break through the dirt. A Wrinkled, dehydrated dwarf rises more than stands, and faces Mort. *I get to smile again.* Eyes twinkle starlight.

Mort speaks, for the first time in his entire life. His words are formed of the ancient tongue, from when communication was said to be young. Young in the Forest, anyway. A tongue of gliding imprecision. He says, "Drink of me and be merry. I live."

Mort feels cold fingers around his neck, thumbs trailing his chin. He sucks dirt off a long tongue, a tongue that doesn't stop. Something coils around his heart. He experiences no more.

The Ancestor knows its mission.

*I will not fail. Green Mother help them put me back, after.*

Dingie looked to the dawning night sky. Then he looked to Duram. "Hide us. Under."

Duram would have liked to point out that Morathu's servile little pet should act a bit more servile. He knew where they were, less about where they were than Dingie did, so he obeyed. They were entombed as usual, then pulled six feet under.

The Ancestor was still smiling when he sat down nearby, leaned into a tree, and watched the pretty sun rising. No pesky bugs bothered to bother the Ancestor.

"What will happen?" asked Pit, from beneath oily covers.  
"I don't know," replied Seehera, from beneath oily covers.

Earth opened. Two fiends emerged, meeting their buzzing busy flying companions. Dingie looked to Duram. He pointed. "There."

Duram saw what he needed to see. He smelled sacrifice. He felt a faint, dying throbbing. His lips, his pretty reds, they twitched.

The Ancestor stood. He stepped forward. The veins of his neck went *pop pop pop*. His stomach heaved in and out, pulling skin along bones nearly exposed. No blood spilled from his fingertips when sharp things broke through.

Duram grinned at the dwarf. "I know you," he said.

Dingie backed away. Op Iall moved with Dingie. The wind blew.

Who moves first?

Duram's wicked grin was gone internal, as he circled. His hair became flat, slippery blacksnakes. His eyes did not fear the other's eyes, the starlight.

Ancestor did not turn as Duram circled. He did not, in fact, move at all.

Duram unleashed one of the snakes. It slithered down his back then fell to the ground. Fell another and another. They went squirming under leaves and pine needles. Soon they were circling too.

Ancestor stayed a statue.

Duram reached inside, searching for the pretty colors. He pushed them out, into his hands, into a swiveling triangle. He waited for a time behind the statue, though he knew not whether it mattered, to push forward the tip of the triangle. Out like a bolt shot the rainbow chain, pushing through flesh and bone. The illusion, and it became quite apparent that that was what it was, swished and swirled before fading. And that was when Ancestor struck.

Duram could feel sharp things inside his back, parting, pulling at his flesh, ripping his cape. As he dashed forward to get away, the cape parted from his neck to coil about bloodied hands. It would hold long enough to distract, to grant opportunity to the snakes.

Cool slender shadows crawled up Ancestor's feet. They entered through his skin without hurting, like razors. He closed his eyes, repressing the starlight, flooding his body with it. The snakes were burned before they opened too many more holes.

Duram turned. The invisible smile was still there. He noticed the flesh on his back felt scorched. A set of wounds already closing. He hissed to Ancestor, "I know you. You are small."

When Ancestor opened his eyes, his skin was faintly glowing. He let his tongue flicker out nearly three feet in front of him, then pulled it back. Soon he was a statue again.

Duram sniffed. He turned into a high kick. He recoiled his foot, gasped at the hot pain of a successful strike.

"I know you," he said once more, before falling into a shadow.

Ancestor looked up. There was Duram, the target, in the trees. He said to Duram, in an old tongue understood by both, "You cannot know me. Knowledge of me would burn you."

Duram was holding another triangle when he faded into the dark surface of the tree. Ancestor split from his image--too slowly, this time. The colors were inside, eating his bones, eating his teeth, exiting his lips. He fell.

Duram calmly kneeled before the body's head. "A sack," he said. He reached into the mouth and pulled out a very long, very black tongue. It burned his hand to do so.

Dingie was approaching, with his useless Op Iall.

Duram bit into the tongue and he drank, though it burned his insides to do so. "*Vedae et enfarnu*". Later, when he was finished, he fell. He lay sprawled out across the leaves and he said, "Sustenance, Dingie."

Dingie said, "I will bring you meat."

Duram said, "A person."

Dingie said, "Of course." Dingie left Op Iall, to guard.

Townsmen, son of Mort, played with his fingers. At least they were easily manipulated. They didn't expect much.

"What now?" asked someone, everyone. It didn't matter. He shrugged. His shoulders slumped.

"I have a suggestion," thought Appraiser. "I *had* a suggestion. It has not changed."

Townsmen nodded. "Send him."

"We'll have to send them both, sir."

"Send them both, then. Neither makes any difference."

"Wake up, Pit." She firmly grasped his shoulder. There was a vigorous shaking. His eyes opened.

"Argh... It's early." He closed his eyes and rolled over.

"You have to wake up." She sounded exhausted.

"AAAAAARRRRGGGH..." He rolled over and over, falling off the bed. Hands grasped the side, pulling occurred, and eventually he managed to stand. He rubbed the bags of his eyes.

"Good. Now we have to leave. They're coming to make us leave."

"Alright Seehera..." He walked slumpily to the door. Once he was outside he nearly tripped on the soil stairs.

Seehera followed with slightly more grace.

She remembered to be modest.

"What is it with you and nudity?" she asked. Pit walked back inside to get his clothes. He walked back outside in a papery brown pair of pants. His fingers fumble-knotted the waist cord.

"Look at the little green man," said Pit.

"I wonder why he's in such a hurry," said Seehera.

The little green man fell to his knees in front of them, clutching his side. He breathed heavy. Then he thought, "You're both banished from Mort Zugat and surrounding territory. You may leave with whatever supplies you request."

"We knew all this," said Seehera. "We won't be taking anything."

The little green man nodded. "You were to be formally addressed before your departure." He breathed heavy for a bit longer, then trotted off.

"Should we run?" asked Seehera. "Your brother is pretty powerful."

Pit gently shook his head. "What good would it do?"

Seehera massaged his shoulder with one hand. "Maybe we should leave with some weapons, then. I'm pretty good with a spear."

"What good would it do?"

"Some," she said.

So they were walking through the Forbidden Forest together. Approaching possible doom. Seehera held a spear in her hand. It had a wicked, jagged metal head and an iron butt. It was balanced for throwing but made for melee. Another just like it was strapped to her back. Pit carried a pebble, just so he would have something to play with.

That was the extent of their arsenal. The enemy doesn't have any weapons, they figured.

Maybe the wind was singing them a song. A subtle song. The breeze was too obscure to tell for sure.

They had a plan, kind of. Seehera had said, "I can get inside your brother's head." Pit had said, "I'll try to keep Dingie out of your way." Yeah, they were professional ass kickers. Yeah.

"How far?" Pit asked.

"Not far," Seehera said.

"I'm thirsty," Pit said.

"We'll drink later," Seehera said.

There was silence. Minutes, long minutes of silence. Dead leaves didn't crunch. Their fingers touched as they walked, they didn't hold hands.

Seehera spun her spear. Pit tossed his pebble.

Everyone said, "There they are."

Duram Slipped out of site. Dingie stepped back with his spirit, as expected. Seehera sent her mind wandering searching. Pit thought about rocks and hard things and motions winds forces beautifully lifting bashing.

Seehera shoved back, driving her spear through pale coldness' stomach. Rage and a moan became. Pain flickered across an old young face. Pain came from more than just the spear.

Duram fell, gasping, clutching the protruding rod, struggling against voices and pressures inside. He can win, he is old, he has faced voices and pressures before. Fight them with your own pushing, inner talking. Spike a connection. Send the attacker to her knees. And rip out that damned spear!



When rocks flew at Duram's head, he was not there. He was behind Pit, punching, kicking, kicking, hitting, stomping... eventually a rock did strike his head, he had to back off to allow for a stagger.

Seehera laid down, rolled, massaged her temples, muttered about dirty images, dirty images. Dingie pulled her aside. He calmed her. Then he scared her again, when he let his spirit feed, *yummyyummy!*

Agh, agh, what is this? On his back the world is spinning Pit feels a tugging an urgent inner calling he knows the call expected it he wants to he has to he responds he stands. Feels fading fear fading life! then sadness

*oh no not her not now damn fuck there's vengeance to be had* and he peaks.

Duram's elbow shoots toward Lupiero's chest almost hits doesn't hurt he catches the blow. He moves forward glowering with intuitive psychic aversion to his father a wild talent psychic coursing with the bloodline traits of his mother not running.

Here comes elbowi can see it know what to do fuck you morathu bastard you're too slow Ive got you can you taste me do you want me? Your time has come and passed time doesnt care and she was new bastard morathu bastard bones can break skulls can split you arent so strong anymore Im here gods bless me.

Want to smile as skin pulls eyes pop pretty kinetic explosions want to smile as those pretty merry always merry lips bloat and blow everything blows you made me sad because *you made me sad*. Now youre dust like you should already have been.

*Can I move mountains* walk on water slay dragons conquer kingdoms spit out volcanoes eat blackberries and try joy one day agai...

Dingie came from behind. A rock lodged itself into the back of Dingie's skull.

When Pit awoke, for he was allowed to awake, he found Dingie's pretty shining eyes. He blinked, and they were still there.

Pit's heart rate accelerated to nervous system capacity his adrenaline levels flooded utterly his mind he fought with spiritual passion.

Pit stole one of Duram's daggers from a black leather belt. His psyche leaked into his two opponents, monitoring their movements. He emanated his psychological aversion to his father as an allergen, an energy sapping identify fail inducing frequency, an inflicted retreat in Dingie.

Lupiero found his tao, he lost verbal thought to monitor the energy transfer of his body, of the soldiers he sliced into with dagger and knuckle.

Lupiero's mind touched base with the dagger as it were hovering without his intention's interaction.

Seehera telepathically transmitted paralysis into the opponents. Lupiero took long slices with his dagger, slightly turning the blade as he carved out flesh and organ.

His aggression induced his  
pride to surge, he hungered for  
the thrill in feeling small  
yet, last iota of life seeping from his opponents,  
overcoming.

The state of intoxication triggered imparted an afterglow of spiritual, sleepless elation.

Two villains fell to the blade of the wild talent psychic Pit, and Seehera, amoral friends yet to encounter the concept of ethical awareness. A protagonist role manifested for ferals with barbaric exposure to civilization.

Dingie's spirit entities retreated with the two souls of the fallen into uncharted escape, insect swarms scattering into randomized pattern

When the afterglow faded, Pit drifted through unfamiliar parts of the forest. It was the Forest to him no longer, for he could sense no presence, no magic. So he drifted and stared and fed on small animals.

He tried exploding animals could not and would not ever again. Thinking things were protected against such direct attacks. A rule, written somewhere beyond sight, never to be broken. The beyond's eyes did not wonder that it was broken once.

He ate berries. They tasted bitter.

A woman that was once something somewhere was nowhere. Another sulked pathetically about a master in Bylveria.

Pit pondered Seehera.

Pit didn't think about the thing inside him, the draining thing he had unlocked, the chaos from whence he could pay in sleep to draw. Diminished in potency by the control, too chaotic not to be diminished, yet strong, healing, and vast. The stuff of strange blessings and twisted games from beyond. He didn't think about *that*.

Soon he found apathy. By this subtle curse, he thought thoughtlessly that he would explore the northern reaches of the forest. It was where he was headed anyway, his psychic intuition reaching for a challenge.

There were berries and apples and squirrels with red stripes. Squirrels tasted best. Pit's hand grabbed a squirrel.

Fire flared at the clicking of stones. Stones that clicked without prompting. Fire consumed old pine needles and small twigs. Fire reached for the live squirrel dangling down. Fire flared.

He held it there for a while. He decided he wanted his meat well done. When he was ready, he lazily chewed. Meat clung to bones. Meat got sucked off bones.

Later, Pit picked with a stick hair from between his teeth.

He enjoyed the taste of cooked meat, raw meat reminded him his father raped and killed his mother, excited him and induced subliminal nausea.

He'd been wandering. Since she died, he'd been wandering. Everything was lilies and azaleas, before. Now he was wandering again. He really had stopped, for her.

Pit took to sparring once a day with Seehera,

the two of them were empathically attuned

Lupiero achieved heights of ecstasy he could not obtain from intercourse from long drawn out magical exchange of improvisation.

**Chapter 8: the Hyr Spirits**

There was a fellow with a tiny twisting cane to match twisted blackened teeth. A foggy-minded man named Mog. Naked gray body standing still over a hill, Mog watched Pit. Pit was sleeping.

Soon, Pit rolled. Later, eyes opened. Mog called down from atop the hill, like a raven caw.

Pit rolled and rolled and shook his head. He planted his palms in the ground and pushed. He pulled his knees to his stomach. A wave rippled through his calf muscles, and he was standing. He shook insignificantly at the dirt in his waist-length black hair. He held his hand in his palms, pushed back on his cheeks, smudged dirt across his face. Then he turned to face the hill and Mog.

"Hey!" shouted Mog the stranger.

Pit blinkblinked.

Not in surprise, some dust particles were irritating his eyes. They started to get watery. He took a step toward the little hill.

"I am Mog,"

said Mog.

"You are very big."

Pit shook his head.

"No, you're just really small."

Pit stretched out his jaw drawing air into his lungs.

Mog crouched down on the top of the hill. He said, "How would you like to live with people? Barca Bear smiles on you."

Pit shrugged. His shoulders slumped. He followed Mog.

"We're really misunderstood by most outsiders, us Hyr," said Mog as they were walking. "You heard anything about us where you came from? They tell you about us in Mort Zugat?"

Pit paused. Old Mog walked ahead a few steps, then paused too. He looked back. He said, "What is it?"

Pit said, "How do you know so much about me?"

Mog said, "Is that all? I shall explain things while we walk."

Pit and Mog went on. They came to a village of people, little humans. Some were gray, others a sort of brown, still others tanned orangish like Pit. Mog was saying, "Have you ever listened to the wind? It has an awful lot to say, I haven't quite the ear for it. I listen to spirits. Living spirits, mind you, not ghosts. We get lots of ghosts, again, I haven't the ear to talk to the likes of them. I can talk to the living spirits however, even though there are far fewer of them, and they talk to-"

"What is this village?" Pit asked, watching a lady plucking water from a stream with a clay pot. His eyes quickly moved on to other things--like the sunken huts. Remarkably similar, they were, to the one he had lived in in Mort Zugat.

"Oh, things are neither organized nor tight enough for you to rightly call anything having to do with the Hyr a village. For one thing, some of us move, and for another, those of us settled enough to stay in one place for a very long time usually don't live very close to each other. I suppose this area is sort of a cluster, that's only on account of the water. Maybe there are enough

around here to be called a village. Usually we don't name such things... we have *territory*. This is Barca territory you're standing in right now."

Pit said, "I heard half of what you said."

Mog said, "Listen to half, you'll be half prepared for anything you'll have to face. As I was saying about the spirits, I can talk to the living spirits. Most of the living spirits, these newer ones I mean, they can talk to the dead."

Pit reached out to touch a large rectangular tent. It felt velvety. He jerked his finger back when a silhouette confronted him and shouted incoherently.

"Rude of you to make a nuisance of yourself, being invited so easily into a community," said Mog. "We trust you Pit, to a point. We've heard about you, as we've said, so we trust you. Don't betray that trust by going off and making a fool of yourself."

"Sorry," said Pit. He was a little shocked by the solemn tone suddenly adapted by the old man's voice. This shock was quickly relieved when Mog twisted his fat lips into a heartwarming smile.

"Apology accepted," said Mog.

They walked on. They came to another cubic tent, larger than the first. Mog walked inside. The tent was empty. Mog looked back at Pit. Mog beckoned. Pit walked inside.

The tent was situated on a thick fur tarp. An itchy blanket lain over another itchy blanket served as a bed. Mog sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed, facing Pit. Pit admired the wooden symbol dangling, oscillating back and forth, from the roof of the tent. It was a bear claw of twigs surrounded by a circle of twigs.

"Barca's symbol," said Mog. "Do you accept this tent?"

Pit looked down at Mog. He considered. He nodded.

A smell ascended a hill. The smell had recently braved a forest of many oddities. The smell had afterwards forged across mountains. Now Dingie was headed for Bylveria.

He probably wouldn't make it to Taerv, the nearest Bylverian city. More than likely, he would collapse before he ever even reached the little settlements surrounding Taerv. Maybe he wouldn't even get close.

Fly larvae ate away at Dingie's deadness. They hatched, more and more of them, inside him. They dined, the cute little white babes, and they sprouted wings. Inside him. A rainbow of molds feasted on his surface. The things that had gotten to his eyes... There was nothing left of the eyes.

Yes, he wouldn't last much longer. He wouldn't last at all. Now, he is collapsing now. Falling, a stinking sack with bones and functionless, shriveling organs. Hanging lips appear to be smiling. The sudden fleeing cloud of insects looks something like a fleeing spirit.

Dingie was flickering, gone. A poor servant. Duram, too, had flickered out. A poor son... A son. The new bride, she was not compatible. She was neither a Meriandril nor a Beetree nor a Shandrelee. She was a Voitrish, pretty but ultimately useless. That night, Morathu would dance the last dance with her.

Thank Bromcaash for Shiarin. Daddy's little girl, always.

Lupiero was out there somewhere. He was growing old and weak. Naturally. Morathu knew nothing of location, except that it was within that vast thing called Forbidden Forest. Morathu would not go there.

Shiarin had sent one of her more trusted vassals to secure Duram's Heylegruv estate. Small enough, that village, to be handled for a while by one of Shiarin's vassals. But when opportunists amongst the other families caught wind of the territory's importance, steps would need to be taken.

Morathu would visit his daughter in Giagre City, in a night or two.

Pit was learning to hunt as the tribe of Barca hunt. He learned through observation. It was permitted that he observed.

Communication was difficult. The old man had spoken his language. None of the others knew it. It would take some time to learn the language of the Hyr from scratch. There was body language to learn, custom, boundary, then actual spoken word. Learning boundary was hardest. Taboos... Tribes like that of Barca have so many. So Pit interacted not at all, at first.

Then he saw a hunting party. He followed. He watched. Nobody objected. He saw everything. Later, he watched another hunt, then another. It was important he learned to hunt as his neighbors hunted.

They were swift,  
these people. Groups of men and women would gather and run  
against the wind. The wind, when cooperative, muffled what little noise the stealthy assemblies  
made. Upon sighting an animal large enough to  
make a worthwhile catch, two of them would slow down a bit, the rest of the party would break  
off. The animal, whether immobile or fleeing, soon found  
itself  
within  
a

tightening circle. Soon, the animal would catch a spear and go thud against the ground.

Pit couldn't learn to hunt like that. Not alone. And he was, with the Hyr, alone.

When a day without a name arrived, a day that carried change of an ambiguous sort, a change that is felt within, people gathered up their tents and left the foaming crystal waters of the river. Pit felt the shift. He followed the people.

The people found a place, a rare and dewy grassy clearing. Some settled. Others moved on. Pit moved on.

There was no conscious order to the move. People split off in different directions. It was a scattering. The only restriction on the scattering was that there were places the Barca Hyr would not and could not go. Pit knew without asking where borders began.

When he was raising his tent in the new place, he wondered what had happened to Mog. He had liked Mog. The one time they had spoken, he had liked Mog. At the time, he hadn't thought it possible that he would like anyone.

The new place was like a lesser version of the old place. There was a stream instead of a river, a stream with a peppery rocky bottom. Fewer tents were raised. There weren't any sunken huts.

It was home.

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There was a bench of bleached wood, a bench that touched the peeling gray wall behind. Morathu sat upon this bench and leaned into this wall. He sank into the wall, felt a vibration surging through its clay-like surface, and let his muscles relax like jelly. He waited in the waiting room.

Morathu's appearance had been observed and acted upon instantly by a manservant prettily decorated in greens and yellows and blues. The parrot rushed off to his mistress and said, "Shiarin, your father is here!"

Shiarin jiggled her white fingertips. The parrot returned to his post.

Morathu waited several minutes in the waiting room. He was a guest, at the mercy of his host. It was his duty to show a little patience. Not so difficult, after all, in the waiting room.

Heavy iron heaved open, cool air slipped into the waiting room. A woman white with leather and lipstick and fingernail polish slipped in after. Her pale blue eyes studied the watery yellow gaze of her father. She smiled and sat upon Daddy's lap, hugging his narrow neck with creasing gloved arms.

"I've missed my dove ever so much," Morathu said. He let his hands grasp tightly the edge of the bench. He matched his daughter's smile.

"Why have you neglected me all these years?" asked Shiarin. "Surely, you can't have been all busy all the time."

"Has it been that long? Forgive me, pet. Time slips through your fingers like sand when you get to be my age."

Shiarin nodded. She nestled her bald head beneath her father's chin and said, "Poor, poor Morathu."

"No father of Shiarin could ever be poor. Troubled, in need of assistance."

Shiarin said, "Ask and yea shall receive, Father."

Morathu said, "I wish for a stake in Heylegruv. I know your people can take care of it. Dove, they're people, after all."

"Oh Daddy..." Shiarin's body was sucked into crossed shadows on the floor. It emerged, slender arms crossed behind slender neck, slender ankle crossed across slender ankle, in the middle of the floor. Chest beneath leather lazily heaving. Black brows twittering, then closing. "Father."

"You will give me the territory, Shiarin. Why shouldn't you? I have given you a city. And who gave Duram his little village? No, dove, you will not deny me. You will grant my request and we will pass the remainder of the night in your chambers, in celebration."

Shiarin's cheeks could have blushed, when she smiled.

"Okay." BJ.

Logs crackled for the heat and light they gave. So many logs. Necessary, for they were giving to many. The circle had gathered that night to dance and play the chok chok sticks and tell true tales. An old man was there, throwing dust on the fire, making shapes in the smoke.

Pit watched from a distance. He was not with the circle. He did not have the understanding to join the circle. It would have been disrespectful to join the circle without understanding.

A dragon flew high to escape the fire, then broke apart in a gust, becoming again smoke. Next came a bird, then a bat. All the shapes dissolved once they reached a certain height.

The dancing of the dancers elevated to inebriated jubilation, with shouts and a slapping of chests and a clasping of shoulders and a circular waving of heads. Eyes rolled, mouths hung wide. Sweat poured.

The wrinkled, gray-skinned summoner of smoke ejaculated a series of noises, angry and proud. He lashed his hand out above the fire, letting fall more dust than any time previous. The bat flew, and the bird, and the dragon. They circled high above the fire. Circled!

Dancers were more than inebriated, and their number was growing. Only the old man with the dust stood still. He called out a few more words, the only one of which Pit could understand being "Barca!"

A bear, an enormous, fat bear with razor teeth and sweeping claws, rose from the smoke. The sweeping claws swept away the others, then the mouth of razor teeth opened wide. A roar lashed out at ears from nowhere and everywhere.

The dancers settled. The circle went back to telling tales, as true but less epic than that of the bear.

Pit walked to his tent and hid himself beneath blankets. It would take years for him to understand. How many years did he have? He thought, *How old am I?* He dreamed feeling young.

When he awoke, he walked to the stream. He kneeled down before his reflection and stared. He rubbed his fingers through the leathery skin of his face. There were wrinkles, they didn't appear to be from age.

Longevity was a terribly rare concept for the uvang. The race grew at such an accelerated and unstable rate... The gra not nearly as fast as the breg and the dogair, the extinct Giant Ones so favored by the illustrations in his boyhood picture books. It wasn't unusual for a gra to die of old age at 45.

From what Pit could remember of his boyhood lessons, lessons he hadn't thought about since boyhood, the longest-lived uvang recorded by gra history had been that great leader and general, Barkanddgi Shodt, founder of the nation Graav and eventually New Kevianquitte. The second oldest individual had been the inheritor of Shodt's throne, Havgd Mardoc. There were other noted similarities between the two, they weren't supposed to have been related.

How had their longevity been accomplished? There were rumors. There had been rumors. What had the rumors been? The most popular involved some kind of minor scandal, suggesting that Shodt had beget an illegitimate son.

Why was Shodt so long-lived?

No matter.

Pit lived in the Forbidden Forest.

That was explanation enough.

That night, Pit again dreamed feeling young.

His dream was of the bear,

a red astral form almost two dimensional,

of feeling tempted by the bear with the prospect of invasion.



He wandered regions of vegetation layered with strange and pungent airborne drugs,  
trees animated by souls disembodied from want other than natural development and  
love of the forest,

he desired to defeat the bear  
he wanted to punch the nose peeking thru his tent flap  
growling, demanding

confrontation.

When he stood within his tent, he felt vibrant like when he fought Duram  
or sparred with Seehera,  
possessed by creative aggression,  
his mind noticed the dimensions of the dream space  
intuited the stuff of astral areas and  
how to manifest weapons and armor,  
leather pants entombed his legs below his waist,  
the dagger he saw slicing into duram's flesh when he killed his first gra warrior  
grafted itself upon his association of his hand,  
his fist took on the shape of the

stuff of the

bear.

He ran toward the red spirit,  
growling internally, sympathetic to the emotion  
cast upon him  
by the bear.

One slice into his chest, the bear claw expanding in length narrow and flat like paper, razor sharp  
on the edges,

his mind interrogated the bear's  
too instinctive to be sentient, only anger and the will to conquer  
as a robot or amoeba, the bear advanced-retreated one pointedly from his tactical mission  
Pit's speed accelerated to that of the bear  
moving as he directed,

his own hand shape shifted into the stuff of the bear,  
his body took on similar dimensions, red and the size of the bear,  
he matched the speed of the bear. He could do that  
by being spontaneous,

he thought past the bear and he began to learn how to intuit the moves of the animal  
to understand the soul addressing him causally,  
to catalogue moves, to respond more fluidly than

one pointed instinct, the fastest kind because pseudo-sentient

allows.

When the bear could not win,  
the bear surrendered.

He felt more fulfilled than when he killed Duram  
and the revenant.

He awoke intoxicated, guarded by the bear. The spirit fed on his own soul,  
his aggression and warrior pride,

and defended his spiritual addiction to fighting,  
not asking permission, pseudo-sentient.  
Neither experiencing pleasure nor pain.

Pit confronted Seehera with what he had learned, mentioned he felt intoxicated by  
a magnified portion of war, he needed power. He sparred with her to test his capacity as a  
psychic soldier, his heart outracing his  
swelling pride and permanently peaked adrenaline,  
his instant peak top speed found heart rate.  
His heart was regular, not psychedelic. The ki his bloodline carried, his mother's line, was a  
chaotic mana  
existing only in myth and fantasy. Authentic magic, his bloodline was enchanted to understand  
how to defy physical law.

Pit and Seehera exchanged telepathic and telekinetic aptitude,  
Pit accelerated Seehera to teach him the lessons she'd yet to share,  
on mind control  
and throwing rocks at soldiers.

## **Chapter 9: The Era of Addiction, close to conclusion**

395 Years Old,

Pit was satiating his alcoholism at the Harpy Tavern, thriving on beverages enchanted to  
exaggerate classic symptoms of depression and stimulation. He was addicted only to alcohol sold  
by places with names like  
the Harpy Tavern.

Drunks chattered cheerfully on topics covering adventures in Southern demonic territories,  
impressive sexual conquests, and long boat trips ending in plank. The bar hummed a familiar  
chaos of argument and alliance.

There was a  
dead black cat  
rotting  
under the front of the bar,  
bugs and diseases  
had gathered as a green dust cloud  
hovering about the kitty's stinking corpse.

Pit found the Harpy Tavern scrying universes for worthy warrior magi. He did not scry for moral  
or immoral traits, only talent.

Particles of wood from the barroom floor replenished the age of his body,  
his heart beat every instant of his life its fastest possible rate,  
oxygenated blood extracted from vibration.

Less than a week ago, Pit had murdered a virtuous female barbarian at the Heavy Centaur's Inn and Bar. He was addicted to bar room brawling, his blood and their blood shed. More than anything, to winning in spite of the risk. If he could not in the known universe find a challenge, he had beheaded the woman for lacking actual power, to feel in control and fulfilled from a weak military exchange.

The women at the bar were usually easy, Pit drank and hustled a prospective lay for whenever he retired into his room. His mind was on chakra and magical alphabet, and the intellectual realm wherein Tantra and War intermingle, he was focused upon the vibration and disposition of attending female shape shifters, disinterested in non magical intercourse.

8' 3" tall, Pit's mother was a wild talent peasant, his father a tyrannical noble. Both were gra, a race of giants human in appearance. Pit charmed skirts as a dark skinned Caucasian, leathery skin, athletic.

One a day bar room brawling was a long phase for a character with a dark history covering prior days and an interlude sample charting his psychological disposition as a serial killer from addiction to war, one fight.

Her dress upon the bar, legs crossed, a wench won, Pit moved on to that one fight scene:

A warrior magi was minding his own business, Pit's temper flared playfully at the thought of peace and politic. Pit's imagination was analoging thru maps of the universes he had studied to fill his aura with an emanated ki as vast as all visited territory. His straight black hair dangled invitingly across his black leather back, his aggression inflating his pride proportional to approximal risks like that his black strands might be plucked.

A warrior magi was minding his own business, Pit poked him in the chest and said, "I do this every day, I wander into barrooms filled with mystics and supernaturals

and martial artists,  
 and I poke them in the chest like I'm poking you right now,  
 and I tell them I'm a hard ass and I want a bar room brawl,  
 and if they are weak fighters  
 I snuff them out before they had time to marry and settle down."

The warrior magi, named Savanteli, said,  
 "I don't consent,  
 I'm not really drunk,  
 not very angry, and I exceptionally value mercy."

Pit cast into the mind of Savanteli the image of a  
 red bull  
 huffing and puffing,  
 to sign he wasn't going anywhere,  
 saying, "I'm an animal that signifies a  
 mean jerk,  
 and this fight is on."

Thorn as a slang term came to mean  
 within barbarian circles, a warrior  
 with an invisible amount of fear, restlessness  
 and too much aggression not to bully.  
 "He had a thorn stuck in his foot,  
 in those days,  
 Before he invented a religion of addiction  
 to dying in battle."

Pit threw a dagger from his black leather belt  
 at Savanteli's ornate silk cloak's left arm,  
 a fraction of Pit's retention telekinetically guiding the blade to turn toward Savanteli's side as  
 empty silk touched steel.

Savanteli moved like an electric current,  
 dancing, visualizing sigils of banishing,  
 yellow and blue circles bleeding out into the floorboards surrounding him,  
 a sphere of black energy following the enlarging circles to engulf Savanteli  
 and cast the dagger away from his form.

Pit channeled a black lightning ki thru his black leather armor,  
 a bolt of entropy inducing energy lashing out at Savanteli,  
 Pit's mind was racing weeks into the future,  
 he was fighting as driven by his spiritual addiction,  
 barely any love,  
 boundless pride and adrenaline,

his simple heart provided him spontaneous perfection,  
 realms of retention,  
 and the ability to scry past all blows his aptitude's exact most effective available  
 strategy.

The black bolt was the retention of subtle matter deconstruction,  
 if it hit Savanteli and was not rechanneled, what was struck disintegrated.

Savanteli rearranged his body and clothing  
 so that currents of ki absorbed his form into a time sense,  
 currents of energy leeching away at percentages of Pit's aura extending for yards away from his  
 body,  
 Savanteli's mind reformed from electricity at chosen intervals as temporarily disintegrated  
 vibration,  
 lifeless then living again,  
 his mind could move between moments of particle exchange.

Pit's dagger returned to his belt,  
 his entropy ki evaporated into an expanding yellow energy of sensing heat,  
 burning thru barroom tables and chairs  
 tables and chairs become sawdust then nothingness.

Savanteli escaped the establishment  
 and began gathering a wild manna several miles above ground.

Pit felt fulfilled high above a rocky soil transitioning thru complex route memorized martial  
 spells,  
 exchanging blows with a rarified adept in a kind of  
 heaven of heaving chest muscles  
 lunges and growls.

Savanteli invaded Pit's flying magical attacks with a flurry of light daggers,  
 the blades transitioning into a least dense form until they touched matter, and  
 manifest as a razor sharp steel.

Pit captured the energy of the dagger attack in his aura,  
 stealing the vibration of the daggers -  
 Pit launched a minefield of enchanted space time,  
 percentages of his retention allotted to memorized complicated magical reactions,  
 such as explosions,  
 creature summons, and energy leeches,  
 and telepathically injected identification of fear.

Savanteli focused on magnifying his present moment time sense  
 to evade enclosure tacticals.  
 Savanteli teleported evasively the instant before impacting a given mind.

Pit saw a kill blow opening  
 in layering space he anticipated Savanteli would teleport to with  
 an energy trap,  
 He also noticed Savanteli was a skillful opponent,  
 and gained spiritual energy from dragging the fight out  
 eventually releasing Savanteli  
 to murder some other time.

## **Chapter 10, the era addicted begun.**

In one scene of the Viking Eddas,  
 Thor brags drunkenly at Loki  
 about he,  
 if seems villainy,  
 may be  
 called  
 the Hunger's slayer:

*Thor spake:*

61. "Unmanly one, cease, | or the mighty hammer,  
 Mjollnir, shall close thy mouth;  
 My right hand shall smite thee | with Hrungrnir's slayer,  
 Till all thy bones are broken."

- the Poetic Edda,

Lokasenna.

In the scene, Loki is accused for being a sinner,  
 and accuses Thor of an addiction as bad as being hungry himself as  
 Thor esoterically brags upon slaying the hungry.  
 This text  
 presents an archetypal Thor cast as a barbaric villain  
 from his addiction to war.

For four hundred years,  
 before barbarian honor

When Lupiero left the dream of the bear,  
 he spent all his time sparring and  
 devouring any esoteric tomb,  
 any scientific psychic text,  
 and an ageless elixir  
 for power - and conquering  
 aimlessly, for  
                   victory's desire.