

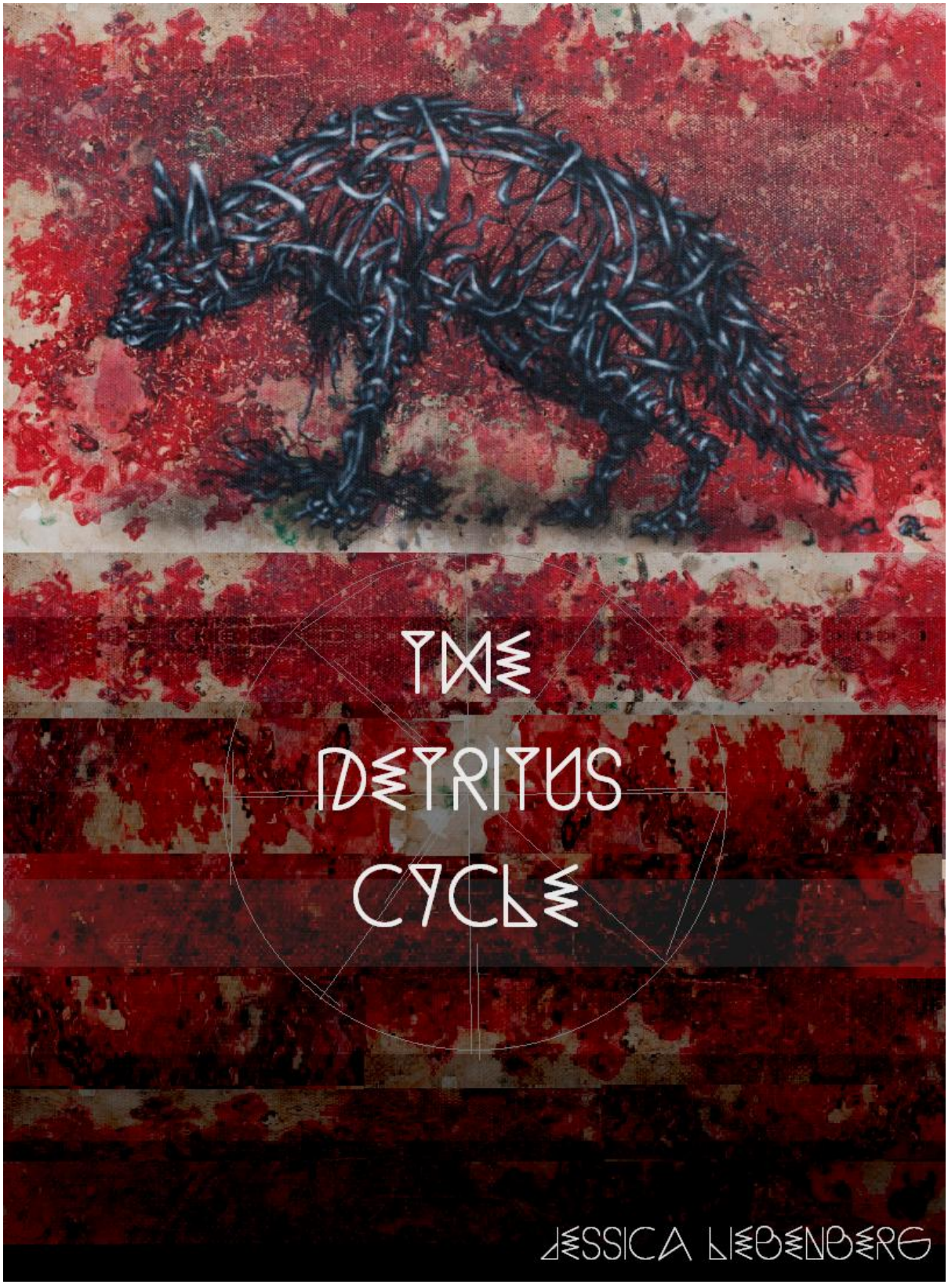
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The detritus cycle

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THE
DETRITUS
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THE DETRITUS CYCLE

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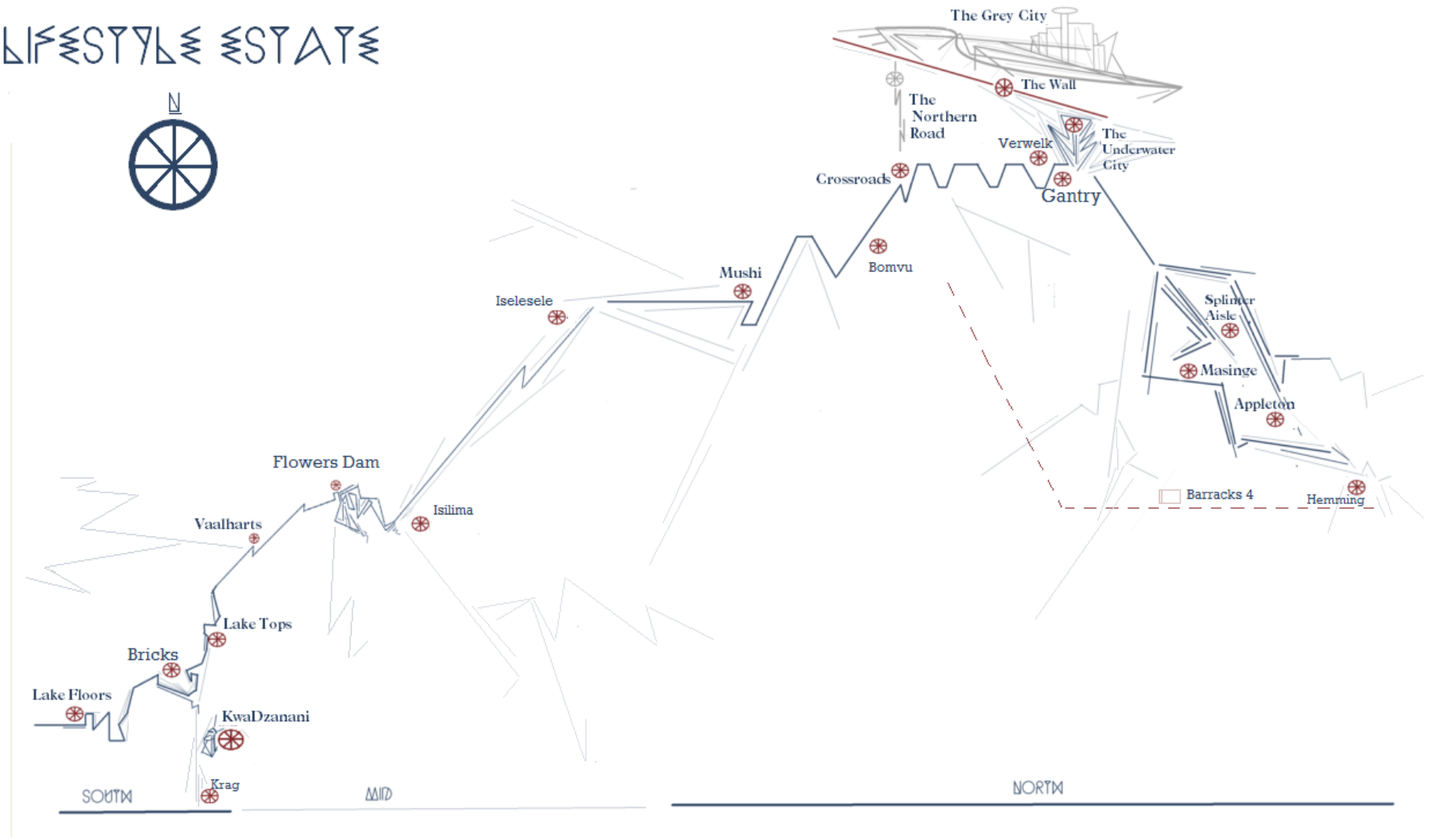
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UKUGONDUKO

LIFESTYLE ESTATE



Lessons for the Abandonment of the False Myths of Progress and Reason

Regain awe and wonder. Abolish indifference. Feel loss.

The world is not a binary system. Few things are comprised of 1 and 0, 0 and 1. There are more than beings and non-beings, Earthers and animals, male and female, questions and answers.

All Earthers are equal, but an Earther is only one of many species of animal. We are not their keepers.

Earthers, animals and the land must unlearn their destruction. This requires patience.

History is only for those who keep it. They shall be our Keepers, and they will protect us from the myth of progress. The Keepers shall be trained to be just and impartial, conscious of our history and fair to the people they preside over. They will report to an elected Council. The council will report to the Trust, who have the well-being of all the people of Ku as their highest concern.

Life will amply supply, so long as no person takes more than required. This is not balance. Equilibrium is a lie. We strive in no single direction.

Luck and superstition are irrational fears evoked by the sound of one's own footfalls.

Repetition, inequality, contradiction, unevenness and disjunction are natural. Everything is flawed.

The answers are from within, not from without. Those who seek answers from without seek danger. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

There shall be no religion: not of science, nature, nor of gods. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

To each person their skill, but their craft will sustain all. Trade shall not surpass self-sustenance.

Ku will not progress. Ku will understand. Understanding is not coherence. Understanding is the inward illumination of one aspect of the world. Never can all the aspects of the world be understood at once, because the world is not a coherent whole. Relieving oneself of this desire leads to freedom. Stories, people, and answers which give the false appearance of coherence are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety. Nothing is complete, there is no end goal.

Stories are to be shared. Stories are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

Nature will not attempt to preserve us. Ku is life.

Glossary

Confirmation: A rite of passage for girls and women, after which they may be allowed to bear children. Being 'Confirmed' means being allowed to seek out a heterosexual romantic partner.

Council: Each village keeps a Council, an elected group of eight to twelve individuals who can serve a term no longer than ten sets. The Council manages the affairs of the village.

Craft(s): A taught, specialised skill. Every Earther undergoes an apprenticeship so as to be Admitted to the Craft and then practise, for example, as a Hunter. After sufficient experience, an Earther may 'master' a Craft, and thus be allowed to teach it. Some Crafts include: Healers, Builders, Potters, Shadowsmiths (metal workers), Tailors, Music-Tellers and more.

Earthers: Inhabitants of Ku.

First Ancestors: The founding members of Ku. People moved into Ku from the Out.

Grey City, the.: The former Johannesburg

Keeper: An assigned lawwoman or man who presides over matters too complex for a Council. Each village is assigned a Keeper, who is in direct contact with the Trust.

Keeper's mantra: 'The Truth is kept by all of us'

Ku: The community of Ku spans from the former Vaal dam to the former Kimberley (now KwaDzanani), in a band around the Orange and Vaal rivers.

Lessons, the: *The Lessons for the Abandonment of the False Myth of Progress and Reason.* A set of lessons to be aspired to by all Earthers, these can be found in every village Centre under the heading 'All ye who live here'.

Metals: Small metal discs distributed by the Trust, forged in KwaDzanani. The currency of Ku.

Northern Road, the.: A road beginning at the town Crossroads, which leads into the Grey City through the Wall. The phrase 'Take the Northern Road' is an insult, meaning 'Leave and go and die'.

Old Speak: Any language used before Ku, especially for writing.

Others: People from before the time of Ku, some of whom are still believed to live beyond its borders.

Out: The land outside of Ku.

Post: A series of huts used for communication between villages, hosting stables and riders. Fallen into disuse.

Šalang: The mark of šalang is in the shape of a wheel with eight spokes. It is tattooed onto Earthers to indicate citizenship in Ku, and all villages are designed following this pattern. Also: šalang refers to things forbidden by the Trust and the *Lessons*.

Salutation for animals: A blessing recited before eating: "I thank you Friend (Earth – for non-meats) for your life. It is not ours to take, but ours to give back. It is not ours to waste, but ours to complete the cycle. We will have only what we need, and we will want for nothing."

Sash of Oaths: A sash of words tattooed over the torso of a Keeper.

Set: A time measurement of four complete seasons (approximately a year).

Shadows: Dark, inexplicable forces and items from the time before Ku. A 'Shadow' may refer to an idea or a physical object.

Teller: A storyteller. This trade works closely with the Trust to distribute its wisdom in all the villages of Ku, particularly to quell insubordination.

Trust, the.: An undefined group of individuals who preside with supreme authority over all matters of Ku. They are located in KwaDzanani, in the Library.

Underwater City: After the collapse of the Vaal damn, many nearby areas were flooded. This is the most famous of these areas.

Wall, the.: The Wall separates Ku from the Grey City and the Out.

White Out: A period over midday when, during the warm seasons, the heat is so intense it is dangerous to be outside working. Thus there is a First Rising – with the sun; and a Second Rising – after White Out.

Regain awe and wonder. Abolish indifference. Feel loss.
- *Lessons for the Abandonment of the False Myths of Progress and Reason*

Chapter One

South Ku, Lake Floors.

The world is not a binary system. Few things are comprised of 1 and 0, 0 and 1. There are more than beings and non-beings, Earthers and animals, male and female, questions and answers.

Genevieve chose her place on the floor carefully. First she made sure that her mother, Akra, could not see her. Then she shuffled as far forward as she dared over the dusty holes in the reed mats. She came to a stop just short of the fifth row of girls. Here she could avoid being bored to death by the needling tones of Porsche, the woman running the ceremony, who reminded Genevieve of a poached egg.

Porsche's vapid features wobbled as she spoke glibly on the topics of duty, fertility and population control.

The ceremony was contrived to Confirm a girl by the name of Bovril, who sat cross-legged in the front row. As such, there were only women in the Centre tonight. Bovril's stiff hemp shirt revealed nothing but her own paranoia: she was far too early in her pregnancy for it to show. For all her stupidity, falling pregnant when she was not yet Confirmed, she had done the right thing now. Or rather, her mother – who had noticed her lack of bleeding – had made her do the right thing now. Her child would be legitimate.

In the centre of the large hut was a fire, its smoke sucked up through a hole in the pinnacle of the thatch roof. Next to the fire was a thin metal rod with a handle, to be heated until glowing and then pressed above the eyebrow of Bovril.

The first brand was the Confirmation: you were allowed to bear a child. The second was awarded to the mother and father after their child reached the age of šalang, belonging. 'Your child survived to five sets, congratulations for not killing it yet!' translated Genevieve. The third dot was for a second child – the absolute limit.

A lonely black dot was burnt above Porsche's right eyebrow. None of the girls on the floor had dots, all of the women on the benches did. If you considered it, the first dot was really the 'Fuck me' dot. You could now put a cock wherever you liked. Genevieve looked for someone she could share her joke with, but all of them seemed fixated on Porsche.

A thin sheen of sweat gathered under Porsche's chins, which she petted delicately with a rag. Genevieve pulled a face in disgust and then checked her mother had not seen her reaction. By leaning back, Genevieve could see Akra attentively contemplating Porsche – far too intently for the topic at hand. Above Akra's cocked eyebrow were two black dots, now arched, a quiver waiting to be loosed. She may have been looking at Porsche, but she was aiming at Genevieve.

Genevieve sat upright, shifting once more out of view, and tried to pay attention.

"Every Earther understands the capacity of Inyoka, our great river," expounded Porsche, gnawing through Genevieve's patience. "It is from the river that all life comes. If we stray too far, we will die. But if we crowd too close, we will strangle the river, and not only will we die, but we will cause all others to die too. This is the lesson the Others have never learnt. Respect is safety. Ku is life."

"Goose love," responded Genevieve with mock sincerity. The mispronunciation of the response 'Ku is Life' made the little girl next to her squint suspiciously at Genevieve, who pretended not to notice.

When she looked away again Genevieve squinted back. The girl was small and scraggly and

smelled faintly of goats. Her šalang was dark but messy. The circle and eight radius lines had bumps, more likely from jerking and movement by the girl than by any fault of the Tattooist. The mark of šalang was tattooed on the wrists of all those who survived above five sets, it was the way the villages were laid out, it was above the *Lessons*, at present made unreadable on the wall by the flickering light of the fire.

Genevieve's was neat, the circle round and the lines straight. For a time she had attributed it to her capacity for dealing with pain. It was only a few seasons ago that she realised her mother – with her immense Healer's knowledge on plants and their beneficial attributes – had doped her before the ceremony.

The Poached Egg continued.

"It is a blessing to be able to conceive. Our markings remind us of this." Porsche pointed with a pudgy finger past her temple to the lonely dot above her eyebrow. "The first blessing is the most important of all. It is the mark of motherhood. Not motherhood of any one child, but of all the children of Ku. It is a sign that one has accepted the responsibilities of being an Earther. To be Confirmed is to take no more than required. And in this way we unlearn our destruction. Ku is life."

"Good stuff," repeated Genevieve, more boldly than the last recitation.

Next to her, the girl jerked and gaped at her. Genevieve glanced down and at first could not conceal a grin. The girl began snickering, pressing her hands over her mouth to keep the laughter from escaping.

Porsche's eyes flitted to them and Genevieve immediately resumed her attentive facade, shooting a reproachful look at the giggling girl.

"To take responsibility for one's pleasure has always been humankind's greatest struggle. Throughout the ages, Others have believed that pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, should be supressed. For this reason they restricted who may love and in what way. Great cruelty was enacted in the name of such laws against pleasure. In Ku, we have no laws against pleasure. There is no perversion where there is consent. We establish those who can and cannot give consent, but there are no absolute laws – everything is flawed. So we see that acts between those of the same gender are preferred; as in passion, judgement is forsaken and mistakes happen…"

The room quieted unnaturally. Genevieve had the sense they were finally coming to the point of the ceremony. Porsche's waffling was drawing to a close.

"And so there are many things to consider *before* pleasure. But this is not a restriction of pleasure. Rather, we Earthers exalt in the pleasure of practical responsibility. Nature will not preserve us; Ku, and its people, must preserve themselves. Ku is life."

"Poon spice," Genevieve muttered.

It was too much for the little girl next to her, who keeled forward, her body shaking with laughter. In an instant her mother had swooped in and was dragging her from the Centre by her arm. The girl screeched with surprise. They stopped just outside the entrance to the Centre and a sharp finger was waggled in the girl's face.

Genevieve could not help but turn and look to her own mother, who looked back with narrow-eyed disapproval, shaking her head ever so slightly. Genevieve shook her head too, gritting her teeth and turning back to the ceremony. She would get trouble for it later.

Bovril, the pregnant girl, was summoned to the fire. She was a few sets younger than Genevieve – who would be fifteen in Spring – but a bit taller. Certainly taller than the Poached-Egg Porsche, at whose feet she now kneeled nervously and looked up. Porsche removed the hot metal rod from the fire and cupped Bovril's chin with her other hand. Genevieve didn't hear the words that passed

between them, but she sensed that Bovril, with a hot iron to her face, was being bestowed with the good sense to confess who the father was.

She must have come clean, because Porsche's smile oozed like wet egg around her lips, and she pressed the iron lightly to Bovril's face, leaving a beautifully round dot, a bit of smoke and a yelp.

There was ululating and cheering, and in a moment everyone was on their feet. Someone in the crowd started a song and everyone else joined in, singing and clapping:

> The climber clambers up the tree, up up away!
> The climber stretches out a finger, close close away!
> The climber tumbles head and heel, branch is there to catch her,
> She didn't think her first love would be so large in stature!

The youngest ones didn't know half the words, but even then they knew the sounds and sang along as the verse repeated.

The men had taken their cue to enter the Centre and joined in the celebrations. One of the first through the door was Chrome, Akra's partner, with their son – Genevieve's half brother – Chromeski on his hip.

It would be some time before Chromeski turned five and received his own name, as well as the mark of šalang.

Only at that point would Akra receive her third dot, and Chrome his second. He was not Genevieve's father. Genevieve's father lived a few villages away.

Soon all of Lake Floors would be inside the hut. Genevieve hurried back through the kitchens and out into the open, hoping to avoid her mother for as long as possible.

The moon was waxing, and it would be a week or so until it was full. It was cold enough outside that she missed her hunting hood, but not so cold that she would turn around to retrieve it from their sleeping hut. Instead she picked her way down one of the many sandy paths to the river, which was running higher than it had been that morning: perhaps there had been rain in the mountains. She sat on the lip of the scooped out hollow through which Inyoka ran; trying to block out the sounds of the village behind her.

People made such strange noises. Their laughter sounded like birds, obnoxiously loud against the quiet of the night. She always felt there were too many people in the village. Not according to the Body Corporate – by the last count there were a hundred and twelve Earthers in Lake Floors, forty below the limit.

It was horrible to be stuck in the village with her mother – she preferred being out on a hunt. When she was home, Akra watched her every move. Genevieve couldn't go piss without Akra chiding her for sneaking off alone.

Down in the hollow of the river, a noise drew her attention. It had tinkered around on the periphery of her awareness, slowly becoming an annoyance.

There was something scraping along the stones.

She chose the route down the bank that would bring her to a shallow part of the river. She hopped down, skidding along until the dirt abruptly became mud and then she bent over, feeling for the metal sound that she could not see. The stones poked at her feet, finding the soft places between her toes. Her shin met the object and she felt for its corners. It was square. Only Earthers made square things. Perhaps someone had built their house too close to the river and it had swept their things away?

But perhaps – Genevieve's throat constricted with excitement – perhaps it was from the Out, not made by Earthers at all. Genevieve lifted the box with difficulty. There were no clear handles and she dropped it on its corner on the wet stones. Readjusting her grip she managed to heave it onto the bank.

She climbed up and rubbed her cold toes, and then felt for the corners of the box. It was sealed, heavy, but not waterlogged. This was not the kind of thing an Earther would waste metal on. It must be from the Out, or from the Old World. She was shivering with cold and excitement.

It could be dragged back to the village, but that would be conspicuous. If the Keeper found her with such an object she would be banished to the Out – never mind what her mother would do.

Along its edges she felt what might be a latch or some other kind of mechanism. It would not open. The metal surface was covered with scratches, but there was also a pattern etched more deeply into the top. It felt like it could be Old Speak, but it was too dark to be sure. Even if there were enough light, she didn't know if she would be able to read it.

Her grandmother had taught her to read Old Speak. It had been a long time since she had anything but the *Lessons* to practise with, engraved as they were into the walls of the Centre.

She gave the latch another useless tug.

No one would be in the village now, they would all be in the Centre, she reasoned. It was fast approaching dinner time: she could hide it somewhere close to home and inspect it again in the morning.

Genevieve's fingers sunk into the sandy bank as she lifted the box from below, struggling back up the pathway to the village.

The village of Lake Floors was laid out in the traditional manner: eight broad spokes which all led directly to the Centre hut. She could walk around the outer rim, but the box was heavy, so she skirted past the Centre and up the path which led to her hut near the periphery of the village.

She was nearly there when a lanky figure appeared ahead. She hurried off to the side and dropped the box as casually as possible.

"Hello?" he called and Genevieve sighed inwardly.

"Hendrik, it's me –"

"Genevieve? What are you doing?" His long strides brought him in front of her almost immediately. Hendrik was of an age with her. He was also tall, lanky and dumb.

There was mud from the riverbed all down her front so there was little use lying.

"I found something in the river." She indicated the wet box at her side.

Hendrik's face shone with vacuous curiosity.

"What are *you* doing?" Genevieve asked before he could ask another question. Without allowing him to process what was happening – he could only consider one problem at a time – she picked up the box and continued walking with it up the spoke.

"I was busy trying to bring the chickens in for the night and I heard this jackal – I'm pretty sure it was a jackal. Maybe it was something bigger though. It had those shiny eyes – do jackal's eyes shine? You're being apprenticed as a Hunter like your father, aren't you? So anyway, I was just closing the pen –"

Genevieve had long stopped listening. She put the box down, it was exhausting carrying it. She stood with her hands on her hips and made appropriate noises at his story. Hendrik carried on, oblivious.

"Jackals can be dangerous you know. I have a friend whose brother was eaten by a pack of jackals on the other side of Lake Floors."

She frowned. There was no curing some people's stupidity, but she couldn't help herself.

"I doubt that," she interrupted, picking up the box once more.

Hendrik eventually caught on and took the box from her, carrying it with much greater ease than she had done. He followed her mindlessly past her hut and into a thick clump of veld beyond it.

"No, really. He's an honest guy," Hendrik continued as Genevieve guided him toward a tree with thick grass beneath it. She covered the box with old branches and grass. "Cross the lake and hope to die. His brother was still young then –"

Hendrik stopped abruptly as Genevieve began to walk back to the Centre, satisfied that her box was well hidden.

"Genevieve, what's in the box?" he asked, as if aware for the first time of what they had just done.

"I don't know. I can't open it – not in the dark. I will have to see it in the light."

"Won't someone take it? –" he looked at her and then back to the box "– it sounds šalang."

"That's exactly what I'm worried about."

"That it's šalang?"

"That someone will take it before I can look inside."

"But… it would be safer for them to do it. You know, with… Shadows and all that," he ended lamely.

"That's food for flies."

"It's not. I know someone in KwaDz who-"

"You always know someone that something happened to. Let's go get some food."

"But Genevieve–" he began.

"It's not 'Jen-evieve' like 'jersey'. It's 'Gen-evieve' like… 'je t'aime'."

"What's that – Jet-am?'"

"It means something, in an Old-speak." Genevieve had forgotten. She had forgotten most of her grandmother's lessons about the other Old Speaks.

"Okay, Jjjjenevieve." He practised it all the way down to the Centre. It was annoying, but she didn't stop him.

In the Centre most of the Earthers had already taken food. Only the children remained in the queue, and Genevieve marched toward it, pointedly ignoring Hendrik who joined in behind her. At the end of one of the nearby tables sat Chrome with Chromeski on his knee.

Akra was not around, and Chrome was taking advantage of this. He slipped her brother a small metal object. Genevieve couldn't see what it was, but they both seemed to delight in it. Chrome was always unearthing trinkets – he worked as a Builder, and often discovered Old World artefacts in the mud. He had even built a lopsided piece of metal into the side of their hut, much to her mother's horror. He used to give these trinkets to Genevieve when he was still courting Akra.

Hendrik tapped her on the shoulder and Genevieve jumped.

"Aren't you scared of Shadows?"

"There are no such things as Shadows," she hissed. "That's just something to tell kids to keep them away from Old World stuff." She tried to sound certain, like her grandmother did when she said such things, but it came out less convincing than she had hoped.

There were stories – not even just those told by Tellers – of children touching items from ruins,

falling ill, and dying the next day. Of invisible things in the air that you couldn't even smell, which strangled you in broad daylight. Of oily shimmers on still-standing water that slimed up your throat and rusted you from the inside out.

"But it's in the *Lessons* –"

Hendrik didn't finish his point. They had arrived at the front of the line and Genevieve looked up to the server. Her mother.

"Genevieve," Akra began coldly.

Genevieve groaned at her own forgetfulness: she was supposed to be helping in the Centre tonight.

"Mom, I –"

"Where have you been?"

"I was just –"

But it was useless. Akra's eyes moved down Genevieve's filthy clothes, where the dirty wet box had been pressed against her shirt. Then, to Genevieve's horror, Akra's eyes moved to Hendrik's front, covered in the same earthy decorations.

Without another word Akra dropped the serving ladle and grabbed Genevieve's wrist. Pincered in her mother's grip, she was dragged out of the kitchen door – the same she had used to escape earlier.

The moment they were out of the door Akra rounded on her. Genevieve tried to pry her wrist away.

"What in the name of –" the struggle briefly interrupted the sermon "– Mud do you think you're doing? You just saw, just saw! – what happens to girls who fuck around before they're Confirmed. Were you fucking that boy Genevieve?"

"Mom I wasn't –"

"Don't lie to me!"

"I wasn't fucking him, jesus –" Her mother's slap stung like a hornet, but it burnt the deep hot of embarrassment.

"Don't you dare –" Akra shot coldly while Genevieve rubbed her cheek with her recently freed wrist, "– let your grandmother's unEartherly dribble come from your lips. It will rot you from the inside out." Akra stepped backward, appraising her daughter from the top to the bottom. "I've had enough. You need to go spend time with your father. I cannot bear to have you here any longer."

"Good," Genevieve retorted before turning away into the dark and marching away from the Centre.

She held in her crying until she was alone on her sleeping mat.

Chapter Two

North Ku, Appleton

"What is red in front and black behind?" Through a wrinkled face the old man's eyes shone, as if two polished beads had fallen into mud. He pronounced each word so that all in the Centre could hear.

"Fire" he growled, licking his lips. "Fire brought us into this time, and we leave behind us darkness."

All the faces turned to him, the tails of conversation whipped away.

Behind them, Neko leaned back against the table, pushing away the last of his food.

"I remember…" the old man paused, his eyes closed. Every word was as sharp as a stone cracking against the side of a cliff. "I remember when I was young. It was a terrible time." He shook his head and his voice died out. The pause dragged, and he lifted one eyelid. His audience had not yet been taken in.

He looked old enough to be a First Ancestor, but there were only a handful of those left. He was a Teller, of that Neko had little doubt. And for that same reason he doubted every word uttered by the old man.

Being a Teller was one of the official Crafts, but like being a Guard or a Keeper, it was a Craft in service of the Body Corporate, not the villages.

"We had already left the Others, but we knew of their misdeeds. They brought it upon themselves! Each person more selfish than the next. Each one dragged by his appetite like a bull by the nose. They still live out there, in the same way!" A deeper hush swept around the fire. The Out was dead, such talk was šalang, forbidden.

"The Others…they would defile nature. They would shit in their own houses and eat flesh from the time they rose in the morning, to when they sunk in the night. And in their slumbers, in their slumbers…" There was a pause here, an uncertain one. As if he had forgotten his next line. Perhaps it could be mistaken for awed revulsion by the other villagers, but Neko wasn't taken in. The old man's eyes flickered from one side to another.

"Allow me to tell you a story, friends. An ancient story."

"Go on," somebody called out. Neko searched the Centre but couldn't see who had said it. He did see a dark woman, sitting on the floor. Her hair was tightly plaited against her head and she traced shapes in the dust with a finger. She leaned an elbow on her thick thigh, her legs crossed underneath her. There was a single dot above her eyebrow, even though she was at least ten sets older than the lowest age when one could be Confirmed. Then again, Neko, with his single dot, was at least ten sets older still than her. He had seen his thirtieth set a few Springs ago.

"I could tell you of my life before," continued the Teller. "I could tell you many terrible things. But I will instead tell you an older story. A daydream, if you like. The story of two brothers, two great leaders. One kind and fair and just, the other corrupted by power. There are a thousand names to tell this same story – Remus and Romulus, Glooskap and Malsumis, Hunter and Gatherer, Earther and Other. A story we must preserve, for our sake. To understand. To respect. Respect is safety."

The gathering murmured "Ku is life." Neko didn't bother.

To Neko, the names sounded made up, the story too practised.

"They were born to the same mother, brothers by blood. But such was the evil of jealousy in

that time that an Other came and stole them away, cast them out – to be eaten by creatures of the forest."

"What forest?" came the thin voice of a child. The Teller ignored it.

"But something wonderful happened instead. The animals were kind in those days, and wanted only peace with humans. So they took the children in. They were fed the milk of the Painted Wolf, warmed by the mane of the Lion. Velvet Monkey would laugh and bring them fruit. In time, the Painted Wolf showed them how to defend against the Shadows and Lion taught them how to roar. Monkey climbed up the trees and pelted them with fruits until they too learnt to take aim. It was like this until one day the brothers came to their mother Wolf and father Lion; summoned their uncle Monkey.

'We must kill the Shadows,' they said to mother Wolf. 'We must lead the people with our strong voice,' they said to father Lion. 'We must take aim and use our cunning,' they said to uncle Monkey."

The story was too simple, as familiar as the path to your mother's home. And yet it was at the same time comforting. The tale was closing in on all sides of him and the world became a quieter place, with only this one story.

"Mother Wolf was distraught. 'Whyeee?' she howled. Father Lion snarled and turned his back. Only uncle Monkey remained calm. 'Brothers, I can see you are set in this decision,' he said, shaking his head. 'I can only tell you not to forget that you too are animals.' The brothers were shocked, 'Never,' they cried and grasped their uncle tight –letting his tail wind around them one last time."

The old man paused and cleared his throat a few times, as if losing his voice. The child that had called out earlier scampered over, lowering a gourd of beer in front of the old man.

Neko had strained forward with the others to hear the story. He leaned back again, trying to muster a look of indifference while the man wiped froth from his lips.

"So the brothers left the forest. They went to what was there before. To the Grey City." Neko folded his arms in front of him to guard against the chill. It was forbidden to leave or enter Ku, but to go to the Grey City was nearly unthinkable. Even those who travelled the river dared not venture further than the Acid Desert.

"In ancient times the Grey City was a place of fire, and the people believed they could live off fire. They set fires in their homes and closed their doors, while ash fell on the world all around them. But fire has an endless appetite, and soon all they had left to burn was ash.

"When the brothers arrived it was a place of ash. The ash fell on everything, and everything fell into ash. Branches became too heavy for their trees and fell to the ground, where they were pounded by feet and turned into ash, which would be swept up by the wind and fall on the trees again. In all this greyness you could not see a Shadow. This is because a Shadow's true colour is grey. It is not black, as some Earthers would have you believe."

Neko hadn't heard talk of Shadows since he was a child. Some Earthers believed Shadows were evil spirits that lived in objects and ideas from the Old World. He didn't remember believing it, even as a child. The Teller continued:

"So the brothers entered the Grey City. They fought, swinging their fists against Shadows that were now roads, now people, now an idea. He re they stayed for a long time. But you cannot feel a flake of ash fall on you. Feel now! – come closer to the fire… do you feel the ash falling?" A small boy stretched out a thin arm and then after a pause of a few seconds, vigorously shook his head.

"Ash is so light you will only feel its weight once it has already buried you. And so the brothers fought on. One day Other Brother, in his wild fight, struck his brother across the mouth. Good Brother saw this harm and called to him, saying 'Brother, fight no more. Speak only in soft tones. Let us return to our mother and father and uncle. We have not learnt enough. We will kill ourselves here.'

"But Other Brother paid no heed to these words and Good Brother heard him crashing away into the distance. Good Brother left, and he could see colour returning to the world. He could see the shapes of trees and rocks and ground and rivers, but most importantly he could see the Shadows. They were pouring out from the Grey City, killing and raping and tearing at the flesh of the earth; the animals.

"He knew then that a Shadow cannot be killed, for it is only an idea. A veil over all things, a thin layer of ash.

"When he arrived home he was shocked to see Other Brother, shaking and tearing – biting at the flesh of his mother Painted Wolf, the tail of his uncle Monkey in hand. His eyes were empty, smoke poured out from his face and ash fell in wet lumps from his mouth. With his father's roar Good Brother leapt forward and killed his own brother then, snapping his neck.

"He kneeled next to his mother Painted Wolf and heard her whimper again, 'Why?' He began to explain, but his words came as ash, falling into her eyes. She turned away from him. He could feel her pain and so he caressed her neck and closed his hand around her throat. He cried afterwards, lying next to the bodies. Father Lion came back and saw Good Brother and the broken animals all around him.

"Good Brother tried to explain but all that came from his lungs was ash. His father roared and Good Brother ran to the fields, knowing that he could never again find comfort in his father's mane. He was without the place where coarse fur soothed tears and turned them to courage. A Shadow followed him then, to remind him always of his past. And so like the fire, we people too are red in front and black behind."

There was a silence and then the crackle of applause. It was a well told story, but thinly veiled.

Ku is life, respect is safety, and Others are bad – all those things told in the *Lessons*.

Tellers were worse than Guards or Keepers: Guards enforced the law and Keepers proclaimed it, but Tellers made it legitimate in the minds of Earthers. Tellers were the reason any villager would call you out for misdeeds. They made you believe in Ku, believe in the Body Corporate, believe in good and evil.

On the way to this village there had been speak of Earthers being banished from here, of dissent. The Teller must have been sent to counteract this.

The chatter in the Centre had begun again, and a small girl was ushered past Neko, asking why animals had shadows. Her father shushed her and Neko didn't hear the response.

Through the crowd Neko saw the woman again, soft marks in the sand around her. He walked to her.

Chapter Three

Outer Ku, the wall.

Despite being jostled and pushed for a place at the window, Little Jimmy could make out the receding cart turning up dust behind it on the road. One of the bigger children stepped in his way and he gave up fighting for space, bolting down the stairs instead. It was 200 metres to Tower 462, and by the time he reached the top the cart was lost in the bushes. The dust it had upturned hung around as uncertainly as he did, waiting for what would inevitably follow.

None of the other children thought to come to this tower, so it was in impatient silence that he waited.

It was more than ten minutes later when the pulse came. He had been playing with his gun just then, and it made him jump.

Everyone described it the same way: it sounded like when you thumped your chest, and felt that way too: as if your insides had been jolted – even at this distance. It wasn't loud but it was unmistakable.

Shortly after that pulse there seemed to be a second, fainter one. It came from far North of the first. Little Jimmy looked out again but then shrugged it off – it must have been an echo off some unseen ridge.

The dial on his gun was set to a non-lethal setting. He toyed with it, turning it up to maximum and then down again, to the low range. The cell was nearly fully charged but he rested it on the sunny ledge anyway, the scuffed black honey-comb surface absorbing the heat and light.

He didn't know if his gun worked.

Every Vigil received the same training, and part of that training was being hit by a low range pulse. Little Jimmy still had the red burn mark in the centre of his chest. The bruises had long faded, and he hadn't broken anything. The lesson was learnt: guns were dangerous, and at least a few of them still worked, mostly those belonging to the Officers.

There were hurried steps behind him, and a moment later Lazy Toby appeared.

"Little Jimmy. What are you doing?"

Little Jimmy shrugged. "Just watching."

"It's not entertainment."

"I know," Little Jimmy conceded, looking down at his bare feet.

Lazy Toby sighed and then came and leaned on the window, putting his gun on the sill too. The charger was flashing a deep red colour, nearly empty. Toby could get in trouble for that.

"Don't worry, that's what I'm here for too. Have they done it yet?"

"Yes."

Both boys watched for the tell-tale dust rising through the bushes. Lazy Toby was sixteen sets; taller but also stockier than Little Jimmy. Little Jimmy was only eleven sets this Summer.

He tried to lean with as much nonchalance as Toby against the window, but he felt awkward, like his limbs were misplaced.

"Lazy Toby, why do the Earthers banish people?"

Lazy Toby cleared his throat, squinting against the light of the midday sun.

"Earthers have very strict rules and they don't like it when people break them. We work with the Body Corporate to remove these people."

"To kill them?"

"To remove them, it's better to say it like that."

They stood in silence for some time. Little Jimmy gave up watching the bush and watched Lazy Toby instead. They both had their mother's dark skin and wide eyes, as did the rest of their siblings – it didn't seem to matter how pale and narrow-eyed the father was.

Toby's face looked squashed and angry whenever he wasn't smiling. Little Jimmy wondered if his face looked like that too.

"Isn't it our duty to protect Ku from Others?"

"It is."

"But I've never seen any Others. I've only seen Earthers, being banished."

Lazy Toby grinned and suppressed a laugh, but it faded suddenly. Dust was rising in the veld. Lazy Toby turned and looked Little Jimmy up and down.

"Don't ask too many questions. Earthers don't like questions; the Body Corporate doesn't like questions. When the man from the Trust arrives, don't ask any questions at all. Just do what you are told to do."

Lazy Toby retrieved his gun, placing the leather sash around his shoulder so that it sat at his right hip. Little Jimmy heard his quick descent down the wooden stairs.

He watched the cart, less one person, return along the road toward the gate. The two Vigil who occupied it gave no sign that anything untoward had happened. There was nothing more to see.

Little Jimmy made his way down the stairs and to the dusty yard behind the kitchens. The smell of compost and chicken shit disappeared as his nose became clogged by dust. The late morning sun burned the skin on his neck a shade darker as he sat tying a grid of wooden sticks together for the chicken coop.

The chickens crooned casually as they pecked the ground around him, one going so far as to hop on top of a nearby panting dog in an attempt to find edibles.

The kids at the barracks always watched Banishments, he didn't know why. The same process occurred every time: an Earther would be taken out, tied and blindfolded. They would listen for the pulse and the cart would return without the Earther. There was nothing to see: just dust on the road and the far off sound. But they watched.

The sun on his back was suddenly eclipsed, and Little Jimmy was surprised he had not heard her arrive. Old Lady had done little but shuffle for many years now, and she had shuffled right over to him.

"Have you seen Little Timoté?" she asked without introduction.

"No ma'am," Little Jimmy replied automatically.

Old Lady stood above him, her hand shielding her eyes as she scanned the yard. Underneath her wrist was the mark of šalang: she had been an Earther, once. But not any more. Now she was part of the Vigil.

Little Jimmy was the biggest Little. After him came Kara, and his three younger brothers: Timoté, Timon and then Zed. Then their father, Little, had died, so after Zed there were no more Littles. 'Little' was not his father's real name. Old Lady had come up it. He didn't know why, because his father wasn't particularly little. He wasn't even especially big, but Old Lady gave all her partners names: Straight, Lazy, Little.

When he was eight sets, he had asked Old Lady why she called his father 'Little'. His older

brothers had dared him to do it. A smile came across her face, sour enough to split the skin off a lemon.

"Why do you think?" she asked.

"Toby say it's because his di-" There was no illumination after that because Lazy Toby had hit him over the head with a wooden spoon. Old Lady had shuffled away, smiling with lemony teeth.

Now those teeth were tucked far away behind her lips.

"Little Timoté, where aaaare you?" she sang, in the same way a sharp knife does. Her shadow passed. The sun reappeared and kissed him on the cheek. Little Jimmy turned in time to see Little Timoté break from behind the house.

Little Jimmy just managed to see Little Timoté's berry-stained hands and the scratches all around his mouth before the boy disappeared.

"Little brat!" Old Lady called, and shuffled in the direction he had fled.

Little Jimmy finished up his task, picking up loose pieces of twine and returning them to the bundle his older sister Straight Brienne had given him. Brienne was on her way to becoming an Officer, everyone said so.

He dropped the bundle at the kitchen door, dusted off his pants and hands, and made his way down to the stream. The dusty yard gave way to grasses and dropped suddenly to the water. He followed the path down, zigzagging back and forth. He let his fingers sift through the grasses, plucking off a head here and there where it met his fingertips. Then he leapt from the path to the river bed and flicked away the seeds, picking his way through the mud. Little pools had formed in hollow footprints. The ground slid underneath him and he spread his arms to keep from falling.

He crept toward the stream and shucked mud from between his fingers, then splashed water onto his face and hair – like the other Vigil did when they finished working. The water cooled his face and he started off along the stream.

Behind the next bend lay his favourite place. Here, the bank grew in a much softer slope. The stream dwindled to almost nothing. From above, it might look like some giant thing, standing in the water, had taken a bite of the higher ground. All that was left was an ell of soft grass, and in that grass you felt as if you were being held in the crook of an arm. You could lie there all day without being found. That was something to be treasured here at the Barracks.

The Vigil protected Ku. There was a great wall all around Ku, and their barracks –number Four – supervised towers 400 to 500, nearly 20 kilometres. There were fifty Vigil for every barracks, ten Officers per barracks and one Supervisor. Old Lady had eight children. Just getting away from your siblings for more than ten minutes was a delight.

Little Jimmy lay down in the lush grass with his head cupped in his hands, stretching out his toes and folding his ankles over each other. There were a few wispy clouds, but the sky was still the blank blue of winter. Particles of light and dust danced in front of his eyes.

He didn't choose to be a Vigil: he just was. If he could choose he would be an Earther. Old Lady had many stories about being an Earther, but she stopped telling them a while ago, when Straight Brienne and Straight Adrian threatened to tell the Officers.

Inside Ku, you got to live by a great river and never worry about having enough water again. There were festivals and dancing and berries so sweet they would turn your lips pink. You got the šalang tattooed on your wrist. It looked like a wagon wheel, and it said that you belonged. You got dots on your eyebrow and you didn't have to carry a gun that you didn't know if it worked or not, and you weren't meant to shoot Others who you never saw anyway.

There was always enough fresh food: the Trust didn't come with their rumble-carts and give

you droop, which tasted like they had caught a goat's nosebleed and sealed it in a tin can. You could not ever be bored inside Ku.

That's why if he got into Ku he would listen to their rules. They had some strange rules. Old Lady had told them how some people were banished because they didn't learn the proper words to say before eating. She refused to tell them what the words were, no matter how much they pleaded. So Little Jimmy and his younger sister Kara had made up words: "Food is good to make you poop," – they would recite solemnly before eating – "We're so thankful it's not droop."

It caught on, and soon the whole Barracks all the way up to the Officers was saying it.

Then the Supervisor banned it and now you weren't supposed to talk at all before eating.

He was suddenly aware of shouts in the yard. The dogs started a hysterical round of barking. It was a complete change in the bored tone of the afternoon. There was a deep noise like a thunderstorm, growing in intensity.

Little Jimmy scrambled up and ran toward the front gate. Perhaps it was an attack by Others! But the Vigil opened up the gate, saluting smartly on either side of it.

The gigantic rumble-cart came through in a dusty roar. On practised instinct he leaped out of the way and saluted smartly, standing as still has he could while the great wheeled beetle dwarfed the other Vigil. Its shell was coated in dirt, the black honey-comb panels were cracked in a number of places.

Little Jimmy gasped as the huge cart drove past: draped over a spare wheel was an emaciated black body, covered with dust. There was a gritty sludge down the figure's back, dust mixing with blood and flesh.

The noise of the cart was unbearably loud and Little Jimmy relented, covering his ears with his hands. It was the Trust man – a day early. The rumble-cart came to a halt in the centre of the yard, and all of a sudden the noise stopped. The gates were closed smartly behind its huge back and the Vigil saluted again. Tings and whines emitted from the cart, and the yard felt like a mid-summer's day with the heat coming off its black panels.

A man in bright blue pants and an unbelievably white shirt climbed out, dropping neatly to the dusty floor. Without any ceremony he walked to the side of the cart and dragged the figure off the wheel and onto the floor.

The man on the ground coughed out blood and cried out in pain, clutching his ribs near the gun burn. Little Jimmy took his gun in his hand but couldn't bring himself to point it at the man like the other kids did.

The Trust man pointed to Little Jimmy and some of the Vigil near him. "Watch him," he barked. There was a šalang on his wrist. Little Jimmy never knew that the Body Corporate got markings too.

The Trust man looked around the yard with an unappealing sneer and marched into the Barracks, the Officers trailing him, as the other Vigil began unloading droop and water tanks from the back of the cart.

Chapter Four

South Ku, Lake Floors

All Earthers are equal, but an Earther is only one of many species of animal. We are not their keepers.

The next morning, once the family had risen and Genevieve had completed her household tasks she found an opportunity to try and open the box. Her mother was away with fellow Healers gathering some herbs to use for cooking. Chrome was helping someone on the other side of the village rebuild a wall that had started crumbling after the rains the day before. That morning, Genevieve had collected a heavy stone which might be of use and brought it with her now.

The box was visible from the path, but only if you were looking for it. She pulled it from the bushes and examined it closely in the light. It was a dull grey. The scratches from the riverbed revealed a metallic shine. There were Old Speak letters engraved on it, but not as many as she had expected. She deciphered them, left to right as her grandmother had taught her:

P R I V A T E A R C H I V E S

It was strange, neat lettering, but she only recognised the first word.

She slammed the rock into the metal loop until it broke apart, and then stopped. The stories she had heard, those that had worried Hendrik the night before, returned. But Shadows were nonsense, just tales for children.

Still, when she pulled open the lid she held her breath and turned her face away lest something leap out. Nothing did.

Inside was a collection of objects: three black things of different shapes, in some places smooth, in other places dimpled. Underneath those was a pile of papers so thick she would never be able to read it all. Underneath that, a book. She knew what it was immediately because her grandmother had books, loads of them, hidden in boxes in her house.

It was outlawed, as were most things her grandmother kept. The covering was dark brown and woodish, and inside was more paper.

She picked up the first few papers from the loose pile. On the top of the first paper it said '2 0 3 0 – 2 0 4 0'. She could read more than any Earther she knew – more than her mother even – but it took an immense amount of effort and time. Her grandmother could read like flowing water. Her eyes drank in the words and her mouth poured them out in a smooth stream.

The numbers – 20302040- made no sense. She turned to the next page and the corner sliced her finger. The minute cut stung like an insect bite. She sucked on her finger as if removing poison.

A flicker of the light made her look up suddenly. A wild olive wolf – seeing something that wasn't really there.

She changed tack, putting down the papers for now and picking up one of the objects.

In a way, these *were* Shadows: creations, melted from matter the Old World had dreamed into being. She picked up one of the three black objects. It was lighter than it looked and fitted easily in her hand.

On the pathway behind her she heard footsteps. She slammed closed the lid, still holding the black thing; tucked it under her arm, grabbing the loose pile of papers and then, without a backward glance, walked into the hut and placed it all under her sleeping mat.

When she emerged she saw her mother carrying baskets full of twigs and leaves, roped together.

"Let me help you," she said taking the basket from her mother's head.

"You will need to bring those to Andani."

Genevieve placed the pungent basket on her head and walked away quickly.

"Slowly!" her mother called, "It took me all morning to find those."

By the time Genevieve returned, Akra had found the box. She shouted at Chrome for bringing home something so dangerous. Chrome denied it. They fought all afternoon, mostly with silence. They hid the box further in the bushes lest one of the other villagers find it. Before dark, Chrome dragged out logs and kindling and smoke rose from the bushes behind the house.

When Genevieve chanced walking past it early the next morning its contents were gone, but the box itself was barely scathed. Acidic smoke rose from inside.

The next day Chrome disappeared with a spade. When Genevieve found a moment to sneak past there was just a pile of ash where the box had been, and a square outline in the dirt.

Genevieve kept what she had taken from the box under her sleeping mat, waiting for an opportunity to examine it. However, late that afternoon a boy was sent to call the Hunters and she went to meet them in the armoury.

All the Hunters, apprentices included, wore red hunting hoods. It had a practical use: they wore red so that they could see each other on the hunt, so that no one accidentally got shot.

You could mix the dye a number of ways: some people used red mud; others mixed it with certain berries. Her mother had made hers up so it was brighter and more impractical than all the others. It was embarrassingly red and the other apprentices had teased that it would scare off prey. That was not as bad as the silence from the real Hunters: it *would* scare off prey.

When she confronted her mother, Akra had laughed it off and told Genevieve it was for her own safety, and that Genevieve wasn't really hunting anyway so it didn't matter, that the colour would fade when the time was right.

Genevieve tried to wash out the colour in the river, but the embarrassing blush was indelible.

She had never been allowed to partake in the hunt proper, to be admitted and receive the twenty-eight cuts that laddered real Hunters' arms.

Today, like all other days, she and a few other apprentices were ordered to gather together supplies for the next day; sharpen blades; ready the pack horses. They would bring the horses and follow the Hunters, close enough to resupply them and complete the ritual salutations. She didn't even know why they carried a bow and arrow with them when they weren't allowed to shoot it.

It would be a few days before they returned, so just before dinner she dug a hole near the back of the hut. That night while everyone slept she pretended to go out to pee and buried the things she had taken, wrapped in a square cloth.

The day Genevieve arrived back from the hunt was a day reasonably free of duties. After brushing and feeding the pack animals; helping to bring the impala to the Centre for cooking; and cleaning all the blades, Genevieve had the rest of the day free. She was relieved to hear that it hadn't rained in her absence, which might have ruined her hidden relics, still bundled behind their hut. Her mother had gone to the Centre to see if she could help prepare the impala, and only Chrome was home,

making some kind of wooden structure for the Centre's kitchen.

She went to the back of the hut, dug out the roll of papers and the black thing and re-wrapped them in the cloth. She left the village with them tucked under her arm, out of sight. Genevieve walked as normally as possible, out towards the goat herds in the veld, or where they would probably be. They were a good excuse for what she was doing so far from the village.

Her mother had started speaking about Genevieve going to stay with her father, Vin. Vinyl stayed in Lake Tops, across the river. She would be taking the full-day trip through Bricks to get there; across the perennial sand bank and over the river on a raft. She had never been to Bricks before. It was built on top of the Sunken Hallways, catacombs filled with artefacts from the Old World. Crooked passages that were said to be filled with an unEartherly silence.

As a child she had spent hours playing Keepers and Shadows, running through imaginary underground mazes. KwaDz was the village where the Keepers and Tellers trained, and being so near it, everyone in Bricks could read Old Speak, and they had piles of things from the Old World lying around. Shadows still lingered there, people said – ignorant people. They said that all kinds of sicknesses came from there.

The black thing began to sweat against her arm. After some time, she heard a bleat. Through the long grass she saw the white swish of a goat's tail. A dog snaked through the tall grass and wagged its tail happily at her. She ignored it, looking for a place to sit without being disturbed. The herder was probably asleep under a tree elsewhere.

She lay under a skimpy Kameeldoring, its thin leaves barely casting any shade at all. It was the best available tree, and she was impatient. The only way to get comfortable was to lie almost flat with her neck propped against a rock. She unfolded the papers first, starting at the top of the pile:

A New History of South Africa: From the Turn of the Millennium **A New Estate [101]**

2030 – 2040

A New Estate

The Thirties were a time of continuous upheaval and violence in the Republic, largely due to growing problems caused by the Private Estate system. The former capitals, Johannesburg and Tshwane, were sent into turmoil by persistent water shortages. The Western Cape and its capital Cape Town were heavily embargoed by the International community, and in the Northern Cape, the 'Sprace' continued.

The Private Estate system remained a thorn in the side of the South African government, as Estates did for many nations worldwide. This system flourished in South Africa for a number of reasons. The inequalities in land ownership, begun in the 1900s and made concrete through the structures of Apartheid, meant that even before the application for sovereign status by Body Corporates, the infrastructure for security and maintenance in the Private Estates was in place for the transformation of these areas from whites-only to private-citizens only. 'Boomed' areas and lifestyle estates had been a prominent feature of South Africa since the end of Apartheid, but never had the ideas of private land been taken to this extreme. This issue reached crisis point in this decade, with some historians declaring this an era of civil war for the bloody attacks between private and public citizens.

Genevieve took a moment to try and absorb what she had just read. It was a story of some sort: Private Estates were a problem for everyone but especially South Africa (her grandmother talked

about South Africa sometimes as a place of the Old World) because… land was private and this was bad because there were violent attacks.

She could sound out most of the words, but they didn't all make sense.

The majority of the population – poor and black – still lived on less than twenty percent of the land. However, the definition of middle-class was changing: Estates provided an opportunity for shared water, food and security. Citizens of an estate, once granted entry were guaranteed work and a certain standard of living through their Corporate tax (an advanced levy). Entry to the estates was highly sought after for these reasons, but became increasingly strictly policed as violence escalated. Private estates were often raided by public citizens, and the protection by the security firms (especially Siyeses Vigilant) became active rather than reactive.

Estates were bad except if you lived in them. Everyone wanted to live in them, so they needed protection. Ku worked like that a little bit: the Vigil protected Earthers from the Out. They had a gigantic wall around Ku. On some hunts they could see the Wall from a koppie, but she had never come close enough to see the Vigil.

Eviction to the public zone was a position from which many could not recover: fundamental resources were no longer being provided by the PANC government, and the skills exodus to neighbouring countries continued. Without the protection of an estate, these citizens were highly vulnerable to disease, malnutrition, violence, forced labour and other life-threatening challenges such as those resulting from negligent mining practices over the previous century. Many thousands of people died as a result.

It is important to note the differences between the first Estates models from the later systems – the forerunner being Ukugoduko Inc. Where Estates had previously required a relatively low buy-in and then biennial contract assessments (a sum which determined the unique levy due from each citizen, weighing their income against their cost of living for the estate) Ukugoduko, the world's largest 'Lifestyle Estate' (this 'Earthing', or 'primitivist' estate stretched from the former Kimberly (now KwaDzanani)

Genevieve felt a jolt reading a familiar name. KwaDzanani was only a few days walk away from Lake Floors. She had always wanted to go there: it was where Keepers were trained, in a place called the Library.

She scanned back up the paragraph. Ukugoduko – was that another way of speaking about Ku?

…to lower Gauteng, effectively controlling the water supply of Johannesburg and other inland cities [see Appendix K for map]). It required a once-off fee per citizen, who waived significant rights (See Human Rights Law in Private Estates p.286) and signed a lifelong contract. Ukugoduko was originally able to sustain this system because of the low maintenance fees involved in running this area, which adopted the ideals of anarcho-primitivist groups such as those seen in…

Genevieve gave up. There were too many words she did not understand. It left a queasy feeling in her stomach. Where had these papers come from? From the Out?

This was not like the stories she had read with her grandmother. Near the end, her eyes had glazed and she was reciting letter groups without being able to understand at all. She tried to refocus, but it was no use. She put down the lot of papers and picked up the black thing. It fitted her hand as if it had been made to sit there.

It was thin and rectangular, but the corners were smooth rather than sharp. The whole thing was smooth, like a pebble flattened by a stream. Each surface ran nearly seamlessly into the next. Nearly seamlessly, because there were thin grooves that lined the edges. The one side had a circle,

about the size of a fingernail. It looked like an eye. There was an intelligence, a looking, that it had. She turned it away from her. The other side was divided into two sections. The first, she recogni sed, was glass. It was cracked and scratched. This was possibly the largest single piece she'd ever seen – including those from the ruins at Lake Floors and in KwaDz. Glass came in all colours – Chrome had given her brother a piece of green before. But this glass was black. Not black like the rest of the thing. More like a hole when you couldn't see the bottom. Like there was something living between the front and back of the thing. The cracks were a faded grey, bunching up at a point of impact and thinning out like hairs to the edges.

The other half of this side was covered with small nubs. They were perfectly aligned and symmetrical, but not all the same size. She ran her fingers over them and they all compressed with a soft clicking, jumping out imperceptibly when her fingers ran off them. Each nub had the faint traces of an old letter, but they didn't make any words.

She held it up in both hands in front of her face, letting her thumbs rest on the cracked glass. She was holding it like that when the leopard crawled past, only a few feet in front of her.

Its belly was nearly on the ground, its back all in a straight line. The black-and-white tipped tail disappeared into the bushes to the left, towards the goats. Genevieve lay exactly where she was f or another second before she jumped forward, stumbling into the path.

It turned its head to her, its ears flattened back with fright looking straight at her. They paused. Her brain whispered hurried phrases; some of it was advice from the Hunters. She couldn't make out what any of it meant. Neither Genevieve nor the leopard seemed to breathe. They stood like insects caught in resin, drowning in the slow movement of time through one another's eyes. She felt her body burn back to life and the world swell with noise.

She screamed. It cracked out of her chest, from where the air had turned still.

She flung the black thing at the leopard as it disappeared through the grass, away from the goats and into the veld. The herd girl jumped up with a spear in her hand, which she threw uselessly at the receding shape. The dogs shot out from beneath the same distant tree, barking into the empty veld. The goats bleated loudly, running around and jostling together on the ground between her and the girl.

She stood staring at Genevieve, and Genevieve stared back.

After a while Genevieve smiled, and then laughed.

The black thing was in two parts from hitting a rock. A breeze blew the papers along the ground behind her. The herd girl could not see the floor near Genevieve through the waist-high grass.

The girl stared at Genevieve. But then she smiled and laughed too.

She laughed at Genevieve's scream, and Genevieve laughed at the unsure way the girl's spear had flown and now stuck in the ground.

She laughed at her own scream.

Their bodies both shuddered involuntarily with fright. Genevieve's hand s trembled as she scooped up a handful of papers, careful not to stoop down too long and let the girl see what she was doing. She waved to the girl after tucking what she could gather under her shirt. She left behind the broken black thing and walked quickly to the village.

Akra was busy in the Centre, preserving parts of the dead impala. Only two other women were around, carrying in the vegetables they would cook that evening. She kept her lips together tightly as Genevieve relayed the story.

"You were walking in the bush and the leopard didn't hear you?"

There was no way Genevieve could mention the papers or the black thing.

"No, I was… peeing. Under a tree. And it crept passed."

"A leopard, in the daytime?"

"Yes a leopard in the daytime mother. That's a strange thing to see hey?"

"No stranger than an Earther wandering kilometres from the village on her own just to pee." Her mother said it quietly, dismissively. As if no other part of the story was important.

Genevieve stared at her. She began to shake. "I was practising stalking." She hadn't needed to practise stalking for moonths. "I wasn't fucking someone."

Her mother slammed down her knife. "I didn't say you were."

"But it's what you meant."

"I just said it was strange."

"Yes, it was. But you don't even care that I chased away a leopard. All you can think of is that I was doing something bad."

"Were you?"

Genevieve walked out as her mother called to her. "If you want I can take you to the midwife. We can start getting you Confirmed."

"I'm not fucking anyone!" She strode away. "I never want children."

She avoided her mother for as long as she could, but Akra would bring up Genevieve's trip to her father at every dinner. Akra first sent news of Genevieve's visit to Vin – her father – with a woman who was bringing sweet potatoes to Lake Tops. She then arranged that Genevieve would travel with Jan – an old friend of Akra's – as far as Bricks.

Jan was going to KwaDzanani. Genevieve longed to go there. She had heard many stories about the Library, the great hole and other wonders that Ku's capital contained. Even more stories than what she had heard about Bricks.

But Jan would never allow that. He was a stickler for rules, and far too doe-eyed for Akra to disobey her. He was unpleasant to be around. For as long as Genevieve could remember he had been bitter about his mangled-foot, crushed in a farming accident.

It was strange that Akra suggest this trip in the first place. Akra didn't trust Vin, Genevieve's father. She said he didn't believe in 'boundaries' as he should. He had killed an elephant once. He had returned home astride Grusha, ribs broken and bleeding down the saddlecloth. The Council had been assembled. They could not come to an agreement: the elephant and the hunting party had come upon each other. The hunting party had tried to back away but the elephant charged them, trampling on one of the apprentices. When the others fled, Vinyl stayed and fought. The young hunter had died, and Vinyl returned. Was it a fair placement of self above animal? It was left to the Keeper to decide. There were no games at night, no stories. Low muttering sawed through the Centre and her father spoke to no one.

Every usable part of the elephant had been brought back, but there was simply too much. All the children in the village were taken past the carcass, to see how much was unusable. Hyenas, vultures, jackals and more came and the remains of the elephant were dragged in all directions. The stench was foul.

The young hunter had been buried, and Akra explained to Genevieve that the same thing happened under the ground as above it, just more slowly. Worms and bugs came and scattered the body, and instead of jackals, it fed plants and trees. Genevieve had asked why they didn't just leave the hunter to feed the hyenas too, and Akra said it was because underground it was more gentle,

and your family and friends didn't have to see you.

Genevieve had imagined it was the same kind of comfort you got from lying under a blanket, even when you weren't cold. It must help you sleep, being under the ground.

In the village, the trial continued. Genevieve couldn't remember what that Keeper had looked like. He was just a vague figure in her memory, with a blue sash tattooed across his chest and back, thousands of letters. An oath in Old Speak, minutely scrawled over his chest and down his belly.

Back then she had wanted to be a Keeper. She had learnt the *Lessons* by heart before any of the others, and she refused to play any games unless it was as a Keeper. She had even packed her things one afternoon, waiting for her mother to return from a Council meeting. Somehow she had decided that Akra would return with news that they had chosen Genevieve to go to the Library, to train under the Trust. When her mother returned with only news about the food stock, Genevieve declared that that being a Keeper was stupid and arrogant.

The two days of her father's trial she ignored the Keeper completely by watching everything he did in silent, jut-lipped reverence. An accord was reached: Vinyl would tell no one how he had killed the elephant – the action would be impossible to imitate without knowledge of how it had been performed. Any person found asking him would be punished. A pair of crossed tusks were tattooed on his ribs, to remind him of the beast whose life he now shared, just like when Hunters took their first kill they received the twenty-eight cuts on their arm.

Akra had stayed with him all through that time, and for almost a set afterwards. Then she had started seeing Chrome, and with her permission Vinyl left to Lake Tops.

The only time that Genevieve had been to see her father was when she was still a young. Akra had come along, and they only stayed a few days before going North where they spent twelve seasons with Meme, her mother's mother. She didn't remember much of the journey, except for a blur of ruins that she had been dragged past too quickly to take in. Instead, she was shown every misshapen tuber her mother yanked up and told 'this could one day save your life'.

A few days before she was due to leave the herd girl sought Genevieve out. She was a youngster of about ten sets, with curly hair tangled around her ears and black freckles under her eyes. She approached Genevieve shyly while she was sharpening a set of blades in the shade of a store hut. From behind her she produced a satchel, made from old and battered leather. The straps were made of coarse hemp.

"As thanks for saving me."

"I didn't save you," Genevieve replied, as she took the gift from the girl.

"You did." She blushed. "Even if the leopard didn't get me, it would have gotten a goat and I would have… I would have been in trouble."

"But this is too much." The girl's embarrassment was contagious.

"No, no, really," the girl smiled for the first time, "we were not using it, and I put back on the straps for you. As you pull them tighter it closes – see?" She showed Genevieve the drawstring and its connection to the straps. It was true – you could close it using the drawstring alone, but the pack shrunk and hugged to your body as you pulled the straps.

"Thank you…" She didn't know the girl's name.

"I will see you around!" The girl seemed delighted that her gift had so awed Genevieve, and she bounded off to her mother who gave a friendly nod to Genevieve to signify her approval.
When she found a moment alone she folded the thin pile of papers into the bottom of the pack, hurriedly scanning through them once more.

There were around eight pages of words, and one picture. It was a map, but not like she had seen before: all beautiful colours like in the picture books that her grandmother owned. In a diagonal stripe down the centre ran a vein of blue.

On the map she found names that she knew: 'KwaDzanani', 'Lake Floors', 'Lake Tops', and even somewhere near the centre 'Mushi' – her grandmother's village.

She folded the map away tightly, hoping not to look at it again when she deciphered the words at the top, printed next to the šalang: Ukugoduko Lifestyle Estate.

Chapter Five:

North Ku, between Appleton and Masinge

Neko smiled as he washed his hands. Appleton had provided more than he had expected. The woman he had his eye on had proved not only obliging, but nearly as dexterous as the Teller – in other matters, of course. She lay wiping him off her belly with the underside of the cloth they had been lying on.

She wore the same detached look as when she had been listening to the storyteller the night before. She patted down her plaits, and the beads that lay in the nape of her neck clicked softly, like a forgotten language.

His own hair was dishevelled and he ran his wet fingers through it: his mother's hair – black and sleek, the soft hair of a paler person.

Birds were chattering importantly. The sound of a village at first rising was audible outside and far below: The first grunts, stumbles and coughs. The clanging of a pot. Soon a child would begin to cry and slowly the people would become louder than the birds.

He crawled under the covers and pulled the blanket to him, closing his eyes. The woman breathed in, as if to speak. After a long while she breathed out but said nothing. They slept again.

When Neko awoke it was to the moth-dust feeling of having overslept. His neck ached. The woman had left.

He threw the blanket off his right thigh. He was sticky with sweat and sex, despite his early morning wash.

After a long while he sat up. In the sand she had drawn a sign: a river (one wave) and a basket filled with indiscernible shapes. There was Old Speak to the left of it, but Neko could not read. It was probably her name – most Earthers could write their own name and little else. He gathered his bag and left the hut.

The village lay below him. The hut they had slept in was abandoned, built on top of an old ruin way up the side of the koppie. It could see in almost all directions. The sliver of reflected light in the distance was the Northern Road, its tar blistered and full of warts and tufts of plants. It led into the Grey City.

If the scavengers who lived on Inyoka were to be believed, before one arrived in The Grey City, the Northern Road led into an acid desert: poisonous yellow sand which gulped down people and houses without any sign they had been there. It was where the insult, 'Take the Northern Road' came from.

Before that still, however, was the Wall. It was not visible from here, but Neko had seen it elsewhere in his travels.

Most Earthers believed that the Guards they saw in their villages and the Vigil who tended the Wall were the same thing.

Neko knew better: while they wore the same kind of yellow coat, Guards were originally Earthers; Vigil were not. Earthers weren't allowed near the wall, lest they escape to the Out.

Why anyone would attempt to leave Ku was unfathomable. The Out was dead land, without water, without life. 'Ku is life,' was the call.

The Grey City was worse still than the Out. Either way, leaving Ku was certain death.

He turned his eye to the closer fields, most of them burnt, dark and empty. In a week or two

the first rains would come, and seedlings would shoot through the rich soil.

In an adjacent field, hemp and wild grass grew tall and yellow. Nearer to where he was there were much smaller patches for herbs and vegetables, but the soil was caked and dry.

Half a moonth and it would be beautiful here. He moved toward the sound of running water. Irrigation veins ran from stepped outlets down to the fields below. The stream itself dropped abruptly into an unusually green patch, and in the trees at the bottom he could see people moving, mostly women. They looked to be tending to the trees. The most exceptional detail of this town was its distance from Inyoka, which from this vantage point looked to be just a line of dark green trees.

He turned back to the hut and gathered together his things. He dusted off his water pouch: an emptied ostrich egg wrapped in goat leather. Either alone would do to hold water, but this way both would last longer. In his drawstring pack he could feel his blunt knife, sheathed. Loose dates roamed the bottom of his pack. There was an ageing reed of sugarcane that he hoped to one day turn into a whistle, if it was not too brittle. This thought was nearly as stale as the reed itself – he had been thinking it since he first cut it from its stalk by the river and the villagers had chased him with their dogs. He had kept it with him all Winter.

He made his way down the koppie, trying to pick the same way that the woman had led him up the night before. She had held his hand tightly, dragging him with some urgency. Neko stopped and took two steps back.

An Arak tree, crooked trunk and tiny yellow budding flowers. In fact, four or five Arak trees: a windfall. He cut off twigs with his knife, about the same length as his outstretched hand. He strapped them together using some nearby grass. He stripped off the leaves and let these float to the bottom of his bag with the dates, before bundling the Arak into his bag. He cut one last branch and began chewing the end as he walked.

It had other names, but most people understood better when you said 'Arak'. It smelt ripe, like an herb, but there were few things more satisfying than the clean feeling it left in your mouth. Tattooists and Healers often used it. It would be good for trading. It would be good to keep, too.

Neko walked down the hill whistling tunefully. He altered his path slightly to include, perhaps, sneaking a look in the village's storerooms before he left.

A lone impala sprinted across his path as he neared the village. A little while later a dog trotted out of the bushes, panting.

The village opened up in front of him, a closely grouped cluster of homes. It was a circle with eight spokes leading inward to the stores and the Centre.

One need not have seen it from above to know this: this was how villages were built – in the shape of the šalang.

The Centre here was made of straw bale, with cooking fires clustered in the centre below the chimneys. The store rooms were the same, but without any chimneys and on raised ground to allow water to run off. The houses were a mixture: straw and cob – smooth, flowing surfaces transmuted from shelves into beds and benches and walls. More regularly, huts were made of mud.

He ducked into a nearby storeroom. His eyes were made useless by the dark so he relied on his nose. There were fresh straw containers, but he couldn't make out what was in them. It was nearly empty, as was to be expected in early Spring.

"Can I help you, friend?"

Neko jumped stupidly. Behind him was a man carrying a large container on his head. He placed it on the ground as Neko smiled a cat smile.

"Friend – I enter your village. I was looking for a woman I met last night. I thought she may

have returned from the field." The lie came easily to him, as they always did.

"Not yet. I am sure you will find her there still."

"My thanks."

Neko turned and left behind the possibility of fresh food. He felt the man watch him leave. A small child ran past, its left wrist still red around the šalang.

Earthers were always suspicious of travellers, but it was beyond Neko why one would choose to settle in a single village for your whole life when there was so much more to see; so many more women to fuck. The longest Neko stayed in a single place was during the Winter, when food was too scarce to be travelling the veld alone. He had spent the Winter in Hemming with a plump, barren woman named Pradah. It had been pleasant, but painfully boring. It was good to be travelling again.

Neko walked down the path that led to fields. Not to find the woman, but because Masinge was East. He walked out to the veld.

Masinge was the first village Neko had gone to after leaving home many sets ago. He had not been back since.

It had always had a reputation for lawlessness. His first time there he had spent all his Metals on whores and drink, and had been living in the mud before he left. Masinge was a dangerous place, but in the seasons since he had grown much wiser: he would not be so easily taken in by its rebellious charm.

The road to Masinge was hot. It reminded him that the season of White Outs was approaching, and that travelling through the day would be impossible for the next few moonths. He always had the same feeling: villages were cooler. Here, where there were no people, the sun watched only you.

The long grass was too brittle to weave a hat. He had to stop and scrape ticks off his pants and feet. He wanted to stop in the shade but the trees were too thin. The further one went from the rivers, the more sparse the veld became. Tellers and drunkards spoke of people who lived outside of the range of rivers, as the Vigil did.

In the Old World, they had created their own rivers under the ground, in pipes, water they could summon through complex mechanisms – installed in every house. He had never seen the pipes nor the mechanisms.

He knew more about the Old World than most Earthers. He had lived near a woman named Rebecca when he was growing up. Her son Nietzsche had introduced Neko to their family's illegal collection of Old World picture books.

By habit he avoided that painful line of reminiscence.

In Ku one could see the ruins of the old houses almost everywhere you went, and his village had been full of them. He had explored the ruins with his friends – as all children did, mostly as an escape from one's elders. His first sexual explorations had been in these hidden places, far from adults who insisted on telling you who you may or may not touch. In these explorations it was not the old walls that kept him in awe. The only wonder in a roof ten steps tall was if it kept the water off, which was important when you were trying to convince someone to take their clothes off.

He walked on and let the sun scorch those memories. He had heard more sinister stories about the pipes which carried the rivers: a child fallen down a round hole and never seen again; a spade that bent against unmoveable metal in the ground. He had been almost everywhere in the North of Ku and had never seen such a thing with his own eyes. It was the usual exaggeration and fanaticism that people got about the Old World.

A snake crossed his path and disappeared into the bushes.

The road wound on, not quite in a straight line, for most of the morning. It eventually disintegrated into a number of smaller paths, and he chose the most likely looking one.

Before noon he came upon a koppie, with deep rocky outcrops sure to hold some creatures. He eyed it suspiciously. He hoped that some Earthers used this path – not just buck. The hum of the veld insects grew louder.

In the shade of the koppie, tucked into a crease of trees he saw a single hut – shabbily made. The village Masinge was about half a day away. It was eerie to come across a hut all on its own in the veld.

He had planned to get to Masinge by nightfall. An outcast could only bring trouble. He stayed on the path and watched for any movement. The trail looked worn, but it strayed off in peculiar directions – one disappeared straight into the veld. There didn't seem to be any water source near here, so it seemed unlikely that the hut was occupied. He squinted at a big tree with rocks underneath it near the hut.

He felt his toe hit the stone and he knew it would be bleeding even before he looked down. He yelped unintentionally as he bent and clutched it. His sandal and his foot were filthy. Blood leaked out of a cut next to the nail. His eye was drawn by a movement underneath the tree. A figure detached itself from the rocks and shadows.

Neko limped towards a rock on the path ahead where he could sit and wash off the dirt and blood. The figure called from underneath the tree and loped into the sunlight. It was a large man, broad shoulders and dark skin.

Neko dropped onto the rock and watched him jog from underneath the tree. The man came through the grass and onto the path in front of him.

"Can I help, my friend?"

He didn't look an obvious leper, or very dangerous. Neko picked up his water bottle. He poured some water onto the toe, then turned and grabbed an Arak twig from his pack.

"No no friend. It was just a spiteful rock. Perhaps I kicked its brother into a snake hole once."

"Ha ha! There are many snake holes here. Perhaps this is the case."

Neko had torn a strip from the twig with his teeth and wrapped his toe in it. He tried to tie it in position but it unfurled.

The man laughed kindly. "Friend, you cannot walk now. Come sit with us until it stops bleeding."

Neko had just begun to refuse when he saw the fluffy impala tail wrapped around the man's wrist.

The stranger followed his gaze. "Aha! Yes friend, I just took it two weeks ago for my family. It is dry and ready for eating," he said, stroking the tail fondly. "We have plenty food for a visitor."

Neko needed to get to Masinge, but fresh meat was a scarcity if you weren't staying in a village where there were regular Hunts.

He allowed the man to take him under the arm and helped him back along the path. He seemed about the same age as Neko, around thirty sets, give or take a few Springs.

"You are staying here as a family?" Neko asked, "I assumed it was an abandoned Post."

The man smiled, "Perhaps the stone was simply reminding you of your manners!"

Neko laughed with him and limped on.

"My name is Vile. Vee-leh."

"Neko. Ner-ko."

They smiled warmly at each other.

Neko was offered water from a calabash and a place to sit on the rocks next to a small pile of unusually white pebbles, such as a child would gather for a game. The throbbing in his toe subsided, and he kept his sandals next to him as Vile told jokes in the shade.

Vile was gregarious and Neko found his pressing desire to move on subsiding. It had been a long time since Neko had been able to enjoy male company, and Vile talked enough for both of them. It was more pleasant to spend the afternoon this way than walking alone through the veld.

"Where are you going, Neko?" he asked. Vile had occupied his hands whittling down short straight branches into arrows. Neko joined him, lamenting his blunt knife.

"I am going to Masinge."

At Vile's raised eyebrow Neko laughed.

"Only to move through. I plan on heading South this Summer. I have not been all the way South, I would like to see it."

"Yes, I hear it is good down there. You wish to make your home there?"

"Not quite." Neko cleaved a disproportionate chunk from his stick. "I am a Craftsman. Despite all appearances." He held up the lopsided stick and snorted at his own lack of finesse. "Craftsmen are always needed, wherever they go."

"This is true. Just look at the mess I made of this hut." Vile pointed over his shoulder at the shabby grass structure. It looked stable, but the straw was lumpy and there were a few loose tufts that would cave in with the first summer rain.

Neko smiled consolingly, not bothering to point out that such work was for Builders, not Craftsmen. Neko could carve all manner of useful objects, could make benches and cob shelves, could shape pots and utensils and create rain tanks and wagon wheels. He could even do a little bit of thatching, but real building was beyond his ken. There was all sorts of things to know about mixing the materials, the foundations and so on.

"So you travel, but where to?" asked Vile, interrupting Neko's thoughts.

"I travel without a goal in mind. I left my home village more than ten sets ago and have travelled the North since then."

"You didn't get very far," Vile joked.

"No," Neko laughed, hoping that Vile not prod too deeply. Neko spent only a few months in any place he went. Long enough to explore the place and its women, not long enough to be held responsible for those explorations. "That's why I plan to go South."

Further questions were halted when Vile's companion returned from the bush with fruit, and curiously, more ginger root than a village would need in a month.

Her breasts were too heavy for her frame, and Neko thought he could see stains on the front of her shirt as if she had been breastfeeding. Her belly bulged ever so slightly under her shirt; she must have been three or four moonths pregnant. There was only one dot above her eyebrow, and the same on Vile. Neko had cultivated a taste for pregnant women. When you fucked them, they didn't get pregnant.

But she was brusque and unwelcoming toward Neko, she had barely been introduced – "Thulisa" – before she began occupying herself with minor chores, as if Neko made her nervous. tasks became so trivial as to be laughable – she picked dry leaves out of the tree and made sure they fluttered away from the neatly swept fireplace. The shadows under her eyes were a dark blue. It was

possible that she was ill, but she didn't seem to be particularly weak. She noticed him watching her and clucked her tongue in disdain.

Her presence had changed the tone of the afternoon, and the feeling that he should begin moving on became more pressing. He put back on his sandals and tied together his bag, but could not find an opportunity to excuse himself.

All three parties dutifully kept up the pretence of normality, as if people often lived outside villages. But underneath it all was a nervousness that the conversation should turn in that direction. His desire to leave was heightened after he went to relieve himself: behind the hut were far more blankets than would be needed by just the two companions.

It seemed to him that there had been children here not too long ago. Their absence was like missing a step on the way down a hill. Something had gone badly wrong in this place.

When he returned to the fire he wished he could occupy his hands but his carving knife was now completely blunted and useless. He should trade for one in Masinge, he decided. But then, Masinge would probably not have something as practical as that on offer.

While Vile chatted on the beauty of the sunset, Neko's thoughts looped back to the children. Masinge was a hungry village; it stole from those around it. He had heard that one of the things it stole was people. Could their children have been stolen? Worse still, could their children have been exchanged for something valuable? There didn't seem to be anything of significant worth around the home, but it could have been hidden.

Just as he was about to announce his departure he was invited to eat with the couple. It was a difficult decision: travel in the dark on an empty belly or spend the night here. He would take his chances with them rather than the hyenas, he decided.

But as the dusk fell his humour rose once more: they ate a stew of vegetables that contained far too much ginger for his liking, but the impala biltong which accompanied it did wonders for his mood and the hollow feeling in his stomach.

Yet all the time he couldn't shake the feeling that at any moment a child would begin to cry from inside the hut.

Vile offered that Neko take some dried meat with him.

"That would be most kind of you." Neko returned. "Perhaps I could offer you something in exchange – I don't have much." Vile would soon have asked anyway. Neko could sense that this was not a night without its price. By offering first, Neko would appear open to the idea of an exchange.

"Well friend, I often have to go quite some time through the veld without returning home." He could see what Vile was moving toward. He wasn't going to help him get there. "At times I end up in the driest of bush, far from any villages, and at those times it becomes difficult..." It was a bizarre explanation. Hunters often strayed far from villages, but he saw no hood and no Hunter's marks on Vile's arm. Then again, the couple did have an impala. "And at times like those every Earther needs water."

"I see."

"I was hoping that you might help me with this problem."

Vile wouldn't say it outright, and Neko would have to be equally careful if he wanted to ensure that he still had a bed for the evening.

"Friend, I would give this to you"– he lifted the ostrich egg and goat leather pouch up to eye height –"But I am afraid that without it, I would have long ago returned to the earth, as dried and wrinkled as a lizard's toes." Vile smiled politely at the quip but was not altogether pleased.

"Is that really all you do friend, wander?"

Neko laughed dismissively. “Ku is my home.” He shifted uncomfortably despite himself. “I can offer you something that has saved my life almost as many times as my water pouch has.” Vile perked up slightly.

“Arak – for wounds. And cleaning teeth.” Neko grinned broadly, flashing his unusually white teeth, and Vile burst out in laughter.

“I can take nothing from you that you will not give,” laughed Vile, “but perhaps we could take a lesson on this from you.” He turned to his companion grinning – “Is there still beer?” She nodded and left.

“She is not fond of laughter is she?” Neko asked, after Thulisa had disappeared into the hut once more.

“She was not always so serious.” Vile’s eyes saddened, and his smile faltered.

Thulisa returned with a calabash full of beer and handed it to Vile, retaking her seat on his right. She sat close to him, but discreetly rebuffed his attempts to put his hand on her leg. After Vile, Neko took a deep sip from the calabash, and had to struggle not to let the beer come back up through his nose. It was strong and sour, but lacked the refined smoothness of a beer from Masinge. Still, it was good for a bush brew made by only two people. Unthinkingly he passed it on to Thulisa who raised it to her lips.

“Stop” he cried, still coughing from his own sip. She lowered it, her eyes widened. “It’s not good for when you are pregnant.” He laughed a little, clearing his throat. “A lesson my mother taught me, I thought everybody knew.”

“Aha!” Vile cried, “A useful tip for a new mother.”

There was hollowness in this light-hearted exclamation. If you tapped on it, the lie would echo. There were a few more moments of silence, and Thulisa’s eyes filled with tears. She shoved the calabash into Vile’s hands and fled as he called after her.

“There she goes again. She is so nervous of going wrong with this child – the last ones were gone before they even lived.” His careful vagueness made it a riddle. It could mean she had miscarried, but it could mean before they received the šalang and their names – either were possible given the single Confirmation dot above both Thulisa and Vile’s brows.

Having children over the age of šalang did not guarantee that one was branded. Neko was proof of this.

Vile took a deep swig. After smacking his lips loudly he went on, “It’s even gotten to me. I hear children calling all through the night.”

And there was the seed which rattled about in this hollowness. Neko was an excellent liar, and he was used to people trying to deceive him in return. He was not used to wanting to be deceived.

He fumbled for words and eventually said, “I did not mean to upset you.”

After a long while Vile shook his head, “No friend, we upset ourselves. It is difficult to be out here alone.” Neko knew better than to press further in that direction and he excused himself to urinate once more.

Just as he was escaping the tense situation he stumbled upon another. Behind the house sat Thulisa, clenching one of the blankets, bundled on the floor. She was weeping and rocking back and forth, holding it up to her face as if she would smother herself with it.

Neko went to piss elsewhere.

He had a difficult time falling asleep that night. The beer rolled around uncomfortably in his belly. There was something wrong in this place. When he did sleep, he first dreamt that he was with his

mother. It was a vague and colourless dream, more of a feeling, merely a prelude.

He rolled over to his other side, hoping for better luck, and pulled the blanket up to his shoulders. It was too short, and he curled his knees upwards to keep his feet covered.

He dreamt he was back at the fire, drinking beer, and there was someone with him. At first it was Vile, but when he passed the calabash it was a small child with eyes set too far apart, and a large head. He could not tell its sex, and it took the calabash and drank deeply, swaying from side to side.

When it lowered the beer it had wrinkled and aged, its skin folded over itself. The sides of its mouth were stained with milk rather than beer. It began muttering urgently, in a language he could not understand but he knew somehow that it was a language even older than Old Speak. Neko's eyes felt sore from the smoke of the fire, and the creature became more frantic and less a child. He rubbed at his eyes, trying to open them wider, to see more clearly.

The creature lifted the drink to its mouth once more and it spilled all over its front. When the calabash was lowered, its eyes were gone. There were just two dark holes. Neko tried to look away but he could not, and he became aware then of the creature's tail, extending around from its back.

The tail arched over the creature's head and came down in front of Neko. Somehow he was both outside of his body watching from the fire and inside: watching it from his own head. The tail split open at the end into an oily black thumb and finger. They rubbed together greedily and reached into Neko's eyes, which were also empty. From his sockets they plucked at a tuft of yellow grass and began pulling. The dry grass grew thicker and the reeds fell to the floor. More and more fell out and the fingers alternated their grabbing between both eyes until the thatch grass came out on its own in a tide and the tail snapped back and seemed to watch Neko's convulsing body with some interest.

It swooped low and picked a perfectly white pebble from the floor. The creature lowered its head backwards, and the tail dropped the pebble into the creature's gaping mouth. Without a noise the creature vanished and Neko woke up. A few pieces of thatching had become dislodged and landed on his face. He groped for his water pouch in the dark and washed out his face, his eyes burning from the dust and grass.

The next morning Neko gathered his things early. Vile was not there, but Thulisa was awake and had bundled together some dried meat which he gathered into his pack. She had included two large ginger roots. She also rolled up a sleeping mat and handed it to him.

"Thank you for your kindness," he muttered, "If I do not meet Vile, will you thank him for me?"

She nodded mutely and accepted a generous bundle of Arak twigs. He loped out of the hut, more quickly than was polite.

On the path he took out a piece of impala meat and gnawed on it as he walked, muttering the salutation under his breath – more out of habit than gratitude.

"I thank you, Friend for your life. It is not ours to take, but ours to give back…"

He contemplated tossing out the ginger roots Thulisa had given him. The smell reminded him of the past day's uneasiness. But ginger could cure a sore throat like nothing else.

Vile came around the corner in front of him.

"Neko! Where are you going my friend?"

"Vile… I am so glad to see you," he recovered quickly. Thank you for looking after me, but I must be going. I hope to return here someday, if you will have me."

"But I have eggs!" Vile cheerfully lifted up a small sack. Neko smiled as kindly as possible and shook his head.

Vile's expression soured. "What do you have to do, in all these places you are going to?" he

asked bluntly.

Neko's smile dropped, he said nothing for some time, watching Vile with growing bitterness.

"Sometimes we want to leave our home, sometimes we are made to leave. For me it was both. But did your children choose to leave, or did you send them away?"

Vile almost dropped the egg. He looked immediately ashen. Neko had deduced correctly.

"Where are your friends… *your* children, wanderer?" Vile sneered, too long after the question had been posed.

They stood looking at each other for a time longer, until Neko gently touched Vile's shoulder and walked past him. Vile did not move for as long as Neko could see him. The path took a sharp curve and Neko walked on alone to Masinge.

Chapter Six
In

Little Jimmy followed the river as Toby had told him to do. He had with him Lazy Toby's water-sack, and even though it was old and leaked, he felt guilty for taking it. He finished the water on the first day.

It was cold that night, and he had never been so thirsty, except for the time the stream had run red and the Old Lady had forbidden them to drink from it.

The next day he was lost in the veld. His lips stuck together and peeling them apart was painful – little patches of skin tore off and bled. He startled a family of klipspringers when he walked past a small koppie, and they ran up the hill – staring down at him indignantly.

He was trying to head north, keeping the rising sun on his right, and the setting sun on his left. Most of all he wanted to get The Wall out of his sight. It seemed like it would never disappear.

The whole day there had been a veil of grey clouds and in the late afternoon they gathered above him, billowing and whipping across the sky in loud cracks, as if someone were shaking out a great sheet of cloth, the static shooting from one corner to the next.

There had only been one tree in sight and he hid under that. He remembered too late that you weren't supposed to hide under a tree in a lightning storm, but by then it had begun not only to rain, but to hail.

This was not the way he had expected to experience the first rain of the season, usually a cause for celebration at the Barracks. He thought about Timote's earthy mound getting wet. Would he float up to the top, right out of the soil? Would that happen to the Other too?

The hail subsided and when the rain seemed to be slowing too he ran and torn out handfuls of damp grass. He lay on those and ate the last of the Num-Num berries. It was not proper dusk yet, but he tried to sleep.

The next morning he found a village. He was walking down a pathway when a man grabbed him and looked at his wrist and asked him where he had come from. When Little Jimmy wouldn't say, the man took a piece of cloth and wrapped it around his wrist. Then the man took away Little Jimmy's gun. He wasn't too sure how to feel about that: he was glad it was gone, but at the same time it made him feel a little bit safer – even though he knew for sure that it didn't work.

The man was grossly fat. His belly wobbled under his shirt like the udders of a cow. He had thin hair, brushed all to one side. Elsewhere he was a mass of pink skin and sweat, coated over with perfumes and ointments.

The man left him in a strange room. There was nowhere to sit, only a broad sleeping mat which rustled as you stepped on it. It smelled like it was stuffed with wet leaves, and although he wanted to sleep, Little Jimmy couldn't bear to lie on it. This room was linked by a passage to another, with a half-drawn cloth separating the two. In the other room was a pile of wood, covered with a blanket.

Little Jimmy scratched at the cloth around his wrist. It was filthy and made him sweat. He was glad the man had something like this handy: everyone in Ku had a šalang, and Little Jimmy did not. With the cloth wrapped around his wrist nobody could see that he didn't have one.

Earthers had strange laws – he didn't know what would happen if someone saw that he didn't have a šalang. He didn't want to get sent back to the Wall.

Little Jimmy brushed that concern aside for now: He was In. This was Ku. His brief walk into the

village had revealed that there were Earthers everywhere. He'd never known that people could come in such colours – he and his siblings were all a shade of Old Lady, but here people were sunset pinks and impala browns and some as pale as a fever tree. Some of them even had hair the colour of dry grass and eyes as blue as the sky. Most of them were a lighter shade than he was.

Little Jimmy scratched the cloth again. He was getting hungry. He wished his Num-Num berries were not finished. Brienna had a song about Num-Num berries. She would sing it to the younger children. Little Jimmy looked around. He hadn't seen the fat man for at least an hour. He had told Little Jimmy 'Stay here and do not move or attract attention. No matter what.' The fat man liked that phrase, 'no matter what'.

The song swirled around his head:

Num-Num green leaves
Num-Num white flowers
'num num' my belly says
eat your berries all hours.

Num-Num green leaves,
Num-Num white flowers,
'num num' my teeth say
your roots have special powers.

Num-Num green leaves,
Num-Num white flowers,
Num-Num-Thousand-Thorns says
"Leave that alone, it's ours!"

At the last phrase, they would all jump back and laugh, as the imaginary thorns pricked their hands.

In the dark hut he jumped back a step and bumped his head against the wall. In the next room a log tumbled off the pile. Tears came to his eyes and he sat on the floor and began to cry. He wasn't sure he really wanted to be In.

Through his tears he saw the pile of wood in the other room rattle and breathe. The piece that had rolled off bent itself into an arm. From under a dark clump of kindling two eyes opened.

"Hai. Fuck!" the woodpile woman grated, coughing wetly. "Shaddup." She settled on her other side. Little Jimmy crept towards her on hands and knees. He brushed back the curtain and could see that the woman lay on a thin sleeping mat.

There were bowls lining the round walls, and the closest one was filled with something that was definitely not drinking water. When he sniffed it the hairs in his nostrils curled with fright and he put it down with a loud clunk.

The woman snuffled and scraped, coughing again. Through a bush of twiggy hair she opened her eyes, and Little Jimmy froze. The whites were yellow and veined, sick. Her movements were stiff. She was like a broken tree, all chopped up and ancient and rotting.

"What are you doing here? I thought I told you to stay still, no matter what!" The fat man grabbed Little Jimmy under his arm and dragged him outside, where he stood blinking against the light.

"Look around," the man squealed, "Look around! Do you see these people?" The few people

going about their chores were giving Little Jimmy and the man a wide berth. “Do you?”
Little Jimmy was still trying to adjust to the sudden change. He gave a teary sniff and nodded. The man’s voice softened. He sounded even more dangerous than when he was shouting, “Do you see what every single one of them has, something that you don’t have?”

Little Jimmy stared. Families? Villages? Baskets?

“I dunno…” It seemed the safest reply.

The man smacked him with an open hand across his ear.

“They are Earthers. And we know they are Earthers, because they have a šalang.”

The fat man shoved his wrist in Little Jimmy’s face. The tattoo there was old and faded: a circle with eight spokes pointing to the centre.

“You have not been marked boy! You are an Other.” He said it in the way someone might say ‘Cockroach’. “They will kill you.” He breathed out after every word. Little Jimmy felt his stomach turn.

“But I’m not an Other, I’m part of the Vigil, I guard the wall, I came from there today –”

The fat man’s sweaty brow wrinkled. “Don’t be ridiculous – Vigil, Guards – everyone gets the šalang.”

“We don’t. We’re not Earthers, we’re Vigil,” Little Jimmy tried again.

The fat man let go of his arm. He looked confused. “It doesn’t matter what you think you are it’s what the villagers think you are.”

“But I’m –”

“You’re causing a scene,” the man interjected, dragging Little Jimmy back into the hut. “Stay here until I figure out what I’m going to do with you. If you go outside, I will take no responsibility for you. I may just be able to get you a šalang, if you listen to me.”

Little Jimmy had no option but to comply.

Before midday, the fat man returned to the hut. He brought with him some fruit and a huge mug of water. They sat in the shade of the hut on a small bench. Many Earthers walked past, but they barely paid any attention to Little Jimmy and the man.

Little Jimmy ate so quickly his stomach hurt. The man waited until he was finished before he began speaking again.

“If someone asks, you’re my nephew okay? You are lucky that you found me; I am one of the few people who can and will help you. I can get you a šalang.”

Little Jimmy looked hopefully at the man, whose fat chins were wobbling; his skin blotched with exertion despite being sat in the cool shade of the hut.

“There is only one person in this place who would tattoo you and not report you to the Council, or to the Keeper. And I will bring you to him.”

Little Jimmy felt dizzy with relief.

“But you must first do something for me…”

Little Jimmy nodded.

“Can you not speak boy?”

“No. I mean yes – yes.”

“Good. I need you to go to Masinge. That’s downstream from here. I will show you the way. It is a big village, filled with women, but I am looking for one in particular.”

“How will I find her?” Little Jimmy asked.

"I am getting there boy! You will see that this village is not set out in the way it should be. There is no Centre, there are no straight avenues. Instead, it hugs onto the side of what is left of the dam."

Little Jimmy had no idea what the man was on about.

"You need to go to the Fork – where the village fans out left and right. Stay on the right, close to the water. She will be there. You will find a house made of red boards. You need to ask for Kamiyo."

"Okay."

"Where are you going?" he dragged Little Jimmy back by his arm. "What were you going to say to her stupid boy?"

Little Jimmy shrugged; somehow he thought that finding her would be enough.

"She has something she needs to give to me. And you tell her that. Tell her that Marikasaan wants what is owed and that otherwise he will come and fetch it."

Little Jimmy nodded seriously.

"Say it back to me boy."

"Marikasaan wants what is owed to him and otherwise he will come and fetch it." The fat man – Marikasaan – flinched and shifted from one foot to the next.

"Yes fine." He let go of Little Jimmy's arm once more. "Once she has given it to you, return to me and stop for nothing else, no matter what." Little Jimmy quickly nodded again. "Stay here."

Marikasaan went back inside and after a while he walked out again with a water gourd that was tied by a rope. He looped it over Little Jimmy's shoulder, but it was too long, so it banged against his knees. Marikasaan held it up, tying a loop in the top so that it fell neatly against Little Jimmy's hip.

"What is your name boy?" he muttered.

"Little Jimmy."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not-"

"You will tell her that your name is… Iguba, and that she may decide whether you are there for peace, or war."

"Iguba?"

"Yes. Now go. You go straight there and come straight back. No wandering off, okay?"

"Yes."

Little Jimmy followed Marikasaan to the outskirts of the village, where the man retied the cloth around Jimmy's wrist and then watched him leave. He carried on along the river alone.

Chapter Seven

South Ku, Bricks.

Earthers, animals and the land must unlearn their destruction. This requires patience.

"Take off that hood, Genevieve; you will pass out in this heat."

"I'm fine."

"If you don't want to end up as crippled as me you will take off that hood."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Jan sighed, picking up his walking stick and pushing it into the dirt. He turned and shoved against the rocks he had been sitting on until he was upright. Then he bent down, as distrustful of his limbs as a giraffe drinking water. He dug the stick into the ground and grabbed the food pack that he had left on the rock. He limped back to the small cart, untying the food bags strapped to the donkeys' faces. They had travelled together a few hours already, all of it unpleasant and with almost no conversation.

Genevieve did not move from under the tree. They had taken a break from the plodding of the donkeys to have lunch, but Genevieve wasn't hungry.

She tore off a piece of dried fruit and chewed listlessly. The cart began moving off and Jan called to her but she didn't want to go after it. The fruit congealed against her teeth. She scraped some off with her tongue. He stopped the cart.

"I don't have any time for games. Get on the cart and let's go."

Perhaps she could run away. That sounded so childish. Perhaps she could go somewhere, find answers. Go to places that her mother didn't want her to go. To her grandmother, perhaps.

She went to the cart and got up next to Jan. He reached over and ripped down her hood. She hit his hand away, the heel of her palm connecting with his forearm, and put her hood up again.

"Don't touch me."

His laugh was a series of short barks. "You are a miserable bitch. Your mother warned me, but this is more than expected."

Her mother's words from him stung like a bellyful of bees. A tear escaped and she pulled her hood closer, turning away from him.

She stared out at the veld. It became a washed yellow blur. She hated Akra. She hated her obsession with tradition and her tiresome lectures.

But it hurt to think that her mother hated her back.

She sniffed loudly without meaning to.

"Come now," he said and before she could stop him Jan had enveloped her in a hug. The thickness and the smell of his body was unfamiliar. She couldn't hold back her crying. He held her, stroking her hair. "It's hard to leave home sometimes, I know. But you will be back soon enough. And you are on your way to see your father. Is that what you are sad about? Leaving home?" He pushed back her shoulders and looked at her face. She stared down and nodded the lie. "Don't worry about that. Jan will look after you." He picked up the reins again and urged the donkeys on. Genevieve rubbed away the tears.

"Have you –" she started, but her voice wavered. She cleared her throat. "Have you been to Bricks before?"

Jan smiled in relief. "Yes, a number of times."

"Is it like they say, full of stuff from the Old World?"

"It is. But most of it is nonsense. They sent all the valuable artefacts to KwaDzanani. The proper historical books. What you get there is rubbish. You will see for yourself, we are only a little way away."

Genevieve tried to look indifferent at the news. She hadn't got the chance to read anymore of the papers, although she had spent time numbly looking at the first unintelligible page.

"I'm heading to Krag – south of KwaDz," Jan continued, "Proper Healers you get there, learning from proper old words that they get from the Library at KwaDz... Not that nonsense that people read in Bricks. It's where Ratel comes from too," he added, as if Genevieve should know who Ratel is. He shook the reins at the slow-moving donkeys. "Your father will be happy to take you to KwaDz, I am sure. It is a place that every Earther must see."

Genevieve nodded and tried to smile, aware that her face was still blotched red from crying.

"I knew your father, Vin, a long time ago." He smiled, waving about his hands as if drawing an image in the air. "Before he got his tusks. He is a brave man, always something on the go. Some ruin to explore, some small wonder to behold. Never able to sit still for a moment."

It was another hour of plodding before the road became busy. It took some time before Genevieve noticed the strangeness of the people on the road with them. Most suffered some ailment: they shuffled and coughed, or had swollen limbs. One man held onto the hand of another and walked with a stick in front of him, stroking it back and forth over the ground as if it were an antenna. They passed a woman coughing wetly into her elbow and Jan took a piece of cloth from his shirt pocket and tied it around his face, covering his nose and mouth.

"You never know what someone will cough onto you in these places," was his answer to her questioning look. Genevieve looked around her bag but there was nothing, so she held her sleeve in front of her mouth.

There were mounds of rocks beside the road. Occasionally a traveller would pick up a stone and toss it onto a mound. Jan watched but provided no explanation. Tumbledown ruins could be seen in all directions. The road dipped, and suddenly they were in Bricks. Chunks of black stone erupted through the grassy surface next to sprays of Finger Grass and dandelion. Jan picked his way over these carefully. When he got it wrong the whole cart bumped so viciously that she had to clutch onto the sides to keep her balance. The buildings were low, their roofs sagging. The walls were held up by a farrago of wood and cob which lay over the original bricks.

At a few entrances stood imposing men with folded arms. They barred the way of small crowds of people, trying to shove their way in. Each person was waving around an Old World item. As they neared one such building, Genevieve could clearly see one woman's face, which was covered in red welts. She held with both hands a stone carving of a tiny person wearing a pointed hat.

"An offering for the prophet," she pleaded, and the man at the door took it from her hands and let her through. Jan barked an unkind laugh at this.

"A waste of time. Don't take these people as your example. They're barely Earthers anymore."

"What are they doing?" she asked, as they passed another group.

"They've gotten it into their heads that the gods will heal them. You know about gods?"

Genevieve nodded indecisively. She knew that gods were private things, you believed in them quietly, if at all.

"People believe that they created the world?"

"Yes," he nodded, "And more than just that. Some people believe that we need to worship them. That they can change situations in our lives, but that we need to show them how much we

love them."

"*Reverence is dangerous,"* Genevieve recited automatically.

"Very good." He smiled. "The man I am going to see in Krag is a great Healer. Wiser even than your own mother. He told me –" Genevieve suppressed a snort as Jan chattered on. Her mother wasn't wise, she was boring.

As they were speaking a man made his way toward the cart. He stank, and Genevieve clutched her sleeve tightly to her mouth as he called out to Jan and stumbled forward.

"Earthers, lend me your ears. For I am the prophet of Gullver. Give me alms and I will cure what ails you." He swayed and made a grab for the reins. Jan pulled them out of his reach and clucked at the donkeys to move on. "May you be buried with your heads poking out from the ground!" But instead of walking away, he followed next to the cart, muttering to himself. When he spoke, it had the tint of desperation. "Please, I have had nought to eat. I am close to eating my most holy of books!"

He produced a shabby book with a crinkled cover, a muddle of indistinct colours and shapes. Jan stared down at the cover intensely. Genevieve doubted he could read.

"Gullver you say? I've never heard of him. Must be a pretty small god."

On the cover, Genevieve began reading the letters, but he was not holding it steady enough for her to see.

The man plumped himself up, pushing out his chest. "Sometimes he is small and sometimes he is great. I am his most loyal follower and only chosen prophet. Not like those Potterians," he hissed as they passed a group all dressed in strange dark clothes, like blankets, which they whisked dramatically behind them. Each had a jagged vertical scar down their forehead. The Prophet of Gullver began to twitch and shake, pointing at them. "Odious vermin. Pernicious Earth crawling –"

Jan steered the cart away as the Potterians turned their cloaks and descended upon the Prophet, each one muttering and pointing a small stick at his face. Jan shook the reins and the donkeys trotted a few steps. Genevieve lost sight of the scene behind her. The town strip ended as suddenly as it had begun, and only a few wall-stumps could be seen poking through the grass. They turned down a slope towards the river, to where a few small ferries could be seen. Genevieve spun around to look back at the one-road town.

"Is that it?"

"That's all there is to it." Jan nodded grimly.

"What about the Sunken Hallways?"

"The whatsers?"

"The place where they buried all knowledge to keep them safe."

"There's nothing buried in Bricks. What you see is what you get. Hop off, this is too steep for a weight on the donkeys."

Genevieve walked behind the cart as they descended the muddy slope towards the sand banks and the river. The donkeys were firmer of foot than her, and she slipped three times. When they reached the bottom she had to take off her cloak and rinse it in the slow moving water. The sandy bank halved the breadth of the river in this spot. She re-joined Jan, who had heaved himself off the cart and was giving over two bundles to a woman who ran one of the smaller ferries.

"Go with her over the river to the crossroads," he directed Genevieve, "Follow the most right fork to Lake Tops. It's not far from where the ferry drops you off, only about four kilometres south. I'm going to have to wait to take the donkeys over, and then I think I will go straight through KwaDzanani tomorrow morning."

Genevieve nodded and climbed onto the boat. The woman pushed them away from the bank with her long oar and only once they were well out from the bank Genevieve turned and shouted back “Thanks”. Jan was already directing two boys to unhitch the cart, waving his stick around. He lifted it into the air and waved at her briefly.

The woman used the tide to bring them across. Genevieve felt sick from the movement of the water. On the other bank she got off and watched the woman row back against the river at a lazy pace. She turned to follow the far-right footpath.

The heat of the day leaked away as she walked, a gauzy grey cover resting over the sun. It looked like it might rain that night. There was no one else in sight, and after a few steps Genevieve took out the papers. She held the first one for a while, scanning through it, and then turned to another which looked similar. She walked slowly as she read.

A New History of South Africa: From the turn of the Millennium Early life on the Arks [307]

2070 – 2080

Early life on the Arks

Expansion into space had always been one of humanity’s shared ambitions. With the successful assembly of the Chinese/Angolan Ark, many saw this as an opportunity to escape the increasing instability and limitations of a life on Earth. However, space presented unique biological, political and social challenges.

Life in Space had long been a staple of writers, philosophers and scientific minds. The technological advances of the last century allowed this project of imagination to become a real possibility. Where the desire to live in space had formerly been only a lofty daydream, the pressing issues of overpopulation and climate change moved this line of thought into a more practical realm. The first lot of apartments on Chan were bought for triple the unidollar price of the average Estate house, 5 years before the first civilians moved into this pioneering establishment. The term most commonly used for any tethered spaceship which functions as living space for 1000 or more people is an ‘Ark’.

Initially many people conceived of these Arks as colonies, belonging to their country of origin. However, the Arks increasingly functioned as the seats of power for corporate governance, collecting resources unobtainable in Space from the countries on the ground and reversing the expected relationship of colonial power and colony. These resources included food and water, but there were more serious problems with living between the stars.

Modelling themselves off the Private Estate system, long-term contracts were signed before being allowed on an Ark. The perpetual problem of reproduction in Space

Genevieve had stopped walking. She flitted back a few lines. *There were more serious problems with living between the stars.* She felt like tearing the paper to hundreds of pieces and stomping on them. It was an absurd fiction, designed to make her feel stupid.

The sound of a goat herd and herder approaching prevented her from doing anything but stuffing the papers badly into her pack. She passed a few cows being guided to their paddocks, gourmandising grass as they walked. Lake Tops came into view soon afterwards.

It was smaller than Lake Floors, and neatly planned. She found the Centre in just a few minutes, despite the ripening dark. There were few people on the paths. Light and noise blustered out of the

doors of the Centre. She took off her hood, bundled it into her bag and walked in, stealing to the side. There was such a commotion that it was at first hard to make out what was going on. In the centre stood a thickly built woman, pointing and shouting at various tables of men. She stood next to a huge dead lizard, taller than Genevieve, an arrow stuck through its back. Its forked tongue lolled out to the side, its ivory-coloured throat streaked with blood.

From the far end of the hall came a shout and in a moment her father was upon her.

"How are you Jenny? Doing well? How was the journey? How old are you now, ten sets and five? Come sit down." He gave her a brief hug and then dragged her by the hand back to his table, where he introduced in rapid succession all of its members, too quickly for her to remember their names. He sat her down next to him and wrapped his arm around the waist of the woman next to him, keenly turning back to the action. The woman turned and smiled at Genevieve underneath her father's chin.

"I'm Fanta. I'm glad you made it. Vinnie and I weren't sure that you were coming after all. Our home is open."

"Genevieve," she said, flattening the first letter in defiance of her father's nickname. "And I thank you for your hospitality," she smiled, trying to make it look sincere. She had not been told that her father had partnered with another woman. She was pretty, with bright excitable eyes and freckles on her cheeks. Akra used to call him 'Vinnie' too, once.

"What's happening here?" Genevieve waved a hand toward the scene in the centre of the room.

"It is a long story and quite sad –"

Her father cut Fanta off. "So Tseb is the woman shrieking like a legless guinea fowl. She thinks the dead lizard there is Lesebi, the father of her children. She claims that every fortnight, Lesebi would transform into a monitor and go and live in the veld, because he was under the curse of a witch or whatever. Then this morning, Roget, who is the guy sitting at the table there, killed this lizard as it was sneaking through his chickens. Now Tseb wants an outside Keeper called in, because the Keeper Spec says that there is no such thing as witches and transformations. Tseb says that Roget has killed her partner, and needs to be punished."

"What nobody is saying," Fanta cut in, "is that it's well known that Lesebi sneaks off to KwaDz every fortnight. We have seen him on the road there, many times. Nobody knows what he does, but Tseb refuses to believe it."

"And Roget was quite right in protecting the chickens." Her father always needed to get the last word in. Genevieve said nothing. It prodded too close to the thorn of the jackal. This was a bad kind of entertainment. The woman was truly furious. The argument persisted through dinner, and Genevieve ate from the meat-rich pot that was in front of her. She lowered her hands onto the table and watched over her arms. Her body ached from the jolting of the cart and the lack of sleep from the night before. Fanta insisted 'Vinnie' take Genevieve to her bed.

Outside the Centre the temperature had dropped significantly, and Genevieve shivered as they walked to the hut. Her father was more subdued.

"This is your fifteenth Spring?"

Genevieve nodded.

"They have given you your own hunt?"

"No, they say I am not ready."

"What nonsense. They are so scared in that village of hunting. We have a bow that you can use. I'll take you on a hunt."

The thought thrilled her. “Really?”

“Yes of course.”

“But will it count, for Admission?”

“Of course it will count. I have been a Master Hunter now for eight seasons, I can admit anyone I want. Well, almost anyone.”

He laughed, and Genevieve smiled too.

“Akra wants me Confirmed.” She didn’t know why she said it. It was clear Vinyl didn’t know how to react.

“Always going about things the wrong way in that village. You are ready to bear a child, but not to hunt? Nonsense. You have your whole life for that. Don’t rush into it.”

“I don’t want to do it. I want to be a Hunter first.”

They came upon a hut and he pointed it out as his own and then kept walking.

“Where are we going?”

He stopped in front of the next one and called gently though the door, “Ma, are you there?”

A voice croaked in response and Vinyl stepped back as a candle was struck and a figure moved inside the dark hut. A crooked old woman emerged and smiled toothlessly at the two of them. “Ma here will take care of you.”

“Am I not staying with you?”

Vinyl laughed carelessly, and walked off. “I will see you in the morning. Thank you Ma!”

Genevieve turned to the old woman who beckoned her inside by crooking a finger.

“I enter your home. My name is Genevieve.”

The old woman emitted only a croak in response, pointing to her throat and lifting her head. Through the folds of skin there was a white scar which stood out against her dark skin. She croaked again and led Genevieve to a water basin and then to her bed. When Genevieve returned from pissing outside, the candle had been left flickering next to her bed. She unrolled her own sleeping mat on top of the one there and climbed under the covers, pulling her hunting hood over as extra cover. She fell asleep immediately.

Chapter Seven

South Ku, Bricks.

Earthers, animals and the land must unlearn their destruction. This requires patience.

"Take off that hood, Genevieve, you will pass out in this heat."

"I'm fine."

"If you don't want to end up as crippled as me you will take off that hood."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Jan sighed, picking up his walking stick and pushing it into the dirt. He turned and shoved against the rocks he had been sitting on until he was upright. Then he bent down, as distrustful of his limbs as a giraffe drinking water. He dug the stick into the ground and grabbed the food pack that he had left on the rock. He limped back to the small cart, untying the food bags strapped to the donkeys' faces. They had travelled together a few hours already, all of it unpleasant and with almost no conversation.

Genevieve did not move from under the tree. They had taken a break from the plodding of the donkeys to have lunch, but Genevieve wasn't hungry.

She tore off a piece of dried fruit and chewed listlessly. The cart began moving off and Jan called to her but she didn't want to go after it. The fruit congealed against her teeth. She scraped some off with her tongue. He stopped the cart.

"I don't have any time for games. Get on the cart and let's go."

Perhaps she could run away. That sounded so childish. Perhaps she could go somewhere, find answers. Go to places that her mother didn't want her to go. To her grandmother, perhaps.

She went to the cart and got up next to Jan. He reached over and ripped down her hood. She hit his hand away, the heel of her palm connecting with his forearm, and put her hood up again.

"Don't touch me."

His laugh was a series of short barks. "You are a miserable bitch. Your mother warned me, but this is more than expected."

Her mother's words from him stung like a bellyful of bees. A tear escaped and she pulled her hood closer, turning away from him.

She stared out at the veld. It became a washed yellow blur. She hated Akra. She hated her obsession with tradition and her tiresome lectures.

But it hurt to think that her mother hated her back.

She sniffed loudly without meaning to.

"Come now," he said and before she could stop him Jan had enveloped her in a hug. The thickness and the smell of his body was unfamiliar. She couldn't hold back her crying. He held her, stroking her hair. "It's hard to leave home sometimes, I know. But you will be back soon enough. And you are on your way to see your father. Is that what you are sad about? Leaving home?" He pushed back her shoulders and looked at her face. She stared down and nodded the lie. "Don't worry about that. Jan will look after you." He picked up the reins again and urged the donkeys on. Genevieve rubbed away the tears.

"Have you –" she started, but her voice wavered. She cleared her throat. "Have you been to Bricks before?"

Jan smiled in relief. "Yes, a number of times."

"Is it like they say, full of stuff from the Old World?"

"It is. But most of it is nonsense. They sent all the valuable artefacts to KwaDzanani. The proper historical books. What you get there is rubbish. You will see for yourself, we are only a little way away."

Genevieve tried to look indifferent at the news. She hadn't got the chance to read anymore of the papers, although she had spent time numbly looking at the first unintelligible page.

"I'm heading to Krag – south of KwaDz," Jan continued, "Proper Healers you get there, learning from proper old words that they get from the Library at KwaDz... Not that nonsense that people read in Bricks. It's where Ratel comes from too," he added, as if Genevieve should know who Ratel is. He shook the reins at the slow-moving donkeys. "Your father will be happy to take you to KwaDz, I am sure. It is a place that every Earther must see."

Genevieve nodded and tried to smile, aware that her face was still blotched red from crying.

"I knew your father a long time ago." He smiled, waving about his hands as if drawing an image in the air. "Before he got his tusks. He is a brave man, always something on the go. Some ruin to explore, some small wonder to behold. Never able to sit still for a moment."

It was another hour of plodding before the road became busy. It took some time before Genevieve noticed the strangeness of the people on the road with them. Most suffered some ailment: they shuffled and coughed, or had swollen limbs. One man held onto the hand of another and walked with a stick in front of him, stroking it back and forth over the ground as if it were an antenna. They passed a woman coughing wetly into her elbow and Jan took a piece of cloth from his shirt pocket and tied it around his face, covering his nose and mouth.

"You never know what someone will cough onto you in these places," was his answer to her questioning look. Genevieve looked around her bag but there was nothing, so she held her sleeve in front of her mouth.

There were mounds of rocks beside the road. Occasionally a traveller would pick up a stone and toss it onto a mound. Jan watched but provided no explanation. Tumbledown ruins could be seen in all directions. The road dipped, and suddenly they were in Bricks. Chunks of black stone erupted through the grassy surface next to sprays of Finger Grass and dandelion. Jan picked his way over these carefully. When he got it wrong the whole cart bumped so viciously that she had to clutch onto the sides to keep her balance. The buildings were low, their roofs sagging. The walls were held up by a farrago of wood and cob which lay over the original bricks.

At a few entrances stood imposing men with folded arms. They barred the way of small crowds of people, trying to shove their way in. Each person was waving around an Old World item. As they neared one such building, Genevieve could clearly see one woman's face, which was covered in red welts. She held with both hands a stone carving of a tiny person wearing a pointed hat.

"An offering for the prophet," she pleaded, and the man at the door took it from her hands and let her through. Jan barked an unkind laugh at this.

"A waste of time. Don't take these people as your example. They're barely Earthers anymore."

"What are they doing?" she asked, as they passed another group.

"They've gotten it into their heads that the gods will heal them. You know about gods?"

Genevieve nodded indecisively. She knew that gods were private things, you believed in them quietly, if at all.

"People believe that they created the world?"

"Yes," he nodded, "And more than just that. Some people believe that we need to worship them. That they can change situations in our lives, but that we need to show them how much we

love them."

"*Reverence is dangerous,"* Genevieve recited automatically.

"Very good." He smiled. "The man I am going to see in Krag is a great Healer. Wiser even than your own mother. He told me – " Genevieve suppressed a snort as Jan chattered on. Her mother wasn't wise, she was boring.

As they were speaking a man made his way toward the cart. He stank, and Genevieve clutched her sleeve tightly to her mouth as he called out to Jan and stumbled forward.

"Earthers, lend me your ears. For I am the prophet of Gullver. Give me alms and I will cure what ails you." He swayed and made a grab for the reins. Jan pulled them out of his reach and clucked at the donkeys to move on. "May you be buried with your heads poking out from the ground!" But instead of walking away, he followed next to the cart, muttering to himself. When he spoke, it had the tint of desperation. "Please, I have had nought to eat. I am close to eating my most holy of books!"

He produced a shabby book with a crinkled cover, a muddle of indistinct colours and shapes. Jan stared down at the cover intensely. Genevieve doubted he could read.

"Gullver you say? I've never heard of him. Must be a pretty small god."

On the cover, Genevieve began reading the letters, but he was not holding it steady enough for her to see.

The man plumped himself up, pushing out his chest. "Sometimes he is small and sometimes he is great. I am his most loyal follower and only chosen prophet. Not like those Potterians," he hissed as they passed a group all dressed in strange dark clothes, like blankets, which they whisked dramatically behind them. Each had a jagged vertical scar down their forehead. The Prophet of Gullver began to twitch and shake, pointing at them. "Odious vermin. Pernicious Earth crawling –"

Jan steered the cart away as the Potterians turned their cloaks and descended upon the Prophet, each one muttering and pointing a small stick at his face. Jan shook the reins and the donkeys trotted a few steps. Genevieve lost sight of the scene behind her. The town strip ended as suddenly as it had begun, and only a few wall-stumps could be seen poking through the grass. They turned down a slope towards the river, to where a few small ferries could be seen. Genevieve spun around to look back at the one-road town.

"Is that it?"

"That's all there is to it." Jan nodded grimly.

"What about the Sunken Hallways?"

"The whatsers?"

"The place where they buried all knowledge to keep them safe."

"There's nothing buried in Bricks. What you see is what you get. Hop off, this is too steep for a weight on the donkeys."

Genevieve walked behind the cart as they descended the muddy slope towards the sand banks and the river. The donkeys were firmer of foot than her, and she slipped three times. When they reached the bottom she had to take off her cloak and rinse it in the slow moving water. The sandy bank halved the breadth of the river in this spot. She re-joined Jan, who had heaved himself off the cart and was giving over two bundles to a woman who ran one of the smaller ferries.

"Go with her over the river to the crossroads," he directed Genevieve, "Follow the most right fork to Lake Tops. It's not far from where the ferry drops you off, only about four kilometres south. I'm going to have to wait to take the donkeys over, and then I think I will go straight through KwaDzanani tomorrow morning."

Genevieve nodded and climbed onto the boat. The woman pushed them away from the bank with her long oar and only once they were well out from the bank Genevieve turned and shouted back "Thanks". Jan was already directing two boys to unhitch the cart, waving his stick around. He lifted it into the air and waved at her briefly.

The woman used the tide to bring them across. Genevieve felt sick from the movement of the water. On the other bank she got off and watched the woman row back against the river at a lazy pace. She turned to follow the far-right footpath.

The heat of the day leaked away as she walked, a gauzy grey cover resting over the sun. It looked like it might rain that night. There was no one else in sight, and after a few steps Genevieve took out the papers. She held the first one for a while, scanning through it, and then turned to another which looked similar. She walked slowly as she read.

A New History of South Africa: From the turn of the Millennium Early life on the Arks [307]

2070 – 2080

Early life on the Arks

Expansion into space had always been one of humanity's shared ambitions. With the successful assembly of the Chinese/Angolan Ark, many saw this as an opportunity to escape the increasing instability and limitations of a life on Earth. However, space presented unique biological, political and social challenges.

Life in Space had long been a staple of writers, philosophers and scientific minds. The technological advances of the last century allowed this project of imagination to become a real possibility. Where the desire to live in space had formerly been only a lofty daydream, the pressing issues of overpopulation and climate change moved this line of thought into a more practical realm. The first lot of apartments on Chan were bought for triple the unidollar price of the average Estate house, 5 years before the first civilians moved into this pioneering establishment. The term most commonly used for any tethered spaceship which functions as living space for 1000 or more people is an 'Ark'.

Initially many people conceived of these Arks as colonies, belonging to their country of origin. However, the Arks increasingly functioned as the seats of power for corporate governance, collecting resources unobtainable in Space from the countries on the ground and reversing the expected relationship of colonial power and colony. These resources included food and water, but there were more serious problems with living between the stars.

Modelling themselves off the Private Estate system, long-term contracts were signed before being allowed on an Ark. The perpetual problem of reproduction in Space

Genevieve had stopped walking. She flitted back a few lines. *There were more serious problems with living between the stars.* She felt like tearing the paper to hundreds of pieces and stomping on them. It was an absurd fiction, designed to make her feel stupid.

The sound of a goat herd and herder approaching prevented her from doing anything but stuffing the papers badly into her pack. She passed a few cows being guided to their paddocks, gourmandising grass as they walked. Lake Tops came into view soon afterwards.

It was smaller than Lake Floors, and neatly planned. She found the Centre in just a few minutes, despite the ripening dark. There were few people on the paths. Light and noise blustered out of the

doors of the Centre. She took off her hood, bundled it into her bag and walked in, stealing to the side. There was such a commotion that it was at first hard to make out what was going on. In the centre stood a thickly built woman, pointing and shouting at various tables of men. She stood next to a huge dead lizard, taller than Genevieve, an arrow stuck through its back. Its forked tongue lolled out to the side, its ivory-coloured throat streaked with blood.

From the far end of the hall came a shout and in a moment her father was upon her.

"How are you Jenny? Doing well? How was the journey? How old are you now, ten sets and five? Come sit down." He gave her a brief hug and then dragged her by the hand back to his table, where he introduced in rapid succession all of its members, too quickly for her to remember their names. He sat her down next to him and wrapped his arm around the waist of the woman next to him, keenly turning back to the action. The woman turned and smiled at Genevieve underneath her father's chin.

"I'm Fanta. I'm glad you made it. Vinnie and I weren't sure that you were coming after all. Our home is open."

"Genevieve," she said, flattening the first letter in defiance of her father's nickname. "And I thank you for your hospitality," she smiled, trying to make it look sincere. She had not been told that her father had partnered with another woman. She was pretty, with bright excitable eyes and freckles on her cheeks. Akra used to call him 'Vinnie' too, once.

"What's happening here?" Genevieve waved a hand toward the scene in the centre of the room.

"It is a long story and quite sad –"

Her father cut Fanta off. "So Tseb is the woman shrieking like a legless guinea fowl. She thinks the dead lizard there is Lesebi, the father of her children. She claims that every fortnight, Lesebi would transform into a monitor and go and live in the veld, because he was under the curse of a witch or whatever. Then this morning, Roget, who is the guy sitting at the table there, killed this lizard as it was sneaking through his chickens. Now Tseb wants an outside Keeper called in, because the Keeper Spec says that there is no such thing as witches and transformations. Tseb says that Roget has killed her partner, and needs to be punished."

"What nobody is saying," Fanta cut in, "is that it's well known that Lesebi sneaks off to KwaDz every fortnight. We have seen him on the road there, many times. Nobody knows what he does, but Tseb refuses to believe it."

"And Roget was quite right in protecting the chickens." Her father always needed to get the last word in. Genevieve said nothing. It prodded too close to the thorn of the jackal. This was a bad kind of entertainment. The woman was truly furious. The argument persisted through dinner, and Genevieve ate from the meat-rich pot that was in front of her. She lowered her hands onto the table and watched over her arms. Her body ached from the jolting of the cart and the lack of sleep from the night before. Fanta insisted 'Vinnie' take Genevieve to her bed.

Outside the Centre the temperature had dropped significantly, and Genevieve shivered as they walked to the hut. Her father was more subdued.

"This is your fifteenth Spring?"

Genevieve nodded.

"They have given you your own hunt?"

"No, they say I am not ready."

"What nonsense. They are so scared in that village of hunting. We have a bow that you can use. I'll take you on a hunt."

The thought thrilled her. “Really?”

“Yes of course.”

“But will it count, for Admission?”

“Of course it will count. I have been a Master Hunter now for eight seasons, I can admit anyone I want. Well, almost anyone.”

He laughed, and Genevieve smiled too.

“Akra wants me Confirmed.” She didn’t know why she said it. It was clear Vinyl didn’t know how to react.

“Always going about things the wrong way in that village. You are ready to bear a child, but not to hunt? Nonsense. You have your whole life for that. Don’t rush into it.”

“I don’t want to do it. I want to be a Hunter first.”

They came upon a hut and he pointed it out as his own and then kept walking.

“Where are we going?”

He stopped in front of the next one and called gently though the door, “Ma, are you there?”

A voice croaked in response and Vinyl stepped back as a candle was struck and a figure moved inside the dark hut. A crooked old woman emerged and smiled toothlessly at the two of them. “Ma here will take care of you.”

“Am I not staying with you?”

Vinyl laughed carelessly, and walked off. “I will see you in the morning. Thank you Ma!”

Genevieve turned to the old woman who beckoned her inside by crooking a finger.

“I enter your home. My name is Genevieve.”

The old woman emitted only a croak in response, pointing to her throat and lifting her head. Through the folds of skin there was a white scar which stood out against her dark skin. She croaked again and led Genevieve to a water basin and then to her bed. When Genevieve returned from pissing outside, the candle had been left flickering next to her bed. She unrolled her own sleeping mat on top of the one there and climbed under the covers, pulling her hunting hood over as extra cover. She fell asleep immediately.

Chapter Nine

North Ku, Masinge.

There were a few other people walking along the river. Little Jimmy would keep pace a while and then walk ahead. Marikasaan had told him to follow the river until he got to Masinge, and so far his journey had been quite easy. Perhaps when he came back Marikasaan would take him to a Tattooist, and he would get the šalang. That put a spring in his step, despite how tired he was.

The šalang was more important than he had thought. Every single person in Ku had one. Marikasaan had said that you have a šalang unless you were banished, or an Other. Which one was their family? The Old Lady had left because you couldn't have more than two children, and in total she had twelve. All of them except Adrian and Brian were born outside Ku – did that mean that they were Others? It must. Little Jimmy checked that the cloth around his wrist, where the šalang would have been, was tight. They killed others, so he could not let anyone see that he didn't have the šalang.

On the road, every person was laden with goods. Tea and hemp and all manner of food stuffs. There was even a 'dongkey' – this was what he was told it was called – which was really just a small horse with big ears. He tried to stroke it but it nipped the air near his fingers. The owner laughed and dragged the thing away, its hips swaying under two large sacks. Jimmy hadn't seen many animals when he was growing up. They once had a horse, and Lazy had brought with him a small dog that chased the chickens and ducks. But mostly he only knew what they were from the stories his siblings told. He was sure some of them were made up. Elephants and Caramels and Tigers, creatures with long necks and big cats which could outrun impala.

The people on the road were cold to him. When he wandered up, trying to listen to their conversations, they would stop speaking and glare at him, and he would worry they could see that beneath the cloth around his wrist he had no šalang. Others were worse: their eyes had the glaze of dead animals. They stared ahead not seeing, stumbling and walking skew.

Little Jimmy had walked behind one man as he weaved from one side of the road to the other, colliding with people and trees and bushes. At a stage where the road sloped sharply toward the river, the man was pulled, as if by a string, to the water, tumbling down the bank. Jimmy laughed as he splashed and groaned at this cold surprise, his sugar cane reeds floating away.

Two men dropped their goods and ran in after him. One dragged him out and the other collected his floating goods. They pulled him onto the mud, where he lay coughing and spluttering. The first man took off his shoes as the other collected the fallen sugar cane. People who had paused to watch the spectacle averted their eyes. The two men packed their loot – the shoes were placed on top of the sugarcane bundle – and marched off at a quicker pace, not talking to each other. Nobody stopped on the road to help the fallen man.

Little Jimmy stayed a while, watching him make furious noises and gestures to the sky and the mud. Just as Little Jimmy was ready to walk away the man sat up abruptly, looking left and right. Then he lay flat again and urgently shook his hand over his belly. Little Jimmy's mouth fell open. The man had taken out his penis, stiffer than Little Jimmy's forearm, and was jerking it up and down, all the while lying in the mud which sucked and squelched in a choir of obscene noises.

He hurried away.

After an hour of walking, he could not see the town road for the mass of people who swarmed around him. Men shouted and grunted and laughed. There were some who had set up square hay bales on the side of the road, shouting out the names of the goods in front of them. People squeezed and sniffed fruit, rapping their knuckles on the big vegetables. A man had skewered and was grilling rats. Little Jimmy didn't know that rats could get so fat. They swapped their goods for little metal discs. These were for when you didn't have anything real to swap. Brian had told him that. Little Jimmy didn't have anything to swap, or any metal discs, but he didn't want any rat either.

He milled about, trying to stay to the right but being jostled toward the centre.

There were so many women. Gap-toothed, scratched, with clumps of hair missing and a sheen of lifelessness in their eyes. They sauntered up to the men arriving in the town, swaying their hips like the dongkey.

He fumbled his way through the crowd, shaded by two large buildings. On the right there was a building that was once white, but black moss had spread from every crook and crack. He counted four layers of windows. There were women and clothes the bright colours of poison beetles dangling from these gaps. One light-skinned woman wore nothing on her top, and her pink-nipple breasts dangled over the ledge. She groped and waggled them for the men below.

On the left was the grey face of a building. Through the empty doors and windows he could see the river. It was so precariously balanced that it made him feel dizzy to look at it.

He pushed onward, tightening the cloth around his wrist every few steps, scared that someone would get suspicious and ask to see his šalang.

The road underneath him changed. If he burrowed his foot through the clammy layer of straw, shimmying from side to side, it met hard black rock. The cloying smell of the rotting straw made him feel sick.

As Little Jimmy walked the crowd began to thin. Fires had been lit, even though it was still light. People sat in front of dilapidated shacks, rusted metal sheets held up by precariously balanced chunks of cement. Across the road from him a woman emerged from the darkness of a shack. She was as frail and thin as a mosquito. She sat hunched over for a while, her clumpy hair in her face as she rocked from side to side, fiddling with something on the floor. Little Jimmy moved closer, folding his arms to hide the cloth. In her hand the woman cupped a small gourd. The stem poked between her middle fingers, thin and straight. She was filling a second, shorter stem with dark grass and picking off a finger-full of brown stuff, like cow dung, stuffing it into the small stem. It was a pipe – Lazy Toby's father had one of those for smoking ganja. When she lit it he could smell marijuana, but there was also a sweet smell which trickled into his nostrils. The smoke wound its way up from her nose and mouth in a lazy puff and her eyes closed, her head falling backwards. When she opened her lids to take another drag the dark centres of her eyes had receded into dots. Some part of her being shrunk away from the world, and Jimmy hurried away from her.

The afternoon throbbed on in heat and noise as Little Jimmy walked. The ground below him turned from mulch to mud, always sloping down toward the river, which was reflected brightly between the shacks.

When Little Jimmy found the House of Boards he felt nervous. It was bigger than he thought it would be. The boards were watery red. He fidgeted with the strap of the water gourd, and retied the cloth around his wrist.

Iguba, here to see… from Marikasaan. Here to see…Cameltoe. Kamiyo. The door was really a curtain, so he knocked on the wood next to it. There was a fluttering of movement inside, the

curtain swelled and sucked and a shimmering noise grew. He took a step back.

A gigantic figure pulled back the curtain.

"What do you want?" The woman glared down at him through charcoal-lined eyes. Her shoulders were broad and her arms were thick. She was swathed in bright yellow and red fabrics which were slung around her body, over one shoulder and under the other. Loops of shining metal slid up and down her arms and even more clinked as she shifted her feet.

"Boy, I said what do you want?"

Little Jimmy stuttered incoherently. There were tittering noises from beyond the curtain, women whispering. He peered past this formidable obstacle to the darkness beyond and saw movement. The gargantuan woman shifted to stand in front of him. They stared in silence a while.

Little Jimmy swallowed.

"I am here from Marikasaan."

Some emotion swept the woman's face and was cleared away with a single raised eyebrow.

"Who cares?"

This was not going as expected.

"I am here to see. Kamel- Kamiyo. I am Iguba."

The woman stared down at Little Jimmy for a long time, unmoving. He folded his arms behind his back, checking the tightness of the cloth. The voices behind the curtain had fallen silent. She studied the boy's face, and at length turned and called "Kamiyo!"

The chatter behind the curtain resumed and a woman appeared from behind the thick fabric, quietly and without ceremony, like a seed sprouting from the earth. She was beautiful, like his sister Brienna, and probably the same age. Her skin was brown and smooth, her hair sleek and black. She made him want to cry. *Little Jimmy stood biting his lip. The big woman grabbed Kamiyo's hand, leaning in to whisper something in her ear. Kamiyo smiled at Little Jimmy and walked out of the House of Boards, beckoning him. She flitted between the shacks, skipping over the rubbish cast from the houses, and down the river bank. There was something Marikasaan had told him to say, but he could not remember it. Her pants were soft and loose, as was her pale shirt. He caught up with her on the sandbank where the river lapped softly against the shore. She looked down as she walked.*

"You were sent by Marikasaan?"

Little Jimmy nodded sombrely.

She swooped down and picked up a pebble, flinging it out along the water. It skipped once and sank. "How do you know Marikasaan?"

Explanations knotted themselves in his head and he scratched the cloth around his wrist, shrugging. Kamiyo saw. He crossed his arms too quickly and tried to uncross them but by then she was looking away again.

"I know you don't know what he wants from me. But –"she paused indecisively.

"He wants what is owed to him," Little Jimmy intercepted.

"I owe him nothing." Her voice cracked and Little Jimmy shied away. She saw him flinch and gently touched his arm. "I'm sorry, you are only the messenger." She reached down and picked up another pebble, flinging it out along the water. It skipped three times along the surface before sinking. When she saw his wide-eyed wonder she laughed.

"What is your name?"

He hesitated.

"Not Iguba, little pigeon. Your real one."

"Little Jimmy," he croaked. It did sound like a ridiculous name now that he said it to her.

"That is a very… unique name. Where do you come from 'Little Jimmy'?" It sounded even more ridiculous when she said it.

"I'm not allowed to say."

She looked down at his wrist. "As long as you came to Masinge of your own will." She looked him up and down sceptically. "Well 'Little' is no name to have around this town." She let a cynical smile escape from the corner of her mouth. "I think you should just stick to 'Jimmy'."

He nodded in agreement. She picked up another pebble and positioned it between his thumb and first finger, picking up another of her own and skipping it across the water once more. Little Jimmy's sunk straight down. They stayed there a while, and she showed him which pebbles to choose. He threw a pebble that skipped once, and Kamiyo clapped her hands.

"Soon you will get it." She sighed and looked out across the water. "Let us get to the business of this visit." He nodded, and they picked their way back through the rubble behind the shacks until they returned to the House of Boards.

"Wait here," Kamiyo advised, as she disappeared behind the curtain.

While Little Jimmy waited a number of men slunk up the road, all keeping a respectful distance from the House of Boards. The dusk deepened as they waited. Once, the curtain shifted and a tall man in neat clothes was beckoned inside.

Kamiyo emerged a while later with a small piece of cloth which she handed to Little Jimmy. He glanced down, but she lifted his chin so that he was looking into her eyes.

"You tell Marikasaan that I too paid dearly for my freedom, and that I owe him nothing more than this." Her hands were soft and warm, but her voice was cold.

After that Kamiyo went inside, and Little Jimmy hurried back the way he had come. Once he was out of Masinge, in the last light reflected off the great river Inyoka, he loosened the bindings to look inside the bundle. Five ripe heads of ganja were entwined with a lock of straight black hair.

Chapter Ten

South Ku, Lake Tops.

History is only for those who keep it. They shall be our Keepers, and they will protect us from the myth of progress. The Keepers shall be trained to be just and impartial, conscious of our history and fair to the people they preside over. They will report to an elected Council. The council will report to the Trust, who have the well-being of all the people of Ku as their highest concern.

Genevieve was woken by the woman 'Ma' shuffling around the hut. She was completing the kind of morning regime the old are fond of. Genevieve's grandmother suffered from the same chronic compulsion for routine; a list of things that needed to be done before the day could begin.

After she had left, Genevieve slept restlessly as the din made by the birds got louder. She defiantly flung off her stuffy blankets and kept her eyes closed. An image struck her suddenly: the jackal, triple its normal size, black as coal, stalking quietly through the veld. She wanted to follow it, but didn't know where it led. Had she conjured it just to frighten herself? Did such animals really exist? She sat up and stretched, her back clicking as she twisted from side to side, her hamstrings tight from the previous day's journey.

She drank some water from her water pouch which she had filled the night before. The water was less acidic than at Lake Floors. She washed her face with water from the basin, pulled her fingers through her hair and scrubbed her teeth with those same fingers.

Outside the hut the Earthers walked with baskets filled with seeds or roots from the veld. She went to her father's hut and called for him. There was no reply. She had already turned to walk away when Fanta came out.

"I'm sorry, I was just cleaning. Will you stay a moment? I am going to breakfast now."

"Can I help?"

Together they swept out the hut and shook the blankets and mats. They left the basin, a wooden bowl, empty in the sun. As they walked to the Centre, it became apparent that Fanta was as talkative as Vinyl. She wondered how they managed their conversations if neither one ever shut up.

"I convinced Vinnie to let you sleep in this morning, even though he wanted to take you hunting. We'll find something for you to do until this afternoon. I don't think anyone will be doing anything this afternoon."

"Why not?"

"Poor Tseb is holding a funeral for the lizard."

"For… but – "

"I know. Vinnie insists that we go. It's something to do." She shrugged.

In the Centre were some dried fruits and a huge kettle of red tea. The old woman, Ma, was there, sucking on a tuber. Genevieve pointed her out to Fanta.

"What happened to her throat?"

"Ma? She was already like that when she came to Lake Tops. No one knows, but everyone says that when she was younger she engaged in witchcraft, and one of her potions went badly and boiled her throat."

Genevieve's eyes widened. "Do you really believe that?"

"No of course not, silly!" Her laugh was high pitched and childish. She even put her hand in

front of her mouth, like a little girl. "Would we put you in a hut with a dangerous witch? She can't do anything now that she doesn't have a voice."

Fanta spotted Genevieve's father and let out a squeal, leaping towards him. She stopped abruptly when he dangled two headless guinea fowl in her face, making their bloodied wings flap. He feinted as if he would throw one at her.

"Vinnie no! That's disgusting!"

It was enough provocation to make her father chase after her.

Some eyes shifted wearily to the couple, but no one so much as clucked their tongue. Genevieve moved to a far table and sat alone, sipping tea. When Vinyl spotted her he ran towards her.

"Jenny! When are we going Hunting?"

He thumped the bloodied birds onto the table. She did not react, other than to pull a feather out of her tea and rub it between her fingers. He was like a giddy teenager, it was embarrassing. Fanta reattached herself to his arm.

"Is that not enough for today?" Genevieve asked, motioning towards the birds.

"Mud alone knows how much meat we'll need: the whole village will be eating. It's an important occasion today."

"I already told her about the funeral, Vinnie," said Fanta, through a mouthful of food.

"You told her?" he was genuinely disappointed. Then his expression changed again. "Naughty girl, it was a surprise!" He leaned forward and bit the loose end of the fruit strip hanging from Fanta's hand, tearing it from side to side and making growling noises. The fruit strip tore apart and he gobbled it up while Fanta nearly choked on her own piece with laughter. Genevieve's fruit strip had been hovering immobile halfway to her mouth through the whole incident. She lowered it and finished her tea.

"I will go and offer help in the kitchens." She carefully took the two fowls by their legs. Her father began pleading with her to stay before once more being distracted by Fanta. She weighed the birds in her hands. They were fully matured, both female. They probably both had partners. Guinea fowls mate for life. She kept her facial expression unchanged and, under her breath, began the salutation which her father never said:

"*I thank you Friend for your life. It is not ours to take*…"

The men and women preparing meals in the Centre were pleasant, especially once they realised she was apprenticing as a Hunter. She prepared the first guinea fowl. After washing away the blood and removing the arrowhead, she took out the flight feathers, as was customary, to be sent to KwaDz. Then she pulled out the rest, down to their clear stems, separating the ornamental feathers from the fluffy down. She clipped the quills from the down and was guided by one of the others to where they were airing feathers under a fine mesh of string. When she returned she cut off the feet below the hock and inserted a knife just below the rib cage. The knife was not very sharp and got stuck twice on the hard plate of bone before cutting through. She emptied the craw and pulled out what was left behind after its decapitation. She removed the heart, which had been scratched by her father's arrow. She took out the liver and then cut down the bird, emptying the gizzard and removing the intestines. She washed it and gave it to one of the cooks, who looked over her work and rubbed a mixture of salts and herbs over the skin. Then she repeated the exact same procedure with the second bird. Afterwards, she took the bowl of innards to the dogs which had been waiting outside. They scrapped over the bloody morsels.

One dog, smaller than the rest but with the same dark-with-tan features followed her down to the river, licking her fingers when they came into reach. She washed her hands as the dog licked the bowl. Even after she was done washing the dog kept following her, sniffing her hands. She walked up along the river to a tangle of bushes, looking for some aromatic plant to scrub off the smell of dead meat. Wedged underneath a larger bush was a katterkruie bush, small and grey. Her mother used it to help with coughing, but she stole a handful of its droopy early Spring leaves and rubbed them over her hands. The dog sat patiently on even ground and when Genevieve returned she offered her hand to the dog which sneezed violently and looked at her with indignation.
"Sorry friend." She laughed and they parted ways at the Centre.

Genevieve sat sharpening knives at a table near one of the side doors. She used the sharpening stone and leather strop from the kitchen and rewrapped some of the worn hilts. She stared absentmindedly at the *Lessons* as she worked. They were badly maintained, above it she could only make out a few of the letter in the heading 'All ye who live here'. Her mother had told her that not all villages had that heading above the *Lessons*, but then again, some villages didn't keep the *Lessons* at all. She hummed an old song – she had forgotten many of the words:

All ye who live here, all ye who live,
all ye who well intend…

What was the next line? Her mother didn't like her singing that song. Genevieve had learnt it from her grandmother. Akra said it was too depressing.

Fanta found Genevieve there amongst the muddle of blades and cloth. She was flushed from working in the fields and played with a dry blister on her finger as they waited for Vinyl. She spoke throughout. Genevieve ignored her and worked on the knives. When she looked up again the Centre had filled up. It did indeed seem as if every person had taken the afternoon off to behold the spectacle. Genevieve collected the scraps and returned the knives to the kitchen. The light from the doors was blotted out by unsure participants, and the Centre became dark. The darkness excited the crowd, who spoke loudly. Vinyl had joined them and now flitted between groups of people, laughing and joking. The Centre stank of midday sweat.

A hush went through the crowd as Tseb entered. Only those at the back kept muttering as they tried to get a better view. Genevieve climbed up onto the table with the other curious onlookers. Soon she could hear Tseb's high-pitched wailing. She walked slowly next to a silent friend who gripped her arm as if Tseb were a wilting blossom.

Behind them, in a wheelbarrow, came the lizard. A snuffle of laughter went through the Centre but soon died down. The lizard was wrapped in a hemp cloth and its make shift hearse was strewn with small flowers. Its face was visible, but did not have the peaceful look of the dead. Its tongue lolled out to the side and its eyes were covered in a white film. Its thick claws had been folded over its chest, but its tail dragged in the dirt behind them. The man pushing the wheelbarrow looked suitably abashed. The stench reached Genevieve. She held her hand in front of her face and suppressed a cough. A man next to her leaned over to his companion.

"The Crafters wouldn't touch it. They refused to make a coffin. Can you smell that thing!"

The wheelbarrow hearse made a circuit around the fire and then stopped, facing the entrance. Tseb stood next to it, her handkerchief clutched to her mouth, probably more for the stench than out of grief. The man who had pushed the wheelbarrow spoke up nervously.

"If anyone would like to say a few –"

"I would!" thundered Vinyl, leaping off a table and sprinting to the wheelbarrow. Once he reached it his demeanour changed: his shoulders hunched forward and his head bowed, he spoke solemnly and slowly.

"We are gathered here today," there were a few hisses, "to remember the very full life of Lesebi , light of Tseb's life, and perhaps of some others too." Although his face remained blank the meaning was well received and most in the audience had to smother their smiles.

"He was a busy man. Never in once place for too long. And he had a most grievous fondness for the fruits born from between a woman's legs." The hall bubbled in incredulity. "Eggs! Of course!" Vinyl interjected, and then there was outright laughter. "Enough!" he shouted, as if the speech was not going as intended. He turned and apologised in a loud whisper to Tseb, "I don't know what they think this is. No respect." He waved again at the crowd. "Dear Earthers! We are gathered here today for a sacred ceremony, the return of one of our own to the Earth." The noise died down.

"Let me say then finally: although his belly slid close to the ground, it was erect that Tseb and others will remember him." There was another round of laughter which he and the sheepish hearse-pusher quieted. Vinyl led the funeral procession out and most of the village followed. The Keeper and two of his fellows, as well as those working on the feast in the kitchen, stayed behind.

Genevieve followed the crowd. The gravesite was a way off. It stood away from the graveyard. The lizard fell into the hole with a loud plop, and the villagers made their way back to the Centre for the feast. On the way back, Vinyl caught up with Genevieve, putting his hand around her shoulder.

"How much fun was that?" His eyes gleamed.

Genevieve shrugged and smiled, not willing to admit her disgust at his part in the cruel scene.

"Well Jenny, I was thinking it would be good to go out for a hunt now, quick quick before the Feast."

"It's too late to catch something for the feast now."

"Not for the feast Jenny, for your Admission! Come on, you can pick any bow from the armoury."

The sun had begun to sink as they made their way into the thick bush, both wearing their red hunting hoods. It was strange to go on a hunt with only two people.

Every noise was amplified: an innocuous footfall crunched like a broken pot; the brush of a sleeve against the grass scratched like a beetle in the ear. They soon heard the titters of guinea fowl. The birds streamed over a buck path in front of them. Genevieve raised her bow but they were gone. Vinyl turned to follow them through the high grass. They stalked quietly until they could see an impenetrable bush which surrounded a large tree. In it they could hear the birds, flapping and shifting, preparing for a night's sleep. If she were to shoot one it could not be retrieved. Vinyl came up behind her shoulder, his bow half-drawn.

"Shoot one anyway. It's good practise."

Genevieve pursed her lips and shook her head. She stood upright and walked loudly back to the pathway down which they had come. Vinyl was behind her and as she turned onto the pathway a large eland froze, just ahead of her. She watched as it blinked once, and then turned and galloped. Vinyl ran up next to her.

"Aww Jenny," he said loudly, "you let it get away!"

Genevieve shrugged it off and they made their way back to Lake Tops.

The drums in the Centre rumbled like a hungry belly, and people danced, their beaded ankles slamming into the ground. Howls and barks and shrieks were loaned from the animals outside. Genevieve drank umqombothi . Her mother would have never allowed it. As the people danced, so too did the shadows; long and high, shaking in the thatched roof. Bats flitted out of the Centre unheeded and moths looped around the make-believe stars in the flames, closer and closer until they were burned. Genevieve danced until her neck was damp with sweat. In the shadows, the black jackal danced next to her, and she spiralled towards the fire. The music stopped and the xylophone players rubbed their wrists.

Fanta sat down on the mat near the other musicians with a strange instrument. It was like a guitar, but it leaned against her shoulder and the heavy gourd which made up the base rested in her lap. The three strings did not give the frayed sound of plant matter, but sang through the whole Centre. She stroked the wooden bow over two strings, and the harmony thrilled Genevieve. She walked to the closest bench so that she could better see the instrument. The bow was made from bleached hairs – she had seen that before. The strings lay flat against the skin of the instrument and shone in the light. Fanta played a slow song, in such contrast to her normal hurried babble. Others seemed not to notice the warm enchantment which filled the Centre, soaking into the smoke and calming the wild shadows.

She felt overwhelmingly lonely in that moment, but also that her loneliness was something to be cherished. The other Earthers did not understand; were not even interested – not in this beautiful music nor in the world around them. They didn't even pause to consider that there must be a world outside of Ku somewhere. Where else did Others come from?

Drunken laughter burst through, but the instrument enveloped it, gently putting aside its discordance.

The Trust would have the answers. The Keeper's oath read *The Truth is kept by all of us*, but above all by the Trust. She needed to go to KwaDz, to find the answers.

The last note rang out and Genevieve stayed seated, unable to move for the weariness of the end of the sound, and the weight of the decision she had made. Fanta looked up and the serious expression fell from her face. She sat next to Genevieve.

"That was beautiful."

"Thank you. It's a song I've been writing the past few days."

"What is this instrument?"

"I have called her Kamaicha," she laughed in the falsetto which grated Genevieve so much; but now it annoyed her less. Fanta picked the instrument up from between her legs, examining it as if for the first time.

"My mama was originally from En-Dear. This is one of their instruments. When her mama came to Ku she created the first one, and mama and I made this one together twenty seasons ago when I was a young girl."

"What is it made of?"

Fanta gave her a coy look, "I can't give away family secrets."

Genevieve laughed with her.

"Okay, how about just telling me what the strings are made of? The bow is bleached... horsehair? The body is wood."

"Wood and leather." She handed the instrument to Genevieve, who plucked one of the strings. It vibrated between her fingers. The smell of wood and old leather filled her nostrils.

"But the strings?"

Fanta looked around and made sure no one else was listening. “Gut. They are made from goat gut.” Genevieve laughed: surely it was a joke.

“That’s not goat’s gut!” To her mind, people fished with gut, they didn’t play music with it.

“Not in its normal form!” Fanta chided, slapping Genevieve’s hand. “It’s a long and difficult process. This is the final product.” She took Kamaicha back from Genevieve and placed it inside a soft case. “People think when you are a Music-Teller all you do is play around at night sometimes. But I create my own instruments, I practise them, I look after them and I remember music for many players –" She was cut short as Vinyl swooped down and kissed her lips.

“Here are my lovely ladies.”

“Did you hear my new song Vinnie?”

“Was that a new song? It was very nice.” The next moment Vinyl had floated away after some acquaintance.

Fanta and Genevieve drank together for a while, dancing when the drumming started again, speaking and laughing when it did not. Fanta’s ability to strike conversation out of nowhere was comforting. There were no strained silences, no subjects that should be avoided. Vinyl fell asleep with his head on the table, and most of the people had disappeared when Fanta asked, “Have you ever been with a man Genevieve?”

Genevieve’s head throbbed with hundreds of answers.

“I…”

“Come on,” Fanta nudged her, “You’re not going to get into trouble.”

“Just before I left… No.”

“What happened?”

Fanta leaned in, holding onto Genevieve’s hands.

“This guy I was friends with. He… I didn’t want to.”

Genevieve tried a few more times to explain what had happened, and each explanation fell short. Fanta stopped her gracefully.

“Let me tell you about my first time,” she said, swivelling on the bench so that they were facing each other. Fanta spoke softly, even though no one could possibly hear. “I was curious. I had never really liked being with girls. I was not Confirmed yet, I doubt anyone is at their first time. I had been ‘seeing’ this boy, Samuel Sung. We spent lots of time together, but whenever my family asked I told them we were just friends. Whenever Sammy and I got a chance we would go into the veld, down to Inyoka or up a koppie. We would lie in the grass and just kiss for hours. It was so romantic, all the sneaking around. We got further and further every time, and eventually we were completely naked, and it just happened. I wasn’t sure that I wanted it to happen, and I didn’t even enjoy it that first time. But when we did it again I did like it. Was that what it was like?”

Genevieve nodded. It was not like that at all.

When she tried to fall asleep that night she felt miserable. She repeated Fanta’s analogy. Genevieve had been a child about it: she didn’t do anything she hadn’t wanted to do someday. This thought gave little comfort. It was like wearing a thin blanket on a cold night. She tried to wrap the memory with that explanation, but that didn’t hide its ugly shape. She had to believe that the blanket was thick enough to chase the chill from her bones. But it was no blanket at all. It was more like sand on a funeral bed.

Chapter Eleven

North Ku, between towns.

Neko limped from the hut where he had been strung up. The two Launders – Log and Lux, Markie had called them – walked ahead. He winced as he felt around his mouth. The fourth tooth back on the top right-hand side moved. Whenever his mind was occupied elsewhere his tongue would slither to the loose tooth, pushing it back and forward.

The Launders ambled through the crowd and Neko walked in the empty space behind them. In addition to the tooth, his eyes stung with tiredness and his body hurt at every step, his neck and arms stiff. He cleared his throat, squinting up at the men.

"It's Log, yes? Where are we going?" The brow of the taller man protruded like a shelf above his eyes, which were the colour of deep shit. His hair was shaved short, except for a thin tail of plaits which tapered into a dry frizz above his shoulders. The other glanced back at him. He too had a neck like a tree stump and fingers like wet bread. The only difference was that he was blonde. They looked like the kind of men who would never get called off for violent play in Murderball, because there was still a blood stain where the last referee had stood.

"We're going to get some rabbits."

"Are rabbits a code for something?"

"Rabbits are whores," explained Log.

"Why do you need me to get whores?"

"Because that's what Markie said. He said you were good at talking."

"And I'm supposed to talk these people into coming with us?"

Log grunted. "You talk, I will take. We will see which of us catches more."

"What if I don't get any?"

Lux, the blonde, stopped and bent forward to look at him.

"Then you don't pay off your debt."

A thought had been nagging at him, like the tooth. He toyed with it, too scared to prod and feel the damage, the real shape of it. Vile and Thulisa's children were here somewhere in Masinge. Had they been taken, or sold into it by their parents? And what kind of life had they been sold into? – whoring?

He had heard of people – mostly women and young men – abducted from neighbouring villages and brought to Masinge to whore. They were hooked on drugs and locked away. Many would escape, he imagined. Even he could run if he had been in any state to do so.

They walked on for some time and crossed over the river using an old bridge. The concrete was propped up by well-shaped planks, but the whole thing shifted as the three men made their way over. It was just broad enough for Log and Lux to walk shoulder to shoulder. On the other side was an area he had never visited before. A stable, tucked between twisted Wild Olives which grew all around this area. It was well kept.

It might have once been a Post. He heard that further down South there were still working Posts running messages from the Trust to Keepers. He hadn't seen one working since he was a kid. They had fallen into disuse for no apparent reason.

There were four horses tied to the fence in the front paddock, and a closed cart with a thick door, ready for harnessing and hitching. The cart was a cumbersome contraption: a giant box on

wheels. The small window on the door at the back had bars over it. There was a bench on the front for the drivers to sit, but even that didn't look comfortable. He waited with Log as Lux went to speak to a man who was shifting hay around with a fork. The horses were in good condition: they were well fed and clean, even their hooves were trimmed and oiled. They had the heavy build of cart horses, but one could still make a getaway on any of them. When Lux returned he and the horses' owner climbed into the paddock and checked every leg on every horse.

Neko had just begun to nod off on a hay bale when Log came over and kicked him, handing him a brush. The others were haggling around the cart, and Neko walked to the speckled grey horse which had been tied to a post with its bit collar next to it. He picked a tuft of green grass and let the horse eat it out of his hands. Its face was splattered with mud. He brushed it absentmindedly, mumbling soothing words. His family had owned a horse when he was younger, a grey, like this one.

If he ran, he wouldn't be able to come back to Masinge for a long time. Nobody really needed Masinge, did they? He hadn't been back in ten sets.

He slipped the halter rope off the fence. Masinge was a curse on his life. He seemed to always leave worse off than when he had arrived. He had lost his pack to Markie, and there was no way of getting it back. He glanced over his shoulder to see Lux climbing into the cart. He swung onto the horse's back, grabbing the bottom tuft of mane and leaping up. He dug his heels into the grey's side and it spun to the left – the only way he could turn it with the single halter rope. He would go South for the Summer. He had heard good things about KwaDz. The horse bolted forward toward the path, half of it in shadow, and Neko felt himself slip backwards onto its rump. He tried to pull himself forward but it was too late.

The horse wheeled again as he pulled to the left and bucked at the same time. He felt himself fly through the air, but most of all he felt himself land. He lay, winded, all the parts of him that already ached aching even more.

His tongue flew to the tooth and he tasted blood. It moved a little more than it had before. He contemplated the situation again as he sucked in air.

Masinge *was* filled with opportunities. And pretty whores. He gave a miniscule nod. It would be better to serve out his time here, paying off this debt to Markie, and keep open the opportunity to return. When he opened his eyes there was a black horse standing a little way off, where the grey had been. Its head was lowered in curiosity, looking at him. A black horse? He squeezed his eyes together and blinked out the dust.

Up the road Lux was hanging out of the back door of the cart. The three men hadn't bothered to move. The owner called to him, "You're not gonna ride Jagati right off. She's not very nice to strangers. She has a… dark side." The three men cackled. Neko pushed himself up, stumbled, and fell over again. The horse trotted back to its paddock at the cluck of the man's tongue and the carrot he held out. Then Neko could see it: the horse was two entirely different colours, split down its back. The left was a flecked grey, the other side black. Its face and mane were splotched with both colours; what he had originally taken for mud.

He dusted himself off, and searched for the oversized boot which had fallen off someway up the track.

Later that afternoon he sat on the roof of the cart, bouncing inelegantly. All four horses pulled in time, and Jagati made a much better carthorse than a riding horse. He could see over the front ledge of the cart to below him where Lux and Log sat, but he was unable to hear anything they said. They

travelled along the old roads, mostly dust now, but sometimes there was a hint of black stone. Thorn branches whipped across the top of the cart. He tried to sleep.

Lux had bought him a ridiculous leather hat from the owner of the horses, saying it would be added to Neko's debt. The hat curled up at the sides quite uselessly, his cheeks exposed. He tipped it over his face to block out the sun. He cupped his head in his hands, longing for the softness of his pack.

That night he was let into the cart to sleep with his coat as a blanket. It was a boon: a dry, windless spot which kept some of the warmth from the day in the wood and the hay bales. It was also locked, and he eventually had to resort to pissing out of the metal bars on the back door when neither Log nor Lux would answer his call. The men had set up a fire, and they ate between mumbled conversations, handing Neko the leftovers. They spoke tenderly to one another, laughing without crassness at the jokes they shared.

Neko made out Markie's name and the mood shifted. He could not hear what was being said, but Log spoke low and furiously. Lux did not speak at all. Through the bars he could see them fall asleep in one another's arms, and later in the night he heard their breathing become an urgent rhythm. Their sleeping covers rustled, but apart from this the men were perfectly quiet. They did not want him to know they were fucking. He turned over to the side that ached less for the moment, but fell asleep before he could figure out why they did not want Neko to know they were sleeping together.

The morning peace was disturbed by the cawing of a hadeda. Neko woke and immediately began tonguing the loose tooth. Lux – maybe Log – cursed loudly and banged a stick against the pot to chase the thing away. It cawed defiantly. Every time he was slipping back to sleep it would caw again. Every caw was accompanied by a flapping of wings, as loud as a clapping of hands.

As a child, he had been taught that animals held no malice, that this was part of their perfection. But any Earther awoken by a hadeda knew it had malice. It was an excessively large, grey lump of bird which tasted like shit. It had dead eyes. Some animals had live eyes: horses, dogs, cats, antelope and even some birds and rats; but then there were those with dead eyes: fish, hadedas, porcupines, rabbits, and more. When he was young he had an entire catalogue of animals that he didn't feel too bad about eating. But childhood fanaticisms fade. He knew that he wasn't alone as a child in saying double Salutations when eating an animal. But you grew into practicality, into the understanding that you had to eat every day, and one could not live with guilt at every meal. Some of the most live-eyed animals tasted the best: klipspringers with their pupils like flower bulbs and cattle with their slow-blinking lashes.

The bolt on the cart was undone and the door opened to reveal a bedraggled looking Lux. "I have had inspiration for breakfast". He pointed up at the tree.

Neko clambered out of the cart stiffly. There was a trail of white shit on the tree. The bird was in a nest above this.

"I'm no Hunter," Neko began cautiously.

"Come on, like you've never raided a nest before."

Neko focused grimly on the bottom of the tree and put on his coat. The nearest branch was some way up.

"I'll lift you," nodded Lux, and they walked to the tree. Lux looked back at the sleeping Log twice, as if afraid that he might see. They braced themselves to spring. Lux put his hands around

Neko's ribs and lifted, his finger wheedling into a bruise. Neko stretched to grab hold of the lowest branch and once he had grabbed it Lux put his hands under his foot to help him clamber up. He managed to steady himself on the trunk and sit on a branch. His hand, he noticed with disgust, was smeared with wet bird shit. He climbed, twisting around the trunk, testing every branch before he put his weight on it. He pulled level with the hadeda and clapped his hands, shooing it away. He couldn't bring himself to look at its eyes. It flapped and flew to the nearest tree, where it landed, cawing in alarm. In the nest were two big eggs. He first tried holding onto the trunk and leaning out, but failing that he began a precarious shuffle forward along the tapering branch.

He reached between the forked branch and into the nest. It felt like a violation. Between the coarse hair of the nest the egg was warm. It was heavier than expected, and he put it in a pocket of his coat, as he did with the second, and then he pulled the nest apart, using it to line his pockets. He then began the precarious shuffle backwards, cautious of the delicate weight in his pockets. He handed his coat to Lux and jumped after it, his body aching again as he thudded to the ground.

They fried the eggs one at a time on the bottom of a pot, the embryo young enough not to have feathers and beaks. Neko was only given the whites. Lux put his body between Neko and Log when he stooped down to wake him with a gentle stroke of his cheek. Neko pretended he hadn't seen.

For the first time in a long time Neko repeated the whole salutation under his breath as he began eating, rushed by embarrassment. "*I thank you, my Friend Earth –*" he was never sure with eggs whether to use 'Friend' or 'Earth', so he used both – "*for your life. It is not ours to take, but ours to give back. It is not ours to waste, but ours to complete the cycle. We will have only what we need, and we will want for nothing."* He pinched off a corner of the egg and rubbed it in the dirt.

Neko was quiet and obedient the whole morning, helping to ready the horses once more – although he wasn't allowed to take them down to the stream to drink. The cart was soon rolling again. Neko sat atop it, dodging branches. The world went by so quickly from here, and everything felt far away. He could get no feel for the land with this cumbersome structure below him. It jarred at every rock, falling into holes a person would have stepped over. It made such a noise that all the bathing lizards vanished long before it arrived, and birds and buck flitted away. There was nothing in its wake but dust.

It did provide a view. Everywhere was yellow and dry, with grass that would snap at the touch of a finger. It was kindling waiting for a flame. Would the lightning reach it first, or the rain?

The sun was well up, and Neko's cheeks were getting burnt despite the hat. Log, who was steering the cart drew the horses to a walk and then stopped under a tree. The two men had fallen silent and Neko followed suit. They unhitched the horses, leaving on the full collars but giving each a bale of hay and a bucket of water. They grimly directed Neko as he helped turn the cart around. The Launders' movements were precise, practised. They pushed the cart backwards out of the road and then Lux rummaged through a pack and drew out a knife belt. Neko could see a number of cloth-wrapped hilts attached to rough blades; a throwing axe; and something dark and metal that Lux slipped under his armpit so quickly that Neko hardly believed he had seen it. A gun. Every Earther child was taught about these weapons, the darkest of the Shadows.

"Where are we now?" Neko asked, his throat tight.

"Where we came to be." Log smiled grimly at his own wit. Neko turned to Lux instead.

"Just another village. Filled with women and men, dying for the opportunity to come to Masinge and – what's that phrase? – 'Experience the glory of the Old World.'"

"Is it dangerous?"

Log had picked up a knobkerrie thicker than any he had seen before.

"Yes," replied Log. He walked to Lux and reached to his belt. Lux leaned back, his eyes wide in warning, but Log just smiled and undid the sleeve of a tiny knife. It was made all the more tiny in his thick fingers. He handed it to Neko.

"What am I supposed to do with this?"

"It's dangerous out there," Log laughed, and the men began walking down the road.

It was a crafts knife, sharp only on one side. The blade was finely made and the hilt was secure. The sleeve was leather, and had a small pouch in which rested a well-worn whetstone.

He slipped it into the inside pocket of his coat. Lux glared at him. "You better give that back afterwards. It's my favourite."

They walked for a while, until the sounds of a village could be heard in the veld around them.

"Distract them," Log grunted, and Neko was sent on alone.

As he walked into the village, Neko saw only women. There were a few young boys, but no men. They all stared at him. He walked uncertainly into the Centre, where a small group sat. They turned to watch as he ran his hand through his hair nervously and repeated the traditional welcome.

"I enter your home," he spoke, searching for the person who would reply.

After a pause one of the younger women spoke, "Our home is open." She had tea-stained skin and freckles under her eyes. She was heavily built, her shoulders and arms thick with muscle. He flashed his best smile at her. The dog that she had her hand on barked and thumped its tail on the mat just once.

"May I sit? I have come a far way."

"Are you a Teller?" piped up a young boy with a broad face.

Neko laughed and sat down, flipping out his coat behind him so that he did not sit on it. They made no space for him, so he sat on the bench that leaned against the side of the hut; outside of their circle.

"No I am not. I could tell you a story, but I am apprenticed in Crafts."

The young woman with the freckles under her eyes threw him a log intended for the fire. She had the horizontal marks of a hunter on her right arm. He could never remember what the different sides indicated. "For our hospitality you will present something. That is the way, is it not?"

"It is," replied Neko, picking up the log and turning it over. He stood up quickly and noticed how the women flinched. They were unnaturally wary. He replaced the original log and took a much smaller one that still had some life left in the wood. He took out the tiny crafts knife and sat back down. He took a piece of charcoal from the dead fire and drew four straight lines on the wood. It was a shape that could be turned into anything. Perhaps they would be flattered by an imitation of something from the Old World. The women and boys stared intently, their own activities stopped. Some had been mashing grain, some were winding twine and others were smoothing ostrich shell pieces into beads. He lowered the wood and the knife and cleared his throat. His hands were shaking slightly. It would not do to have their attention so closely focused on him.

"Perhaps I should tell you a story too? What kind of story do you want?"

The boy who had asked if he was a Teller called out immediately, "One about animals!"

"About animals?" Neko's eyes moved over the group, and they made no sign of assent or decline. "About animals…" He picked up the knife and continued carving. He was here to convince these people to come to Masinge, if he had understood Markie correctly. If this could be done, why had Lux and Log armed themselves? "There once was a very dangerous creature. He was not an

animal at all. Not a human animal; not any kind of animal. His name is an old name, one of those that is made from water running over rocks and the sound of falling trees; of barking animals and the stamp of their feet."

The description came easily to him. He had watched hundreds of Tellers in his lifetime, but this one had been told to him by a very memorable young girl from his home village.

She had danced around as she told it, with the lightness of expression of a monkey. It was such a cheeky story, coming from someone so young. "Hlanganyana." The words shimmered over their heads like an enchantment. The boy mouthed the word soundlessly.

The only one not enraptured was the dog, whose ears were pricked forward toward the bushes where Neko had come from. It was possible that Lux and Log were there. Perhaps they were looking for the men of the village.

"Hlanganyana," he repeated, "was not as majestic as his name suggests. He was a small thing, but he was a hundred times wiser than he was big. No, not wise, clever. Far too clever for one so small. One day he grew a big appetite, bigger even than his own cleverness. He arrived at a hut where an old, sick woman sat alone. 'Old woman' he said, 'let us cook together. If you instruct me I will make your favourite meal for you.' The old woman agreed and commanded him to put the cooking pot on the fire. Hlanganyana carried in the biggest cooking pot he could find and placed it on the fire. Looking at the pot the woman clucked her tongue. 'What is that?' she asked, pointing at the pot already heated on the stove. Are you feeding an army or your granny?' Hlanganyana laughed and said 'But come and see granny, this pot makes for the best roasting.' Granny walked up slowly with her stick and looked inside. As she was looking Hlanganyana went 'vup'" – Neko threw an imaginary granny over his own shoulder – "and tossed her in, closing the lid and roasting the granny. He cooked her until she was well done, and then he put her in a sack and carried her away."

"That's disgusting," frowned one of the women who had not spoken before. The elder women around the circle shook their heads and shifted their feet underneath them. The boy's eyes were gleaming with delight.

"Perhaps I should tell a lighter tale?" he looked to the freckled woman for confirmation. The boy whipped to face her, pleading, "Filofax please I want to hear it."

She shrugged and waved Neko on, "It happened. It was a story."

Neko nodded briefly at the formality and carried on. "So, Hlanganyana carried the sack until he found a clearing. There he found a group of children. Putting on his best fatherly tones he said 'I have brought some meat for us, children.' The children cheered and they began eating the meat." The boy gasped loudly and interjected – "They did not even say the salutation –"

Neko turned the knife in his hand and began on the other side of the wood.

"Ssshhht," hissed the other two boys and turned to face Neko again, mouths agape. He smiled and then continued.

"One of the children stopped suddenly, pulling out something that could not be mistaken: an ear. 'What is this father?' he cried. 'Is this an ear?' Hlanganyana leapt up and threw the offending piece away. 'No you silly child,' he replied, 'it is part of something that the animal ate before.' So the children carried on eating, until they found another ear. Again they said 'Father! What is this? This is an ear!' and Hlanganyana picked up the thing and threw it away. He grabbed his sack and marched off, rebuking the children for their fussy eating. He came to a freshly made fire, where a young woman –" The dog cut him off with a flurry of barking.

Neko looked up from his carving, which was just beginning to take shape. The group had turned away from him. Neko looked too, but he could not see anything. He turned and the freckled woman

Filofax met his eye. She was staring at him with utmost suspicion, her mouth narrowed.

"And then as Hlanganyana was offering the meat to the woman –" he hurried on, over the sound of the dog. He looked only at her now. "Two men appeared and snatched away the meat. But they were not there for good. They had enslaved Hlanganyana and they stole away the woman, to take her as their slave too." Neko stopped as a figure appeared at the end of the road ahead of them. All eyes turned toward the figure, except for one pair.

"That story had no animals in it." The boy folded his arms grumpily.

"Apparently you tell shit stories, Neko." The voice rose from the opposite direction they had turned and the group swung around to see Log, his knobkerrie hanging lazily at his side. The dog's bark leapt in pitch as it swung around, its hackles raised.

Neko had leapt up, the crafts knife pointed outward. Before they could act, Lux came jogging in from the other side, holding his gun as if it were dragging him towards them.

The eldest were the first to sit when commanded to do so. They recognised Lux's weapon as a gun. The dog was not so obedient, and lunged in to try and bite Log's hand. Log lifted his stick to hit it but at a brief whistle from the freckled woman it backed off, growling.

"Where are the men?" Lux shouted. The women tittered and the youngest of the boys began crying. Lux turned to Neko and shouted it again. "Where are all the men?"

"I don't know," Neko replied, sitting down and continuing with the carving. His hands shook uncontrollably. Without looking, he could sense that Lux was in furious thought.

"Let's go," he snapped, hauling up an elderly woman by her arm. He reached the crying boy and slapped him across the face. "Shut up." The dog began barking again, and one of the women hugged the boy to her chest as he wailed even more loudly. Lux pointed the gun at the dog and Filofax, the freckled woman, whistled again, to no effect. The dog snarled, lunging forward. She grabbed it by the scruff of its neck. It whipped around and bit her arm, but soon realised its mistake. She stood over it and it was quiet. "I will shoot it if it makes another sound," Lux hissed.

She stared up at Lux. "The men are all gone. They are not coming back."

"Where have they gone?" he spat.

"Where all men go. To Masinge."

Lux scrutinised her face, and then began to grin. He packed the gun away, chuckling to himself.

"Then this will be a happy reunion. Come." Log moved the group from the back and Lux walked at their side. Neko stood at the fire, watching them. Was his debt repaid? Could he leave? He slipped the knife into his jacket and followed behind.

When he arrived at the cart the horses had been hitched and the dozen villagers were being loaded into the box. He watched as the dog sniffed at the horse and then tried to piss on its leg. When it had finished it trotted to the back of the cart, giving Log and Lux a wide berth. To his surprise, it came and stood next to Neko. When Filofax disappeared into the cart it stood up again. Neko stooped and touched its head reassuringly but it ducked away.

It walked forward and sniffed the edge of the cart. Neko walked forward and scooped it up by its back half, pushing it into the darkness of the box. Its feet scrabbled on the wooden floor and it darted out again, its tail tucked between its legs. Log laughed mirthlessly and slammed closed the cart door. Neko could just make out the shapes inside the box through the barred window on the back door. When the cart lurched forward, Neko climbed to the top, returning his hat to his head and pulling off his coat. He sat cross-legged, sullenly dodging branches. Well behind the dust kicked up by the horses, the dog followed.

Chapter Twelve

North Ku, Near Masinge.

Little Jimmy got home well after the sun had gone done and gave the parcel with Kamiyo's hair in it to Marikasaan. The fat man was furious. He threw the parcel against the wall where it fell down lamely, and the Woodpile Woman grumbled. Marikasaan told her to shut up. She coughed and pulled her blanket over shoulders, wheezing as she fell back asleep.

Little Jimmy's feet were sore from stumbling down the road in the dim dusk, and every piece of him ached. The trip back from Masinge had taken almost as long as it did to get there. In the fading light he had to go much more slowly than he had in the afternoon.

He watched Marikasaan's rage without understanding the reasons for it, and curled up on his own sleeping mat and went to sleep.

Little Jimmy awoke late. His head felt stuffy and he blew his nose into his shirt. The hut felt like an oven, and he poked his head out of the door to get air. It was well into mid-morning, and every now and then a person would walk by. There was a bowl of water near the door, and Little Jimmy drank his fill, and then went to relieve himself.

On his return he encountered Marikasaan, who was lounging in the shade of a hut alongside a man Little Jimmy thought he may have seen before. Marikasaan's skin was bright pink. He shifted uncomfortably, pinching the cloth between his legs and fanning himself with a board. He beckoned Little Jimmy toward him. Under their bench lay a dog, who bared its teeth at Little Jimmy as he approached. The other man kicked it with his heel and it stopped growling.

"What were you doing boy?" Marikasaan asked, slouching against the hut. He was staring at Little Jimmy's wrist. Little Jimmy tugged at the cloth and retied it.

"I went to pee."

Marikasaan sat fanning himself a while. After a long time the second man leaned over and spoke quietly into his ear.

"We need to find something for you to do," Marikasaan announced at length "while we wait for that bitch to remember exactly who paid for her freedom."

Marikasaan waved away his companion, and the man stalked off, the dog following him. The fat man patted the seat and Little Jimmy sat down. They stared out at the village in silence. Marikasaan turned to look at the boy.

"How was… Did Kamiyo look healthy?" he asked with care.

Little Jimmy nodded. The day wobbled unsteadily in the heat. Marikasaan stared forward. He grunted and shifted his weight again, as if there were something uncomfortable about sitting. A tiny dot of liquid formed on his pant leg. Little Jimmy looked up in horror but Marikasaan seemed not to notice.

"She owes me, no matter what," was all he said.

The man and dog returned with a companion: a wrinkled woman who led Little Jimmy out into the fields. The woman and Little Jimmy walked slowly over a ruined piece of earth, too dry and sandy for anything to grow. The old woman walked slowly. He waded through the sand, dragging up clouds of dust.

They arrived at a field prepared for planting, and the woman showed Little Jimmy how to scoop out shallow holes, drop in the seed and press the earth down on top of it. She seemed not to notice the cloth around his wrist, or not to care. Once he was left alone, Little Jimmy found the routine calming. He alternated the colours as he went: white, yellow, brown, grey.

The day burned on, and he was called in for food. When he returned to the field his muscles had stiffened and his fingers ached. He shoved a grey seed into the ground. He imagined that soon the rain would come and soften what he had packed tight. The seed might burst open, welcoming the damp, or it may rot where it was buried. In that way people and seeds were different: once they were in the ground, people would always rot. Little Jimmy imagined that this seed would open. It would push itself through the earth and look at the skies.

Why were they called skies, when there was only one? It stretched on, broken by time, the sun stroking a hot finger down its back until it rested on the horizon.

Little Jimmy saw the men and women come to harvest at dusk. He sat watching them from the side of the field, waiting for the old lady to walk back to the huts with him.

The ones there to harvest brought knives with them, and sought out only the plants with yellow leaves. They sliced a pattern into the plant's round belly and milk spilled out from it. They waited until it dried and then scraped it away. When nothing more would come from it they uprooted the whole plant and carried it back to the village to be hung upside-down.

The wrinkled woman came and fetched him. She said the plants were called 'poppies'.

After three days he had grown fond of the routine, seeing the seeds planted and the milk harvested. He came to like the wrinkled old woman, who showed him how to collect the seeds from under the dried plants and choose the best ones for planting. But on the fourth morning Marikasaan stopped him on his way out of the hut, and sent him along the river with another message to Kamiyo.

The journey seemed quicker this time. Masinge slept in the morning light, the roads empty except for a few human lumps which the stray dogs and cats avoided. When the huge woman emerged from behind the curtains at the House of Boards even her bracelets seemed too tired to jangle. It took much longer to summon Kamiyo, who emerged with dark rings under her eyes. Again they walked along the riverside. Only Little Jimmy threw pebbles this time. Kamiyo smiled at him often, praising him when his stone skipped on the water. They sat down together on a rock, and she held his hand between hers, warming up his fingers which were wet from the sand. She told him how all of Masinge had once been under the water of a great dam, made by people in the old times. That this water was bigger than any other water he would ever see, unless he reached the 'sea', which some people didn't even believe in any more. He made up his mind then that he would also believe in the sea, like her.

"Then they broke down the dam walls."

"Who did?"

"You know. The Trust. They made place for us to live, and for Inyoka to flow better, without all the metal and concrete. *Life will amply supply*."

"But in Masinge people still live in houses made of metal and concrete?"

She laughed at that. "This is nothing. These were mountains of metal, huge buildings. It was terrible, everybody was sick and starving. The people here sometimes go and fetch parts of the Old World."

"Why?" he asked. This seemed like a terrible idea.

Kamiyo shrugged and shook her head. “Everybody wants what they don’t have.”

“Did you see the mountains of metal?”

She laughed. “No.”

“But then how do you know that they ever existed?”

“You see the bones of them sometimes. Ruins.”

“How do you know what happened?”

“This is why we have Tellers. The Trust remembers what happened, and they teach the Tellers. They teach us about Ku and Shadows and…” she paused, placing her hand on top of the cloth around his wrist, “You don’t know any of this, do you?”

His face grew hot and he shook his head. She took her hand away and looked out at the river.

“We are living in a world completely different from what it was before. It is a better world. If you don’t hold onto the past. Masinge holds onto the past, and that is why it is so bad here. Marikasaan holds onto the past too.” She stayed still then for a long time. At length she let go of his hands and shifted on the rock. “What did he say he wanted from me?”

He felt so ashamed saying it to her: “He said he wants what is owed to him. He says he paid with flesh, and this is what he should get in return.”

Kamiyo said nothing. She turned and led Little Jimmy up to the back of the House of Boards and into the area where they prepared food. They moved around quietly, so as not to wake the others. She took two knives from the table, as well as a container of clear liquid from behind a pot on the shelf. They sat on the mats next to the fire and she rubbed the liquid spirits along the two knives, cleaning the blades.

“Have you ever made a promise without love, Jimmy?”

Little Jimmy licked his lips uncertainly, but she carried on speaking. “A promise is only a promise if it is made with someone you love.” She tested the edges of the metal with her thumb, and pushed one knife into the coals of the fire. “Who do you love Jimmy?” Little Jimmy blushed and looked away. Kamiyo laughed, but it rang false. “You will learn not to love, that is the best way to stay alive.” She turned the knife over, examining both sides. “I do wonder why we are born loving ourselves. We have done nothing to deserve it.” She unfolded a kerchief and took down a brick of opium from behind a pot on the shelf. Little Jimmy knew what it was because Marikasaan had brought one for the Woodpile Woman. Poppies made opium. The wrinkled woman who worked with him in the fields said it was a kind of medicine, something that made you feel better.

Kamiyo paused. “Promise me you will not look inside what you are bringing to Marikasaan?”

Little Jimmy nodded.

“Promise it like you love me.” She grinned, and Little Jimmy blushed again, nodding. “Good. Now go outside and wait.”

Little Jimmy paced along the river bank, throwing stones into the river. They ‘glomped’ heavily and sunk.

He heard a shout from the house and ran back up the slope. There was sobbing and hissing, panicked voices and the smell of burning. In the house his eyes could not adjust to the dark before the huge woman grabbed him and pushed him from the room. She left bloody fingerprints on his arms. He fretted as he waited a few steps from the entrance, too panicked to cry. He could hear soft moans, and he knew it was Kamiyo. As he decided to go inside the large woman bustled out, blood on the front of her sleeping clothes. She thrust the bundled kerchief into his stomach and shouted furiously for him to return it to Marikasaan, cussing at his back like scorning a dog.

Little Jimmy cried for most of the way back. The bundle was stained with blood. It blotted the front of his shirt and made his fingers stick together. As he neared the village he tried to stop crying, which only made it more difficult.

He arrived back at the hut and called for Marikasaan. A figure came through the curtain. It was the Woodpile Woman, groping her way along the wall.

"What have you got there boy?" she crooked a finger at the kerchief, scraping the moss off her tongue with her teeth.

Little Jimmy cried more, making gasping noises as he tried to explain.

The woman clambered toward him.

"Ey?" she called. "Tell me it's poppy." Little Jimmy backed off but she grabbed the kerchief from his hands and unwrapped it hungrily. She poked into the opium, rubbing it between her fingers.

"Wet, slimy, this is rubbish!" She shook it at Little Jimmy and from the kerchief fell a small object. "Eh?" she called to no-one again.

Little Jimmy stood paralysed as the woman stooped down and picked up the finger. She examined it, looking from his teary face to the finger-joint, and giggled. "Slugs in the lettuce. Fingers in the pie. There's nothing here to get us, but all he does is cry." She waggled the finger at Little Jimmy.

"Stop crying boy! Whose is this?" she cracked.

Before she could take another breath Marikasaan entered the room. They all stopped a moment, and then Marikasaan shoved her off her feet, grabbing the finger in the kerchief. He breathed heavily, almost as if he were about to scream, staring at both of them while holding tightly onto the bundle. He closed it in his fist and stormed out.

Little Jimmy spent the afternoon out in the fields. He soaked his shirt in the river and rubbed away the blood as best as he could, and then let it dry while he worked. He washed the cloth around his wrist, and it was still wet when he put it back on. He didn't talk to anyone, but he didn't cry anymore. He let his body move automatically. His thoughts pulled and leapt like a tethered animal, pinned to Kamiyo. Every time he thought her name he smelt blood. He filled his buckets with water from the river. He smelt the blade turning hot in the fire. He carried it across the dry land. He smelt berries. He tipped a small amount of water onto the mound of a seed. He smelt soft grass and heard the crack of a tooth against a stone. He moved down the row of seeds. He heard his brother, breathing through his nose, screaming with his mouth closed and saw the Old Lady feeling the insides of his gums. He poured the water. He saw a finger fall to the floor, and Kamiyo, smiling. He moved along the row of seeds.

When it was too dark to work he made his way back to the hut. The Woodpile Woman was asleep. He lay down, trying to sleep too, but his hunger sat like a block of wood in his stomach. He grew angrier at Marikasaan every moment. Eventually he got up and set out to the food hall in the centre of the village. He pulled at the filthy cloth, caked with dirt, winding it around his wrist. When he entered he could see Marikasaan, sitting around a far table with a crowd of men all laughing drunkenly. Little Jimmy scooped out scraps of food from the serving bowls and sat as far away as he could. He ate quickly, and got up to leave, his stomach cramping. He was halfway back to the hut when he heard Marikasaan shouting after him. He stood where he was, watching the man stumbling toward him.

"Boy! Hey boy! Now…stay there!" Little Jimmy hadn't moved. Marikasaan stumbled past him and put his arm through a thatched roof. A flurry of straw followed it back out. He turned and leaned

against the shabby hut, breathing heavily – his head nodding forward and back. There was blood coming from his nose.

" I nold Speak I had what they called 'a ninvestment'. D'you know what thad is?"
Little Jimmy shook his head.

"Ey?"

Little Jimmy shook his head again.

"Well… le' me tell you. A ninvestmen' is when you pay for someding, and it takes time before whad you paid for pays you back. No madda whad. You unnerstan'?" He leaned his head back and held his nose.

Little Jimmy nodded.

"Now Kamiyo, thas' my ninvestmen. But she's nod only my ninvestmen, I loved her. You hear that? I loved her. Even when she was *his* whore. She's gone and fugged up her hands, an' knowing her she'll do worse. Now you go tell'her that I, me, Marikazaan, I'm comin' to coll'ed. No madda whad." He spat out some blood on the floor next to him.

"To collect?"

"To coll'ed on my ninvestmen," his gaze sunk down to the floor and shot up again, "No! Waid! Don' go tell her," he stumbled forward, putting a hand on Little Jimmy's shoulder. "Don' don' don'." He shook his head and wagged his finger. "I'm gonna surprise her. Firs' thing tomorrow. I'm gonna surprise her." Marikasaan grinned, blood between his teeth, and then shoved Little Jimmy away. He stumbled back to the dining hall, spitting out blood along the way.

The little boy stood still behind him for a while longer, staring at the ground. Then he ran toward the orange glow of Masinge.

Chapter Thirteen

South Ku, Lake Tops

Life will amply supply, so long as no person takes more than required. This is not balance. Equilibrium is a lie. We strive in no single direction.

She felt she had barely slept when her father shook her shoulder. His breath stank of umqombothi from the night before.

"Jenny, it's time to go. Wake up Jenny."

Genevieve pulled herself upright.

"I'll wait outside while you get ready."

She washed her face and grabbed an arak twig from her pack – too lazy to scrub with her fingers – as well as her two knives. She had fallen asleep on her hunting hood and half of it was warm. She stumbled outside and picked up the bow, feeling as though she hadn't even woken up.

"Where are we going?" she yawned.

"I thought we'd go back to the place where we saw the eland last night, but Stereo told me about some crocodiles he'd seen on the bank downriver and promised to meet us on the edge of the village. Crocodiles are… tricky. " He held up a thick length of rope that had been looped over his shoulder.

"A crocodile?" Genevieve felt dread settle like a heavy meal in her stomach. She had never heard of anyone killing a crocodile. You could eat them. But they were dangerous. Her father didn't seem to be joking.

He looked awful. His eyes were bloodshot and had dark imprints under them. His skin was pallid and showed the beginnings of a clumpy beard. The man they met at the end of the fourth spoke looked in the same state: his dark skin was blemished and a few of his dreadlocks stood straight up in the air. He had a metal rod with him, as thick as his thumb. It was sharpened at the end and had a solid handle.

"Welcome friend," the man began.

Vinyl took the rod from him and examined it.

"This will work, Stereo?" he asked, turning it in his hands.

"The Shadowsmith guaranteed its quality. The steel goes all the way into the wood. It's not going to fall apart. Whether it will work is up to your girl here."

He picked up his spear and as they left the village Stereo asked about her apprenticeship, how many hunts she had seen, how many animals she had prepared, ceremonies she had performed. It was clear that he was much more faithful to the Earther ways than her father.

"Do you know the words for the first kill?"

"Yes."

"Good," was his only response.

They went through the veld for a while, seeming to move away from the river. But Genevieve could tell that they were looping back towards it. Stereo stopped to listen to bird calls and asked her to identify the bird. There was a Lapwing which made a sound like two rocks being rubbed past each other. And the Coucal, which sounded like a pot lid coming to a halt on a hard surface, a descending scale of 'doo-doo-doo-doo-doo' in a liquid tone. Her father walked behind them, oblivious to the sounds, or perhaps too hungover to notice. They walked quietly, watching for thorns, their feet hardened and practised at walking over difficult ground. A bow twanged behind them and Vinyl

leapt towards where life was rapidly leaving a hedgehog. He pushed the arrow all the way through and carried the hedgehog on this skewer, shrugging in response to Genevieve's questioning look.

The ground began to slope down toward the river and Stereo fell silent, leading the way through the trees. Inyoka ran slowly here, and a sand bank jutted out, collecting debris. The bank was about 20 feet wide, and on it lay two crocodiles, their chins resting in the water and their mouths open.

They were taller than Genevieve, half made up of tail. They looked unreal, eerily ancient. Old trees come to life. Their armour looked as impenetrable as bark. Their teeth were an uneven row made for tearing, not for chewing. Her hands began to shake. She knew their lumbering indolence was a dangerous deception.

"This is our plan," Stereo whispered. He picked up the steel rod again, showing it to her.

"A crocodile is covered with armour. The quickest way to kill it is to go for the brain. And it must be killed quickly, before it gets into the water. An arrow, even a spear, will not penetrate its armour – especially not from a distance. The weakest points on a crocodile are the belly, and the eye. If you cut open the belly," he took out his knife and made a slicing motion, "it can still move, it can still bite. If you go through the eye, up to the brain, it will die quickly. This rod," she took hold of it and felt its weight, "is to go through the eye at an upward angle." Genevieve's heart was beating uncontrollably. She nodded, feeling faint but not daring to show it. Crouched next to her, Vinyl was binding the hedgehog with the rope he had been carrying. Once it was tight he crept off to the side, loosening a length of rope and moving towards the crocodile.

"We need to lure them out of the water. If they slip into the water it will be too dangerous to try and catch them. Keep your knives at hand. If the croc is still struggling, you need to slit its throat. I will come after you and strike with my spear. Are you ready?"

Genevieve paused, examining the rod. She took an experimental swipe and then got up, moving back through the trees to the veld. Stereo followed her. She went to a rock they had passed and leaned the rod against it.

"If it is too much, we can find something else. It is not too late yet," Stereo said, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"No it's fine," she replied, crouching down. Her voice betrayed her nervousness, her throat so constricted it came out in a higher pitch than usual.

The rod pushed into the sand, the handle leaned against rock. She shifted it further up the rock, so that the weight would fall on the metal rather than the handle. She pulled a second rock from the ground. The soil underneath was it dark, and bugs ran in frantic loops, shocked by their sudden exposure. She lowered the rock against the rod twice. The third time she slammed it down. The rod bent slightly. She hit it again and again, readjusting the rod as it slipped down the rock. Eventually it bent into an obtuse angle.

She picked it up and swiped the air. This way she could hack into the crocodile's eye from above, rather than trying to shove it in horizontally. Stereo smiled in grim understanding and they went back to the bank.

Vinyl watched them return and she nodded to him. He threw out the rope. The hedgehog landed with a loud plop on the water's edge and one of the crocodiles immediately slithered into the water. The other turned and bared its teeth, ready to attack. Their quick movements set Genevieve's head spinning. Could one actually kill a crocodile? Vinyl made the rope twitch and the crocodile spun and began chasing the hedgehog up the bank. Now was the time for action. Her body didn't want to move. What was the point of this? Why hadn't she shot the guinea fowl the day before? – Stereo

grabbed her arm and dragged her forward, and her mind became unstuck. It felt as if she could hear nothing at all, but really she could hear everything. She rushed towards the crocodile's back, the bank slippery underfoot. She could hear Stereo's footfalls, his breathing. She slowed down as Vinyl let the crocodile reach the hedgehog. Every part of her shook with fear as she moved up behind the crocodile, the rod held ready. It saw her and lashed to the side. She leapt out of the way but its head still hit her ankle. It did not hurt. She saw her opening and dropped down onto its back, her knees on either side of its body. She avoided the back leg which clawed and pushed forward.

It whipped around and she hacked at its head with the rod. It missed the eye, glancing off its snout. She hesitated as the crocodile turned away from the arm with the rod, trying to pull away. When its head straightened she swung into its eye, up through to the top of the head. The crocodile rolled, and she fell forward and hugged its head. All the air was crushed out of her. She wasn't sure how many times it went around but it stopped just as suddenly as it had begun and gave one last thrust of its legs towards the water. The power seeped from its limbs and it stopped. It sank without a sound. She opened her eyes again and could see only the brown of the river and mud, splattered all over her limbs and those of the crocodile. She loosened her grip and sat upright, the crocodile did not move.

Genevieve felt this profound end. It ached in her body. This animal that could live a hundred sets, ended by her. Tearful, she bent and kissed the top of its head.

"*Thank you friend for your life. It was mine to take, and it is I who will give back. It is not mine to waste, but mine to continue. I will have only what I need, and will want for nothing. Our life is now shared."* She was crying outright now, and Vinyl helped pull the crocodile away from the water. Stereo whooped and thumped Genevieve on the back.

"That was crazy my girl! You were on its back!"

Genevieve sniffed, smiling, and wiping away the tears. She chuckled, "I had no idea what I was doing."

"Neither did we. You did very well," replied Vinyl, strangely sombre. He pushed Genevieve down onto her ass and pulled out her right leg. He took his water pouch and emptied it on her foot, rubbing away the mud. It was only then that Genevieve saw the gash. It started on her foot, deepening around her ankle and then ending before her calf. Stereo fetched more water from the river, and her leg began to hurt. They cleaned the wound thoroughly, and Vinyl cut a strip of material from his pants leg to wrap around her ankle. She stood with their help and tested the foot. She could put her weight on it without pain. When Vinyl realised it was not serious he could not stop grinning.

They bound the crocodile. Stereo and Vinyl hung on a thick branch, bouncing up and down until it snapped. Genevieve sat on the sand bank in the meantime, scrutinising the spear hole in the crocodile's stomach. When had Stereo managed to thrust in a spear? It must have happened when it was spinning. How had he managed not to hit Genevieve? It was miraculous that she had survived this. Stereo and Vinyl returned with the branch and she helped tie the crocodile to it for easier carrying.

They laughed and joked the whole way back to the village. When they arrived everyone stopped and admired the kill, marvelling that Genevieve was the one who had done it. Many of the elders came and stroked their thumb over the crocodile's forehead and then placed the same thumb on Genevieve's brow. They moved the crocodile to the Centre and a crowd gathered: all those that didn't need to urgently attend to the fields. Croaky Ma was there, and she kept grasping Genevieve's hand and petting it, smiling broadly.

They laid out a big mat from the kitchen. A Healer came and cleaned the wound, placing boiled Burdock leaves on her ankle and rewrapping it in cotton borrowed from the Tattooist, had gone to go fetch his tools. The crocodile was placed in front of her. Genevieve was guided by a number of the cooks, as well as the two Hunters who had not joined them that morning. Watching her closely, the cooks and Hunters ordered her harshly when she went astray as she prepared the crocodile. The first thing was to establish the sex of the crocodile. It looked undignified, lying on its back as various men and women poked its private parts. First they believed it was a female. But then Ma walked forward, reaching into the hole between its two back legs and pulled out what looked to Genevieve like an underdeveloped claw. Ma held her fingers next to it, to prove its size, and then rasped and pointed at Vinyl. Everyone but Ma laughed.

The Tattooist returned. He brought his cleaning liquids. The fire was built high. Genevieve skinned the crocodile slowly and carefully. The skin was taken away by one of the villagers and she scraped the fat globules into a bowl for the Tattooist.

She cut the tail around the spine, shearing flesh from above the backbone. The cooks took away what she had cut and from the kitchen came the smell of their potent garlic and ginger marinade. The fire began giving off a stifling heat, and the crocodile's head was thrown in. Some of the children lamented the loss of the ornamental teeth, but the women insisted the fire was not hot enough to burn the teeth. The rest of the crocodile was cut into small chunks for a stew which the cooks had already begun to prepare. The crocodile's head charred and burned, turning black and becoming unrecognisable in the flames. The fire was left to burn out, and the head became just another hot log. By the mid afternoon it was cool enough for the Tattooist to reach in and collect the black ash. He mixed this with the fat Genevieve had collected before.

Genevieve's heart began to thump as he retrieved a thin knife from his bag. He rubbed Genevieve's right arm with his cleaning liquids and squeezed the flesh together. Then he made a quick stroke, so thin that at first Genevieve did not notice the pain. He rubbed away the blood, took a flat stick and rubbed the paste of ash and fat over the wound. Her whole arm felt as though it had been set afire. The skin around the cut turned red and swelled. Just as the pain began to fade the next incision was made, and so it went on until all twenty-eight cuts had been made. Genevieve felt lightheaded as she looked at her mangled arm from shoulder to wrist. It looked a little bit like a crocodile's back. Fanta gave her some umqombothi to drink, winking and squeezing her shoulder.

The Tattooist turned her arm this way and that, flexing and straightening it. He warned her of the pain that would come and what would indicate an infection. The warmth of the umqombothi spread up her neck. She chatted cheerfully with the Tattooist, giddy with happiness, excitement and pain. He warned her not to drink more than the one cup. He was pleased when she said that her mother was a Healer. He told her to avoid camphor, which would draw out the ash, and that she should be careful not to pick at the scabs, but keep them moisturised using the milk-coloured grease he gave her.

She sat in the Centre for a while longer and then went for a late afternoon rest in Ma's hut. When she awoke the sun had begun to go down. She was more tired than when she had gone to sleep. The feast was as raucous as the night before, but Genevieve felt distant from it. The first piece of crocodile meat was offered to her. It tasted like a fleshy fish, filled with the flavours of the herbs, but tougher than most other meat. She was no longer tired, but she was not enjoying the company. The men and women around her laughed at Tseb's absence from the feast.

"She thinks we are eating Lesebi's aquatic uncle," they joked.

Fanta kept her distance for a reason that Genevieve could not decipher, until her father came to

sit next to her.

"Fanta and I were talking about when you should go back to Lake Floors. I am enjoying your company, but I think there are important things to do there. Things you could only do with your mother."

Genevieve crumpled her eyebrows, trying to puzzle out his message. It was unlike Vinyl to be cryptic. She could not go home.

"There's nothing I need to do there."

"Fanta told me… that there is a boy there. One that you were getting very close to. The last thing you want is something to happen and you are not Confirmed."

"That's a lie. Nothing happened." Her stomach and face burned and she stared at the table.

"I know you don't want to talk about this with me, that's why you need to go to your mother. You can sort this out with her."

"You know nothing about me or about Akra. You didn't want me here from the beginning. That's fine, I will go. But I am not going back."

"You will go back."

Genevieve stood up and walked out of the Centre. Vinyl leapt up and followed.

"Where are you going Jenny?"

"Don't call me that," she spat back at him from the pathway up to Ma's hut.

"Come back here,"

"No. I'll leave tomorrow, you don't want me here. That's fine."

"I don't want you fucking boys all over town and getting pregnant. Your mother sent you here because she didn't want you near that boy, but she's mistaken if she thinks I'm going to babysit you indefinitely. You need to grow up and take responsibility for your actions."

Genevieve's anger coursed through her, her hands shook as she turned to face him.

"My mother is as stupid as you are. You are the most irresponsible Earther I know. You should be banished. You're wasteful, it's disgusting. Everything is a joke to you."

Vinyl bristled, his face blackening with anger. He ripped off his shirt, showing her his ribs and the two black horns crossed over them.

"You think I haven't heard this before? Can you see this? It's this fucking place that has it all wrong. You pansy-foot around everything like we're trapped in the house of the dying. You think the Shadows come from outside of Ku? No! They invented the Shadows to keep us in line with all their meaningless rituals and laws. Fucking Keepers and Councils, dictating how much we can live. There's something wrong with this place Genevieve, not with me."

Fanta strode up behind him, grabbing his arm and trying to pull the two away from each other. Ma had shuffled from her hut at the commotion, but then disappeared.

"The rules and rituals are bullshit, but I'm supposed to go back to my mother to get Confirmed? You only use the laws when they suit you. You use people when they suit you. Fuck that."

Vinyl broke free of Fanta and grabbed Genevieve's cut arm. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist.

"You're hurting me!" she screamed, unable to keep the pain and panic from her voice.

He softened his grip immediately. A noise attracted their attention. They paused and looked up as the freezing water hit them square in the face. Tumbling backwards, Vinyl pulled Genevieve down and they landed in a soggy heap on the floor. Ma stood frowning down at them, holding the wash basin at her side. She clucked her tongue in reprimand. Water dribbled down Genevieve's hair and over her nose. She was glad for it, because it hid her tears. Next to her Vinyl began to chuckle.

He threw a quick glance her way and when she caught sight of his dishevelled appearance she began to laugh too.

"You silly bitch," he laughed. She was unsure whether he was speaking to Ma or to her. Fanta left them to go and fetch blankets.

The fire in the Centre was stoked and they dried in front of it while the villagers watched, bemused. Genevieve left to go to sleep, promising that she was fine.

"I'm just tired."

"We'll talk about it in the morning, okay Jenny?"

She nodded and waved him off.

Ma was asleep in the hut and Genevieve lay down. Her hair was still damp and she moved it off her neck , shifting her pillow in line with the door. She fell asleep stiffly, and woke repeatedly through the night as her arm throbbed. The next morning the sunlight fell on her face, and she woke quickly.

Ma was already moving around the hut when Genevieve got up and applied the Tattooist's ointment to her arm. She bent and straightened it, testing its flexibility, and then did the same with her ankle. Her whole body felt bruised. Her hair was tangled badly and she was fully awake by the time she had pulled her fingers through it. She should try and make a brush sometime, she thought in passing as she rolled up her knives and supplies, gingerly pulling on her red hood and picking up the water sack that had been set aside. She slung her pack over the uncut arm.

Ma made an inquisitive noise.

"I have to go Ma. If Vinyl asks, I went back to my mother."

Ma cocked her head at the news and held her palms upwards.

"It will be at least a moonth before the news comes that I am not there. I cannot go home. I am going to my grandmother in Mushi."

Ma watched her with pursed lips and then nodded.

"Goodbye and thank you for looking after me."

Ma nodded again and then petted Genevieve's back kindly. Genevieve stepped out of the warm hut and walked to the Centre. The kitchen was still empty and she filled her pack with pieces of dried meat and vegetables, as well as some veldkos she had seen gathered the day before. She filled her water pouch from the drinking tub, which was nearly empty. She slipped through the arms of the village to the Armoury, and took the bow she had been using as well as a bundle of arrows and a quiver.

Then she walked back along the path by which she had arrived.

Chapter Fourteen

North Ku, Near Masinge

"Who would have thought – Neko brought every bitch in the village with him." Lux and Log laughed as they watched him shaking a tuft of dried grass as if it were food, to lure the dog that had followed them the whole afternoon. He wanted to catch it now while it was tired and put it in the cart. It was panting heavily and limping.

"– and they all hate him!" finished Log. There was more laughter from the men on the other side of the fire. Neko sighed and leaned back, letting the tuft of grass fall. The Launders had refused him any food for this endeavour. And the women stuck in the cart did indeed hate him. He had been the fly on the line, and the Launders were the hook hidden underneath his ruffles.

He pushed his tooth back and forth, further every time until he felt pain.
He took out the carving he had been making. Lux had taken back the knife, so it was still just a square block. He knew what it would be if he finished it: a cell-phone. It had been his favourite when he was an apprentice: radios and cell-phones and computers and watches with their tiny details and hundreds of buttons. He would carve it onto the underside of benches and shelves. He had gotten into trouble for that. He had tried to explain that it wasn't a fondness for these objects that made him carve them. It was that they were more complex. They spoke to him about craftsmanship and ideas beyond their subtle shapes. It wasn't some gecko with its globular fingers. It was something that no longer existed; square edges and dimples and grooves, each with an inscrutable purpose. Many people still believed in witchcraft, but this was the real magic.

His village had been close to the ruins. Almost every adult had some illegal artefact hidden away in their huts. Rebecca Moonsamy was one of his many aunts not related by blood. In her house, under a pretty mat was a latch that you pulled, which opened into a metal box. A spindly arm would be stuck into the gap and while one kid held, the other searched. Nietzsche – who was the least interested of all the children in his mother's relics – would hold impatiently while your fingers uncovered a city of strange objects. A cell-phone and a watch. Books. These were filled with pictures of radios and computers and televisions and ice rinks and swimming pools and beaches and seas and parking lots and cars; everything had a name that was said in thousands of Old Speak words, but they only learned them after Rebecca caught them looking at the books, and taught them. She would recite their names and uses until Neko knew every one.

While some kids played Murderball and Keepers and Shadows, for him and his friends a tree became an apartment block. In the parking garage below were tens of goat-cars, braying as they manoeuvred along invisible roads, stopping to refuel with crushed leaves at any juicy plant. They would work in small offices, making hats from grass and chipping at stones. Then they would band together, gaping in staged unison and slapping each other's hands when the wrong expression was assumed while staring at the television-rock.

Nietzsche never joined in. He said he could read the words, but he became stingy in telling what they were about. When he did, there was a penalty. You had to touch him where he told you. You had to look after goats while he disappeared into the bush. You had to kiss him on the lips. It was much easier just to imagine from what you could see in the pictures. Nietzsche got taken to become a Keeper.

The games changed. They looked at different books: books where people wore bizarre clothes, books where people wore no clothing at all. These were Slop books. Rebecca found them with their

hands pushing down on the front of their pants, looking at pictures of half-naked women. Perverse insect women, thin and pale with white hair. They all looked the same, they may all have been the same.

She took those away and gave them the other picture books to memorise: Toothbrushes, perfumes, nappies, couches, curtains, dresses, tuxedos, hair gel. Then there were more difficult ones. Clocks, bicycles, cameras, fridges, vacuum cleaners.

Neko wasn't sure she always told the truth. Rebecca was a very late First Ancestor. She had traded the books from a friend who had brought them in from the Old World.

Somebody had ruined it by speaking to their parents, and Rebecca had stopped explaining. Who was it? Some person who couldn't just shut up and try and understand it all quietly. Someone who had told their parents he wanted to go live in the city. That was the first time he had seen a Keeper. The Keeper went into the hut and there was a great commotion as she ripped off the mat and dragged the blue box into the sunlight. He stood watching with his friends, but for some reason apart from them. Rebecca was crying. He remembered the mud sticking to the box's blue sides. It felt as if they had always known that the outside of the box was blue. The Keeper ordered a fire pit and burnt it all. The village watched. His mother stood with her hands on his shoulders as the square edges became soft. The Slop books burnt quickly. The other things didn't burn so well and the Keeper ordered them destroyed in other ways. Rebecca was put on trial. The children were not told the result. They did not see her again. They did not see Nietzsche again. Many Tellers came to their village after that and there were stories every night around burning coals. It was a long time before the other children played with Neko, and even then their parents were cold to him.

The lump of guilt had moved up Neko's chest to his throat. He was the one who had told his parents he wanted to move to the city. It was stupid to be remembering this all now. He weighed the unfinished carving in his hand, and then tossed it into the fire. That had been the Keeper before Keeper Kipper, who he could not help but think of as his nemesis. He had been put on trial by Keeper Kipper, for a mere trifle. That's when he had to leave his home village. He rocked the tooth back and forth. On its borders he could taste a little blood.

The dog was still watching him from a distance. Neko looked at the Launders, who were looking into one another's eyes. Lux laughed coyly.

"When are we going to give them food?" Neko nodded his head towards the people in the cart.

"We're not," replied Log, moving forward and stirring a small pot on the fire.

Neko was unsurprised. They had not let them out, and the women had held the smallest boy up to the bars on the back door so that he could pee. This was a chance to play the hero.

"Can I let them out to piss?"

"Why would we let you do that?" replied Log.

"If we don't let them out, we're going to be dragging a slush of piss and shit behind us, and they're not going to be half as appealing to Markie."

"Why would we trust you to let them out?" asked Lux.

"Because that way you can sit quietly by the fire."

"Quietly while you run off into the wilderness? Psssht, take the Northern road," he laughed, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"No. If I bring back the women, my debt is repaid. If I set them free, I have to run with them. And right now we're somewhere between the buttocks of a baboon and I'm quite certain they won't invite me back into their homes."

"Not a chance," Log replied.

He could see that Lux was still pondering it. He nodded and threw the tiny crafts knife at Neko's feet. "Just do it."

While Log turned to him and the men began bickering Neko jumped to his feet –which sent the dog fleeing –and walked to the cart.

"Friends?" he enquired. There was a shifting in the cart but no response. "I am going to l et you out so that you can stretch your legs and go piss. We will do it one at a time, okay?"

There was murmuring and coughing. He began undoing the latch and a weight flung itself against the cart. The latch still held and the weight bounced back heavily onto the floor.

"What are you doing!" he shouted. He looked down into the dark cart where a woman was being picked up from the ground by other dark shapes. "Do you think they want me to let you out?" he hissed between the bars, pointing back at the fire. "No! They want you to sit in here in your own piss." He looked back to check that Log and Lux were not listening. "I have a plan to get you out, but you can't run now. We're a long way off, and they not only have horses but also a gun. I may be the one standing outside here but I am also a prisoner. Can we do this civilly?"

One of the boys started crying while Neko spoke, snuffling and sniffing.

A woman's voice responded this time. She seemed to be speaking not only to him but in reproach of the others. "We can." She responded, "We will send out the boy first." The crying became louder and the boy shrieked, becoming panicked.

"Enough! Send out ma Chalk." The cart shifted under the changing weights as a heavy figure shuffled forward. It was one of the older women. Her shadow blotted out the bars and Neko undid the latch again.

"Let me warn you now. I may not be able to catch all of you if you run, but I will catch at least one. And those Launders won't be so forgiving. It is your life or mine, and I wi ll make sure I live. Just the same. If you run and don't return, I will kill someone you left behind. " He opened up the cart and the smell was already quite strong. To have eight people in one small space the whole day was unnatural. It smelled like old food, and like fear.

The elder woman briefly looked up to meet his eyes. He took her hand and helped her down, locking the cart behind him. He folded his arms and stood where he was as she hobbled off without a backward glance.

Five minutes later he felt sick with worry. Had the old lady run off? He had not expected it. She had gone beyond the trees to the left. What would happen if she were dead? –the others in the cart would never abide by his plan then. Log slurped loudly, leaning on the cart, making Neko jump.

"Where did you come from?"

"Lost someone already?" he asked, sucking out food from his bowl as loudly as possible.

"She'll be back any moment." He tucked his thumbs behind him and leaned nonchalantly against the cart.

He stared uselessly at his boots, which reflected some of the half-moon light above them. The women in the cart would at least know that he hadn't killed her. He had stood here the whole time, but maybe Log – or what if she was eaten by an animal? Surely they would have he ard it. The bushes quivered and he made out the shape cautiously making its way towards them. He tried not to show how relieved he was as he helped the woman back into the cart. "Next," he called when she had taken her seat. When he looked again, Log was lying back down at the fire.

It went on for quite some time, and no matter how long they took he panicked. It was foolish to trust people with the lives of others. If they saw a chance to run, they would run. That was what

people did. They survived because others did not. He would run, but he needed Masinge to be open to him. Perhaps it was a little sentimental: Masinge was the first place he had come after leaving home. It made him appreciate how dull one would become if one were to stay in one place. It was the most interesting place in Ku, but the people had nothing to say. This famed river city was as cheap and meaningless as anywhere else. He liked leaving. It was his favourite time. He let another woman back in.

His worry increased as the women emerging became younger. Women who were neither young nor old were always the most defiant. He tried to avoid them as a rule. They knew too much and they wanted too much. Filofax emerged. She refused his hand as he offered it to help her down. She disappeared behind a bush and he walked away from the cart for the first time. Questions were shot across the cart behind him and one woman shouted her name through the bars. Filofax stood up from where she had been crouched, holding a threatening-looking thorn branch. Neko kept his distance. "I need to speak to you," he managed.

"Speak away," she said, and dropped down again behind the bushes. She did not falter in her stream, and that threw him off, talking to someone who was pissing.

"I have a plan to get us out of here. We need to do it tonight. But it takes some trusting, and I know that you don't trust me." He waited for a response. "We need to split the Launders in two, and for that we need to split your group in two."

"No," she replied.

From behind him he heard galloping footsteps and the dog sprinted past him into the bushes. There was a shout as it collided with the woman. "Get. Out. Apple Juice! Git!" The dog barked happily in reply and the bushes shook as its tail wagged and it bounded around her. She eventually stood up and the dog leapt up too, trying to lick her face. She pushed her fingers into the fur around its neck and stroked the top of its head. Its tongue lolled out to the side. "We stay together," she finished.

"This plan isn't only about your freedom. This is about me too. With this plan, if you get free, I get free. And if you don't go free, I don't go free. That seems fair doesn't it?"

She studied his face with a bitterness that Neko was unused to. It made him uncomfortable. He tried smiling, but she did not smile back. He closed his mouth and pushed the tooth back and forth.

"How does it work?" she asked.

"We have to take the men down as soon as possible. We can take them with numbers. We have to control the gun. Whoever controls the gun controls everyone else. So we'll wait until they're sleeping, or when they split up. I'll let you all out, and we can overpower them."

She cocked her head cynically.

"Why would we have to split up?"

"I need some of you to come back to Masinge."

"Why?"

"There is a man who sent these two. I owe him a debt."

" I don't care about your debt," she laughed, "You expect us to follow you into that hole?"

"Listen to me. This goes about me as much as it goes about you. If his Launders never come back, what do you think he will do?"

"His what?" There was a noise by the cart.

"His… his – men. He will just send more. He is the root of all of this. We have to stop him –" Neko lowered his voice even more " – do you know what they do to women in Masinge?"

Filofax eyed him with sly suspicion. "Of course I do. Many of the women here have escaped

before."

"Then you know," he continued, "why we have to stop someone at the top."

"What interest do you have in stopping the trade?"

"None."

She flinched.

"The 'trade'," he continued, "has nothing to do with me. This man has the ability to control who comes in and out of the village. I want to be able to come in and out of the village. I need to get rid of him as much as you do."

She stood considering him, grinding her teeth over her bottom lip. Eventually she nodded.

The shouting from the cart had drawn Log, who was banging a stick against the bars. He whipped around to the figures emerging from the bushes. "Walking in from the wild. What are you doing poes?"

"I was taking this prisoner out to piss. As we agreed." Next to him the freckled woman, Filofax, lowered her head submissively. The dog Apple Juice began growling.

"We didn't agree on them making a racket louder than a troop of wet baboons. Piss time is over."

He had to push it now, in front of the ones in the cart, to get them on his side too.

"That's stupid thinking. There are only two more to go."

"Stupid?" He walked up to Neko, the stick lowered dangerously at his side. He brought his face up to Neko's, who tried his best to keep his eye and pretend to ignore the stick. He was going to get hit.

"You're just a poes in boots with a big debt. Fuck you," Log spat in his face.

"Well we know *you* can't fuck me. Your dick is already fixed in another hole," he managed and Log spun. Pain seared through Neko's arm as the stick cracked against it. Filofax ran for the cart and undid the latch, whispering directions. The dog Apple Juice leapt for Log's arm, allowing Neko to kick him hard in the knee. Log shouted out in rage and pain, swinging at the dog. He heard the stick connect and the dog whimper. It slunk away. "You mudfucked –" Log began. He never finished the sentence. A wave of women came over him. The first charged at his knees which buckled, and then they flipped him onto his back. One threw a blanket over his head, stuffing her fingers in his mouth and the others piled on top of his raging limbs.

They flipped him over onto his stomach, pushing his face into the dirt. One ran for the front of the cart and Neko helped as she untied a rein and dragged it back to where Log was still struggling. The rope was too thick for such fine work, but she managed to knot it around Log's arms and his feet, tying them together behind his back. Log's screams were dampened through the blanket. He struggled fruitlessly. One of the boys sat on the loose end of the rope, anchoring it.

"We need to move quickly. I'm sure the other one heard that." Neko nodded to Filofax who was crouched beside her dog, feeling the paw it held up in the air. She pointed to three of the others, crooking her finger at them.

Neko's head was reeling with the suddenness of it all. He had intended to follow through on a well thought-out plan deep in the night. Filofax directed the group quickly.

They split up and Neko walked back to the fire. The lump on the ground that he assumed to be Lux was not moving, but he couldn't be sure that he was asleep. This had happened all too quickly. He should have waited until he was sure they were both asleep. He cleared his throat and shifted the pot fairly loudly, his hands trembling. The pile of blankets moved, turning around to face away

from the fire. Neko held up his hands to the darkness, urging the others to wait, and walked forward tentatively. The knife belt was between Lux and the fire and he started pulling it away. It caught on something. It was stuck underneath Lux. The fire was heating Neko's pants fiercely. He slid the small knife out of his pocket and began sawing through the leather strap. Every stroke was torment as the thing pulled and twitched; the knife had been dulled by his carving efforts. Then the strap frayed and tore apart.

Neko backed away with the belt. He signalled again to the darkness, made even darker by the light of the fire. He heard the figures before he saw them. He pulled out a knife at random and held it ready, dropping the belt to the floor. The knife was too wide and the blade too heavy. He could use it as a threat, but not for fighting. He would have to bluster his way through. Filofax nodded to the boy who had come with her. It was the same one who had asked all the questions about the story. He brought forward a rope salvaged from the cart and began the precarious process of looping it around Lux's legs. He slid the rope underneath the sleeping mat and slowly pulled the noose up so that if Lux moved it would tighten both the rope and the mat around his ankles. At the same time, Filofax moved forward, scooping hot ash from the fire into a bowl that one of the men had left after eating from it. She held this over Lux's head. Her hands weren't shaking at all. She would turn it. Lastly, a woman crouched next to Lux and slid her hands under the blanket to find the gun. The sleeping figure jolted and hardened, and then bucked forward. The woman cried out as he grabbed her wrist. "Don't move" growled Filofax and the boy yanked the noose tight. Dust and grass flew up with the rope. Lux writhed and looked up to see the bowl held over his head.

"Hand over the gun."

"Fuck you," he spat, pushing himself up onto his elbows. She tipped the bowl slightly to the side, and an orange coal fell onto his shoulder. He pulled himself away and rubbed the smouldering patch on his shirt. "Mother of mud what are you doing woman? Log!" He reached underneath his elbow and none of them reacted in time. He pulled out the gun but did not fire. He only pointed it at her face. Neko noted this, and slunk back into the darkness. He crept around, aware of the rigid negotiation. She would not lower the bowl, and he did not lower the gun. Lux didn't even look at the others. That was clever, in a way. He only had to convince them he would shoot her and they would back off.

Neko had moved around in absolute silence, and now the scene was unfolding from the reverse: Filofax's back and Lux's front were facing him. The boy and the other women were standing at a distance, unsure of what to do. The showdown was becoming more heated, ash slipping out of Filofax's bowl and Lux shaking the gun. Neko bent his knees and sprang forward. In two huge steps he was at Lux. With his arms spread for balance he launched his back foot forward and it connected with Lux's wrist, sending the gun and Neko's boot spinning away into the darkness. Lux screamed and clutched his hand. The coals were jolted from the bowl onto his face. Ash seared his open mouth and throat as he breathed in fire and rubbed it from his eyes.

Neko stood gaping as Filofax cast aside the bowl and reached for the water the men had collected from the river. She tipped it over him, undoing the damage she had just caused, holding open his mouth and pouring it down. She used a whole bowl in this way and then sent the boy to fetch more.

When he returned, Lux had been moved to under the tree, his feet still bound. The man's moans were pained, but the scalds on his face were more like the welts from a whip than the bubbling of burnt flesh. He drank and spat repeatedly. He tried to speak, but his throat was cracked like a stone, and only wind whispered through.

They set out the moment it was light enough for a horse to see where to put its foot. Jagati seemed to have forgiven him somewhat, and he was especially kind with her when he took her to drink at the river. They left Lux bound under the tree with half of the women and all of the boys. It was more difficult to get Apple Juice the dog to stay where it was. In frustration, Filofax eventually left her tied with the broad-faced boy. She whimpered and pulled at the rope as the cart made off down the road.

Filofax had wanted to take the gun, but Neko explained that it was a liability. Firstly, because it was the most šalang thing in all of Ku, but secondly, because if you were going to have the most illegal thing in Ku on your person, it better work.

She agreed at last, and Neko threw it into Inyoka.

The going at the beginning was slow –they had used two of the reins to tie up Lux and Log, so there were only two left. They tied the reins together, but they were no longer as sensitive and they had to direct the horses at a walk. Once the sun had truly risen Neko undid the rope around Log, who had been lying all the while in the back of the cart, and reattached them to the cart. When he returned to the door of the box the man looked furious, his brow pulled forward as he puzzled the circumstances of his capture.

"We have Lux back at the camp. If we don't return in two days, at the latest, he will be killed."

"I don't give a fuck."

Neko smiled. "Yes you do. You are in love not lust. Even an eyeless fish could see that. Do as we say, and you too will be free of Markie."

"Markie does not command me." Log spat, scowling and kicking the dust. He cursed to the bushes but pulled himself up into the driver's seat.

They travelled at an even pace. Neko and Filofax repeated the plan four times, until everyone could recite their roles. They arrived at the stables that evening without completely draining the horses. Things happened very quickly then: a stable boy was sent as a runner to Markie, telling him that there had been a complication. The horses were unhitched and replaced. Riding horses were saddled and held behind the stables. Jagati was saddled and kept aside for Neko. Log helped smash the loops on the shaft of the cart out of shape, and they closed the cart with the three women inside. Filofax had chosen two women near her own age – Tiffin and Casa – to hide with her. The owner of the stables was inside too, bound using the reins they had used on Log. And then they waited.

Chapter Fifteen

North Ku, on the road to Masinge.

Little Jimmy stumbled along the river, his chest burning. He refused to walk. His hands were layered with mud which would dry and cake and then be reapplied as he fell and then got up and ran again. He had to warn Kamiyo that Marikasaan was coming for her. Little Jimmy had to get to Masinge before Marikasaan did. He had no light with him, and no other person took the road that night. Baboons barked from the top of a distant koppie and the moon tugged the blanket of clouds up to her chin.

Masinge burned and cackled, women calling out in pain or faked pleasure. He waded through the straw, and from the darkness a hand grabbed at his wrist. A weedy looking boy with eyes like globes pulled Little Jimmy toward him.

"I am Hans, elder brother of the petal of the North river, only five Metals to have my sister. She's in fine fettle for five Metals, may I interest you in Gret–"

Little Jimmy pulled his hand away, the cloth unravelling in the boy's hand. He grabbed it back and ran blindly on. He kept along the wall, turning up the right lane at the Fork. When he arrived at the House of Boards there were colourful bubbles of light, orange and blue lanterns hung across the road on ropes he had not noticed before. Under each one stood a woman from the House, giggling and flirting with the men who orbited around her. The men were dragged in by her tide – exploding out again in tipsy laughter. He pushed through their legs, calling for Kamiyo. The girls stopped giggling. He saw Kamiyo leading a man by the hand into the House. He had dark sleek hair, and held her hand gently, smiling all the time. Little Jimmy ran toward her. Two cat eyes flashed from the man's skull, green-yellow and shimmering in the lantern light. Kamiyo and the man slipped inside and before Little Jimmy could follow the huge woman grabbed him under the arms and carried him off.

"You're too young for all that," the huge woman said. The lantern-girls laughed and the wave rippled out, the men splashing all around them. One man called out "Bravo! See here the Giantess, banisher of bad taste," much to the amusement of the others. Little Jimmy twisted and wriggled but he could not get free from underneath her arm. She took a mock bow and strode to the back of the House, her bangles making every step a musical event. She huffed and lowered Little Jimmy onto the ground, not letting go of his wrist.

"Now you listen here little one, I will not have you and Marikasaan disrupting business –"

"He's coming for her!" Little Jimmy shouted, "Marikasaan is coming for Kamiyo and he's so angry."

"Nonsense. Marikasaan would not come here himself."

"Please!" Little Jimmy cried, "He told me not to come but I came anyway to warn Kamiyo, if you let me –"

"Stop! Just… stop a moment." The Giantess' shoulders were stooped forward and she puffed for air. "I am going to let go of your arm. There is nothing you can do, right now, for Kamiyo. Okay? If you disrupt her now, so help me in the name of mud I will make sure you never see her again." Little Jimmy nodded and the giantess let go, her bangles leaving an imprint on his arm. He rubbed at the red spots, wondering what mud had to do with anything.

"Sit down." He sat. The Giantess lowered herself onto a nearby log.

"Kamiyo is busy. She is probably making herself a nice sum, despite her injury. Pretty soon,

she's going to be able to trade for the quickest, strongest horse out of here. At the House of Boards we work for no-one but ourselves. The girls – they don't work for me, I work for them. Some of them will stay here their whole lives. That's not my problem. They can leave, if they want to. And that's the important bit. That is what I am here to do – other than the occasional lover of big girls, that is." She gave a coy nod to Little Jimmy who did not follow her meaning. She resumed more seriously,

"Marikasaan is making my job very difficult. Did Kamiyo tell you what she owes Marikasaan?"

"She owes him nothing," he responded, frowning severely.

"Aha!" the woman rocked back and clapped her hands together. Her bangles clashed together at her wrists. "That is what she would say, indeed. But her actions" – and here she held up her fingers and wiggled them –"would speak differently, would they not?"

"But what about –" he didn't know how to complete that sentence.

"Did Kamiyo tell you how she became indebted to Marikasaan?"

Little Jimmy shook his head.

"Well then you don't know if she owes him anything, do you? And let me tell you: she does. Kamiyo came here like any other young one, or, like any of the young ones used to. Just today I saw a young brother and sister, sold by their parents and brought here for business. That's not how it used to happen. People used to come here by themselves: 'Come to Masinge, Famous Port Town, A Relic of the Old Times, Last Connection to the Old City'. That's what they were told, you know. People from the other towns – they all heard it. Not me, oh no – I was born here.

"Some of them believed it, became nostalgic for things – most of all for things they had never even seen. And when they came they were disappointed. So they picked up their pipes and blew out smoke, and it clouded their eyes and for a moment they could see the Old World in all its glory."

She spat out the bitter last word. "Kamiyo came and got stuck in that mist, like so many do here. You've seen them walking around with their eyes so clouded it's a wonder they don't float off. She worked for a man, a horrible man, and Marikasaan took her away from him. Rescued or stolen. Either way, whether she likes it or not, she made a promise.

"Promises don't count if you don't love the person."

"That's nonsense she has been telling you."

Little Jimmy gritted his teeth. "She doesn't owe him anything."

"Well either way, he is coming to get it. I don't much want him to get it either. It has been a long night, there's a rumour spreading round that I don't like the sound of – trouble with Keeper Markie doesn't bode well for anyone. You should get out of here as soon as possible. But Kamiyo will still be a while, so I will make you a bed by the fire." She stood up, motioning toward the kitchen.

"But I must tell Kamiyo that he's coming for her!"

"I will send her to you as soon as she is done. Okay?"

Little Jimmy's limbs felt heavy and he nodded dutifully. "Giantess?"

"Just 'Tess'."

"Oh okay. Tess? What did Kamiyo take from Marikasaan?"

Tess paused, holding a blanket in her hands. "The man who Kamiyo worked for made Marikasaan… not a man anymore. But that doesn't need thinking about. Just sleep."

Little Jimmy lay down on the blankets and his mind swam. He thought painfully about the dot of wetness on Marikasaan's pants.

His dreams bobbed and swayed in dark bubbles, full of muted voices and laughter and the smell of

smoke. A needle pricked through, and the kitchen came into view once more. It was quiet, the sun not yet up, and Kamiyo had her good hand on his shoulder. She was smiling gently. She looked tired but happy, calm, and when Little Jimmy looked at her he knew everything would be okay.

She handed him a bowl of pap mixed with mielies and butternut, and sat opposite him. They ate a while in silence. Once he was done eating she pulled a small impala skin pouch from her sleeve. From it she poured a grey powder into the water gourd beside her and stirred it with a finger.

"Is that medicine?" he asked.

"Not really. It's a quick way out."

She took a deep gulp from the gourd next to her and coughed hard.

"Butternut has always been my favourite," she croaked, reaching for a piece from his bowl and popping it in her mouth. He reached over to the gourd she had just drunk from. She grabbed it from him as quick as a cat and it tumbled across the room, a little puddle of milky liquid trailing behind it.

"That's no drink for little boys." She left it where it fell. Little Jimmy felt unnerved. There was something terrible going on, and he could not figure out what it was. "I have somewhere I want to show you." She uncrossed her legs and picked up a small bundle of cloth, and Little Jimmy left his bowl unfinished.

They walked out of Masinge, further up along the spike of land which protruded into the water. The House of Boards was one of the last houses, and as they walked the grass rose up higher and the pathway thinned to a single lane. It brushed wetly on Little Jimmy's arms. They walked off the path, through the grass, and Kamiyo let her bandaged hand trail along the stalks, which bent and kissed each of her remaining fingers as she went by. Little Jimmy could see that they were making their way toward a big tree. The sun had begun colouring the world again, and the crown of the tree was a golden green. When they arrived Kamiyo walked around it so that she was facing the river. She slumped onto the ground, and Little Jimmy now saw that she was sweating, her lip quivering. She looked very sick when she looked up at him.

"You are going to have a difficult time in this world Jimmy. Don't love. And especially don't love the past. Don't love me either." She stared at the river for a while.

"Break off a branch there." She pointed at a low hanging branch. He twisted and tugged until the sinewy tree let him have it, and handed it to her.

"No no – you bring that," she breathed deeply, and he could hear her chest rattling as if some seeds were bouncing about in there, "to Marikasaan." Little Jimmy nodded and bit his lip, trying not to cry. She smiled again, and coughed, hiding a dark wetness in her hand. She pushed the bundle she had under her arm to him. "This is your way out. Now go." She smiled again and leaned back into the tree. Her lips almost looked blue they were so pale.

Little Jimmy backed away, his eyes wet. Her hair was crumpled against the bark of the tree. The roots held onto her and she became still, her chest stopped moving and her hands unclenched.

He stood staring at her for so long that it became unclear where Kamiyo ended and the tree began.

He walked away eventually. When people went into the ground they rotted. But when he looked back at the tree it burned with light, even though the grass around it was still misty grey. Its leaves took a breath and whispered a secret to the dew, which shook with silent laughter in the breeze.

Jimmy walked in silence, staring at the ground in front of him. In the early morning there were groans from Masinge and the chattering of monkeys and birds along the path, which was flecked

with dung from small antelope. When he returned to the hut he could smell Marikasaan, steeped in alcohol and snoring loudly. He had passed out on Jimmy's sleeping mat. Quietly, Jimmy collected the water gourd Marikasaan had first given him. He stood staring at the door uncertainly. At length he pushed the twisted branch with its dark green leaves into the ground at the entrance of the hut and turned away.

Across the village he found the man with the dog, washing up. The dog growled.

"Marikasaan says you must take me to the Tattooist."

"Oh really?" the man sneered. "If 'Saan says anything but 'Shut up' before this evening I would give him my right testicle. Mud knows he needs one."

Little Jimmy thrust forward the bundle he had been holding. He was surprised himself that his hand was not shaking.

"He says this is to cover the fees for the Tattooist, and that you can keep the rest yourself." The man took the bundle, watching Jimmy from the corner of his eye. He unfolded it and let out a low whistle. Jimmy did not look to see what was inside.

"Well that settles it." He clicked his tongue and Jimmy and the dog followed him.

The Tattooist's was a small house, and they had to wash their hands and feet before entering, leaving their shoes and the dog outside. The Tattooist himself – 'Kim' – was small and had a broad face. He stood inside smoking something that smelled like bananas. On his light skin his tattoos showed beautifully. Jimmy was sent outside and after a long time he was let back in. Kim and the man with the dog both looked angry, but it didn't seem to be directed at him. Kim was holding the bundle close to his chest. Jimmy was taken to a room to strip and wash, and given a gown to wear in place of his clothes. He then joined Kim in a quiet room. The floor was slightly damp, but the whole place smelled like alcohol, and a little like blood. Jimmy was sat down on a bench next to Kim, which was divided by an arm rest covered with a soft piece of cloth. Kim showed him where to put his arm, and wiped away the dirt that was still on his wrist.

"I use the old methods. Old methods are best." In the corner Jimmy could see some kind of urn, filled with black paste. Kim pursed his lips and picked up a small chisel, "Are you ready?"
Jimmy nodded, looking straight ahead.

After an hour his whole arm ached but etched into the skin was a wheel with eight spokes, just like those his siblings had. Kim admired his work for a while, wiping away flecks of blood which rose to the surface. Then he placed a piece of cloth over it.

"This cloth is cotton – very difficult to find. But perfect for healing." He wrapped a second piece of cloth around Jimmy's wrist. "Even though it's rare, you make sure you bury it after tomorrow morning. Don't let the arm get wet. Don't cover it up again. Put this on once every day until it's finished." He handed Jimmy a carefully carved pod which opened up to reveal thick green gunk which smelled like herbs. Jimmy clipped it closed again.

Kim leaned in and pulled Jimmy toward him. His breath smelled like burnt wood. "And you don't tell anyone that Kim gave a šalang to you."

Jimmy nodded. In the other room he pulled on his normal clothes, careful to not touch his wrist.

In the open air he took a deep breath and filled his water gourd. He left for Masinge for the last time.

Chapter Sixteen

South Ku, KwaDzanani

Luck and superstition are irrational fears evoked by the sound of one's own footfalls.

Genevieve held her breath. Her lungs burned with foulness in the small closet. She held her shirt to her mouth, gasping the toxic air like a fish held out of the river. Her stomach cramped. As soon as she finished she fled the filthy hut, grabbing her pack and darting back into the town. Who had the disgusting idea that all people should shit into the same giant hole? She understood why: there were too many people here. Their sewerage had been leaking into the water. But KwaDzanani had Vigil rifling through bushes looking for offenders. She shoved through a knot of people and shivered at their touch.

The setting sun was abrasive, the town was abrasive. The white flamingos with their scaly stick-legs were abrasive. The food was worse than abrasive, it was poisonous. Her bloated stomach twinged unhappily. She pushed a fist into it, massaging the cramp. A fortnight in this place had felt an awful lifetime.

Worst of all: she had not yet found a way to get into the Library. That was what they called the place where the Keepers learned. KwaDz was a real city. She saw her mistake in thinking that Bricks had been a city. Where Bricks had one street, here were tens upon tens, set out in a complicated logic. It had taken a few days to understand the pattern. There were three centres: Flamingo Lake, the Pilgrim's Hole and the Library. Flamingo Lake worked like any other village: it had a Centre hut for eating, and eight spokes. But half of the spokes led directly into the lake, which meant that nobody could live in the houses on the outer rim. In any other village that would be the end of the matter, but scores of travellers slept in these damp huts. The wetness from the walls soaked into their lungs; wrinkled their skin; and when the floods came: washed them away completely.

South East of Flamingo Lake was the centre formed around Pilgrim's Hole. The red-sand roads were thick with people, and the air was heavy with disease and dust. The Earthers wore tattered clothes and skew limps, and across their mouths they had pieces of cloth to stop their spit turning the same brown colour as their grimy skin. Some would wait by the hole for days to get a chance to peer down into the oblivion dug up by ancient hands. They would throw their luck into that hole, their bad will, their illness and sometimes themselves. Genevieve had stumbled blindly around the Pilgrim's hole, her hair matted and nose clotted. She came as close to the edge of the hole as she dared, but could see no more than the opposite wall. Only the ones who jumped saw the bottom.

The final village wheel was South of Flamingo Lake but west of the Big Hole. This was the wheel with the Library at its centre. She stood looking at the wall that lined the outer rim, Vigil posted atop it like baboons in a tree. It was the first time she had seen Vigil. They were stolid figures, unmoved by the happenings in the street, gazing into the distance as if enemies would approach from afar, blind to the streets below them. Their robes were the colour of dark piss, and their faces blank.

The narrow gate was open, and every person who entered was scrutinised, their goods unpacked, their skin checked for signs of disease. Genevieve scratched her arm. A scab had appeared there a few days before. A dry lesion on which none of her mother's herbs had any effect.

The cuts from her admission ceremony were healing well. Her arm was stiff in the mornings, but it soon eased. It itched, which she had always been told was healthy. Her ankle on the other hand, did not look as good. There was a pink band all around the cut, and it was only aggravated by

the mud and dust.

The wall ran the entire length of the Library. There were ten gates in total. Of these, only four opened, and then only three at the same time. The fourth let things out rather than in.

Genevieve swatted away the Believer who was tugging at her elbow. The wall was impossible to climb. Almost. If one could climb onto the thatch roof of a nearby hut, one could climb in. She had seen cats do it. Hissing, furious creatures that would flash like Shadows from rooms, and mewl in a demonic chorus all through the night. The Believer tugged again. She turned, her jaw set as sternly as she could muster.

"What." It was not a question. The Believer was one of the Potterians. She had learnt to identify the different groups with ease. They always announced themselves.

"Greetings I am a Student of Hog-"

"No thank you." She didn't want to hear about blemished pigs. She pulled away and walked on. The Potterian moved on to another bystander. The Potterians were mostly harmless, except of course to themselves. The jagged cuts on their forehead became easily infected in this dust, and yellow pus bubbled out of their skin and became flaking scabs. They were the most common of the Believers, but there were others.

The ones who spoke about 'one true god', those were the dangerous ones. Their huts were privately guarded, and when they ventured into one another's territory, it meant violence. On her first day Genevieve had seen men carried away, limping and bleeding. Others carried machetes caked with rusted-blood. The Vigil did not interfere. Here, in this place of a hundred Keepers, was something that went against every value of Ku, against the *Lessons*.

Their women were not allowed to stray from their homes. The men worked and fought while the women stood with screaming children on their hips – probably more than was allowed – and all the while the Vigil looked up and over KwaDz. Genevieve clenched her fists and ground her teeth, watching the Vigil as they unpacked potatoes at the third gate. On a small wooden stand to the right of the gate, a man climbed onto the temporary dais and began to call people around him.

"Friends, Earthers, Believers and on! Listen to my tale, a true tale, like any, and as dangerous. I have travelled from the North by raft and by foot."

Genevieve looked back to the gate, where the torches had been lit and absentmindedly scratched her healing arm. There were people telling stories by the dozen in KwaDz, and their stories had no life in them. Every Believer had a story to tell you, and it was always the same. There is a power greater than nature, and that is a god. That god had a child – and he, but sometimes she – roamed the Earth and sacrificed their life so that you could live. You must give this person your worship.

Reverence was dangerous. She respected these tales, as was correct, but she did not believe that they had any value. After they told you about this sacrifice, they would tell you that this child would come again and wreak havoc on your life if you did not sacrifice for them.

Then Genevieve wanted to spit and rage. Her life was not owed to anyone. Not her mother, not Vinyl, not some petty god-child. She wanted not to be held by stories. These absurd tales of god-children, or Life in Space, and most of all not the ones the Trust fed to the Tellers. These tales that clung like black-jacks to her ankles and pricked her when she slept. She wanted to get inside the Library, to find truths. To find the Sunken Hallways that everyone insisted didn't exist. A history of Ku that made sense of the crumpled sheets in her pack. A Keeper would know these answers, but she would be exiled just for asking them.

People had begun to move with purpose. The day stalls were packing up, and the night stalls

opening in their place. Swallows swooped under roofs, and bats flitted out. The dinner rush would be happening across town, where the Centre would be providing food at the price of a single metal.

They didn't have time to exchange goods here. Most people chose instead to buy food from stalls. Genevieve snorted with contempt and picked at a flaking scab on her arm from her admission ceremony. Her grandmother had instilled into her that when people were starving, Metals didn't mean anything. 'You try giving a Farmer a nice shiny Trust-minted token in the middle of the dry season. He will give you a handful of dust and tell you the plants should grow from it soon'.

A city that relied on this substitute for exchange could never flourish. Every place was better at one thing than another. You could grow roots better in the veld, and fruit trees better in the flats. In Mushi there were berry fields and wild olive forests. Nowhere else that she knew of had either of those things. KwaDz's only assets were Keepers and the Trust. She daydreamed about trying to exchange a cartful of fruit for a Keeper.

Her stomach roiled at the thought of food. When she arrived she had crushed seeds and baked mud-bowls and had thus been allowed to eat at the Centre at Flamingo Lake. The past three days she had done nothing but watch the gates at all hours, so she was not allowed to eat.

The last two nights she had joined travellers as they cooked torn animals on fires by the roadsides, offering up some of her own goods in a bad trade. The rat – if that was what she had eaten – had tasted awful. Her stomach whined in agreement. She rested her hands on her swollen belly and leaned back against the wall. She should eat something. But she left her pack on the floor beside her, her eyes unfocused, watching only for a break in pattern at the gate.

A big-bellied man pushed his way out of the entrance, laughing obnoxiously. His friends bumped into his broad sides, like baby pigs trailing their mother. Genevieve directed her general anger toward him. What business could a man like that have in the Library? On what grounds was he allowed to enter, where she could not? The man seemed to notice her gaze, and he nudged his fellows. They walked toward Genevieve, who straightened against the wall. He whistled as he looked her up and down. Genevieve rolled her eyes and stared in the opposite direction.

"You working, baby?"

Genevieve turned to look at him, cocking an eyebrow and chewing the inside of her cheeks, trying to look indifferent. She felt fear and anger burning scarlet on her cheeks.

"No." She looked away again.

"You look a bit young to be working. But a pretty girl like you, all alone in a big town like this…"

"Go fuck yourself."

"I was hoping you'd help me with that, I'm only going home tomorrow, and it has been a long moonth." His friend snickered as the man rested his arm against the wall, leaning over Genevieve. His breath stank. "My name is Lesebi. They call me Big Al. What's yours pretty girl?" Genevieve's brow furrowed. The name was familiar.

"My name is 'Fuck Off'." She pushed him in the centre of his chest. He barely moved. She had put force into it, but he absorbed the blow. He laughed.

"What a rude tongue." He stroked her cheek, "I also have a rude tongue. My woman back home calls me a lizard." He flicked his tongue grossly out of his mouth.

Genevieve kicked him as hard as she could between the legs. Her shin met bone and the man bent over gasping. She shoved him away and he keeled over backwards as she swung her pack over her shoulder and ran. His friend started shouting and Genevieve could feel people turning to look at her, but none barred her way. After she was sure she had lost him Genevieve slowed to a limping

walk. She had kicked him with the foot that had been cut in the hunt.

The first wave of laughter crumpled her serious expression, and she choked and stumbled. It foamed from her aching stomach and she held her hand over her mouth. She limped and laughed, and laughed and laughed. Lesebi – Tseb's husband, Lesebi. He would go home tomorrow, he said. Genevieve would love to see that. He would go home, and Tseb would have buried her lizard love, and she would be furious.

This mirth kept her going, past the closed second gate and around to the first. The scene replayed in her head many times. It had been satisfying to floor him. She had never done that to someone before.

There was a twenty-people-long queue on the other side of the gate, waiting to be searched and let out. She had not waited at this gate before. What was the point? Nobody was let in here. Taking out her hunting hood and the last morsels of dried fruit she resolved to spend the evening here, simply for a change of scenery.

Genevieve had been asleep for an hour when the pounding of footsteps woke her, and her first illogical thought was that someone was playing Murderball. Her neck ached from leaning against the wall. She scratched sleep from the corner of her eye with a dirty fingernail. Three grimy children ran past, and just before she was about to curse them the first disappeared through the wall. She stared numbly as the second looked around and then slipped through the wall too.

Genevieve scrambled up and over to where the legs of the third child wriggled and disappeared. She dropped to her knees and was about to reach into the hole when a small arm reached out from the other side. It grabbed the muddy sack from next to the hole and pulled it halfway in. Even from this close vantage point it no longer looked like the hole existed. She looked around. The streets were abandoned.

She pulled the sack away and went in headfirst. The hole dropped down vertically, and the space was cramped. She muted the panic that she felt in this absolute darkness, the walls pushing against her shoulders. She clawed her way down the sloping tunnel. There was no way she could turn around and replace the sack. She scrambled forward, her legs unable to bend. Her hand met solid wood in front of her. Had she missed a side tunnel? Dirt stuck to her teeth as her breath became ragged. It felt like she was not breathing at all. She took bigger and quicker gasps. She thumped on the wood ahead of her. She would not be able to get out the way she had come. She smacked the wood again and again.

A crack of light appeared to the left and a moment later the wood shifted. A dirty face peered in at Genevieve, two more dirty faces bobbed behind it.

"What in the name of mud… what are you doing? Go back!" the child hissed, its eyes wide.

"I can't. I'm stuck." Genevieve's voice quivered. The children made way for her and she pulled herself out. The floor was three feet down from the hole and she flopped onto it.

"Did you close the back?" Genevieve shook her head and a child clambered over her and into the tunnel. It seemed to be a girl. She returned with Genevieve's pack, which she hadn't even noticed that she had lost. When the wooden slate was slid back into place the three children stood over her, hands on hips. They were identical in size and mouse-like expressions. They looked related. Three children was a bad omen. A woman or man could only ever have two children. A third was šalang, and one was banished with one's children. They stared at her intensely. There was dim light, but no light source in the room itself. It seemed to emanate from the top of the ladder that was

leaned against the far wall. The top rungs were most brightly illuminated.

"She has to go back."

"We can't risk it. She'll get stuck."

"She's going to get us caught."

"You can't stay here."

Genevieve snapped back to attention. The girl on the far right had an upturned nose, which wiggled with childish annoyance.

"Where are we?"

"In the storerooms."

"In the Library?"

The children looked at her nonplussed and fidgeted, the smallest boy stroking hand over hand repeatedly, and then brushing his nose.

"You have to go back."

"Are these the Sunken Hallways?!"

Genevieve stood up and dusted herself off. She looked at the three creatures in front of her, their faces whiskered with dirt, and their brown eyes filled with sincere concern. The girl began to speak again but Genevieve cut her off.

"No. I'm not going back." She walked through them and toward the ladder. The girl flew onto her arm, scratching at it.

"You can't go up there! You'll give us away!"

Genevieve shushed her and pulled away. She climbed up, conscious of the girl climbing up behind her. At the top, they were on the floor. Heavy looking sacks towered above her, and quill feathers poked through a sack on her right. She crawled out and stood up. The three children followed behind.

The light in this room came from a candle, or some kind of flame that had been set on the wall. It did not waver or flicker. It maintained an eerily steady light. The room was as still as sleep. The girl beckoned the other two and helped them up. She walked over to the nearest sack and, frustrated with the knot at the top, gnawed a hole in the hemp. A trickle of mielie kernels leaked from the hole. She used her shirt as a pouch to catch the debris. Genevieve wandered into the next room, framed by a rounded doorway. It was almost identical to the first one, but without a hole in the floor. There were no books, just more sacks of food and quills and other goods.

Each room led into another, and she followed the snaking pathway without thinking. The children scurried behind her, each with a pouch of meal in their shirts. She arrived at a room with three doors and paused. She could go back, left or right.

The door on the left was closed. It was heavy to pull open. It felt like opening a lid underwater. Freezing cold air blasted from inside and as it opened bright lights appeared on the ceiling. She stood in the doorway aghast.

Pigs, goats and buck hung upside down, suspended, with ice flakes on their skin. The walls were covered with ice – as if it had hailed inside this room. She was too shocked to move, her quick breaths clouding in front of her. She had never believed the tales of Shadows, but this was Old World magic. She stepped back into the other room and the door closed by itself, the light disappearing as if a hundred candles were all blown out at once.

She shivered then and turned. The three children stood gawking at the closed door. She walked through the open doorway to the right. In the next room she went left, and so alternated until she arrived in a sloped corridor. She followed this up and waited in the entrance. The fresh air

was cold. A few people walked with bowed heads, moving with purpose between buildings. She nearly retreated into the innocuous-looking store hut behind her, but now that she was in, it was more than likely that no one would question her presence, especially if she acted as if she had nothing to hide.

She marched down a straight spoke, past three store huts. Were they also hiding a nest of rooms underneath them? She brushed her fingers past a hut as she walked. It seemed to be made from ordinary mud. But the tunnels beneath it would never hold up if this were the case.

When she looked back the children were gone. A cat shot past her legs and up the walls of one of the huts. Above the thatch she could see the heads of the Vigil, looking out to their distant enemies.

The spoke ended abruptly in a concrete wall. Another wall, wrapped around the centre. It was like biting into an orange and discovering a second skin at its core. Genevieve turned sharply to the right, not missing a step. She could see two Vigil posted at an entrance ahead. She steeled herself, straightening her back and pulling her hood over her forehead. Her bow and her knives were buried under a rock in the veld to the North of KwaDz, and she felt their absence keenly.

Just beyond this entrance was a huge doorway, which led into the biggest Centre that she had ever seen. It wasn't a hut: it was an Old World building, a ruin, but it looked less than a season old. The walls were smooth and even, the roof intact, and a golden bright glow emanated from within. She walked straight toward the guards, who did not move to stop her. She stared forward, not daring to meet their eyes, her chin held upward. She was eight steps through the gate when a voice called to her.

"Halt!" she cringed and turned. Two yellow-cloaked guards were looking out at her from the shadow of the wall. Guards that faced inward, toward the Centre. One had lowered a well-crafted spear toward her. The other seemed dazed with sleep and moved forward uncoordinated, circling to her right.

"What is your business here?"

"I…"

She ran.

Genevieve's ran straight into the Centre, and her feet pounded along the hard floors.

The two guards followed behind her, and she could hear them shouting for help. In front of her an old man was carrying a stack of sheets. She tumbled over of him and they both fell to the floor. For no reason she could explain, she grabbed a few of the papers he had dropped and clenched them in her fist. She carried on running, skidding around corners. She flew out of a half-open door which bruised her shoulder as she hit it and flung herself into the open air. Her heart leapt at the abandoned entrance in front of her, and she sprinted through it and past the store houses. The gate ahead of her was barred, but there was an even stair case to the left of it. She ran up and at the top of the wall she ran past two Vigil, staring numbly outward. She had just one moment to look at the black shine that covered the flat roof of the Centre behind her, like a dark lake divided into equal blocks. Then she put her foot on the balustrade and launched herself onto the thatching of a nearby hut. The rafters resisted her in a flaccid embrace and then gave way, and she fell into someone else. She didn't stop to ponder the thatched, screaming being she left behind in the rubble. She ran north, toward her bow and arrows, toward Inyoka.

It was then that she reflected, and she saw; so strongly that the hyena-snickering veld around her seemed to disappear into myth. She saw the polished stone floors over which she had run, and lights that burned without fire. Through heavy wooden doors there had been rows of tables and hundreds of individual chairs. There were towers of books lining every wall.

She had seen the Library, the Trust, and unthinkable debris of the Old World; Keepers worshipping before boxes filled with the cerulean depth of empty skies. She had heard the hum of mechanisms supposedly long dead, animated by life-carrying wires, and saw the square reflection they left in glazed eyes; blue light on black-word sashes. Her grazed knuckles clutched the papers she had stolen. Did they mean anything? She was tired of trying to get answers from papers. The past had answers. Her First Ancestor, her grandmother, had answers. She ran north.

Chapter Seventeen

North Ku, Masinge

Three Launders shouldered their way across the bridge with Markie walking a little way behind. One of them was the Launder from the first night, who had strung Neko up and beaten him.

Neko dusted his leather hat and put it back on, even though it was nearing dark. He tightened the large boots over his feet. Log gave him a look of pure loathing and shifted the knobkerrie at his side as the Launders parted and Markie stepped forward with all the flourishing of a Teller.

"Logarithm my dear friend. You seem to be missing your other half." Markie glanced momentarily at Neko and then away again.

Log opened his mouth but Neko cut in before him. "He's holding some rabbits down the road – the cart was giving us trouble so we couldn't carry them all at once."

Markie turned slowly from Log to Neko.

"Trouble? With our trusted cart? I daren't believe it." The Launders fanned out around the cart, inspecting it from all angles. Neko rubbed away the sweat on his hands.

"The loops bent on the right of the cart. It made two of the horses lame."

Markie smiled, staying where he was. One of the Launders came back and muttered something into his ear. He cleared his throat and looked at Log once more.

"Is Lux close?"

Log grunted, giving a nod. He beckoned one Launder away with a finger, walking away down the road. Panic shoved a fist down Neko's throat, and he called weakly behind them, "Just send him on his way Log." This was not part of the plan. Had Log decided to turn on them? Did he not come for Lux after all?

Markie narrowed his eyes at the two receding figures but when he turned to face Neko his false grin returned.

"Already in command? It doesn't surprise me. I have been hearing the most fascinating stories about you Neko. *The truth is kept by all of us*."

Neko smiled quickly and began tonguing the loose tooth.

"Well known throughout nine villages and beyond. Neko the Cat, always lands on his feet, they say. Always lands with some woman's back on the floor."

Neko laughed, "A reputation based on solid personal achievements then." Markie circled around him to look inside the cart. Neko closed his eyes and turned, his hands clenched. Markie laughed and addressed the figures in the cart, peeping through the bars on the door.

"Welcome to Masinge. The greatest village in Ku. I hope you enjoy our hospitality."

"May mud splatter your children," came a woman's voice out of the cart. Was it Tiffin or Casa? It was not Filofax who said it. Markie laughed again.

"I have no children you silly whore." He leaned against the cart door now, facing Neko, whose mouth had fallen open somewhat. "Oh I'm sorry. Did you not figure it out? Did I let the cat out of the bag? – or rather, was I too successful in getting the 'cat' into the bag!" He laughed, as did the two remaining Launders, who had come up to stand next to Markie as a wall between Neko and the cart. "That ugly bitch is not my daughter. Really, Neko. Is there any resemblance?"

Neko gritted his teeth. There was a little tear, and then blood filled his mouth. He spat out the tooth and a mouthful of blood.

"I may have once been the simple son of a miller. But I'm a Keeper now. That's as high as one

can go in this pitiful reserve. It does mean that I speak to other important people –"

Neko watched as a pair of thin arms slid through the bars, between them a thick rope. One hand met the other, and a noose was formed next to Markie's ear.

"– other Keepers. Like that old friend of yours. Goes by the name of Kipper. Keeper Kipper, what a darling!" Neko felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. He inadvertently reached for his unblemished šalang, a little faded with age, but intact.

"Oh I see you remember!" clapped Markie delightedly. "Yes, Kipper had some fascinating things to say about you and a young cousin of yours. A much, much younger cousin. And an incomplete trial that you didn't wait around to see the end of–" The rope lifted and fell, pulling tight around Markie's neck, slamming him back into the bars. Neko leapt at the right Launder. The man's attention was focused on Markie, whose feet were scrabbling against the ground.

Neko slammed his shoulder into the Launder and sent him spinning off balance. The cart door swung open with Markie still attached and the three women poured out. Tiffin maintained her grip around Markie's neck, hauling the rope over her shoulder and pulling with all her strength. He could hear Markie choking on the other side of the door.

Filofax and Casa leapt for the other Launder, both wielding Lux's knives. The Launder who Neko had knocked down was getting up, and Neko shoved a heavy boot into the side of his head. The man went limp for a moment, and Neko turned at the sound of a scream. There was blood pouring down Filofax's hands and Casa was holding onto the hilt of the Launder's knife which was jammed into her own belly.

The Launder Neko was supposed to be dealing with grabbed his legs and pulled them out from under him. Neko was on the floor with him now, and the man pinned him. He struggled, trying to keep free his arms. The Launder reached back with one hand and pulled a spearhead out of his belt. He lifted it up and Neko covered his face with his arms.

There was a clunk. The heavy ball of the knobkerrie caught the Launder's temple. He dropped to the side and Neko shoved him completely off. Log grunted at Neko and then pulled the knobkerrie along the sand towards the on-going fight.

Filofax and the other Launder were struggling over the knife. Her shirt had been ripped off her shoulders. As Log swung, Neko saw the knife shear across the top of her left breast, the skin and the nipple flapped away and revealed the reddest flesh. The knobkerrie connected with the man's ribs and he tumbled away too. Filofax stood up and Neko gawked at her. He ran to try and help but she had picked up the fallen knife, and in a swift movement had cut the hanging skin off her chest.

He watched astounded as she tied the remains of her shirt tightly across the wound. There was a crack and a grunt as Log left an indentation on the last standing Launder's forehead, blood seeping out of a purple swelling. Filofax screamed in undirected rage and then turned to Markie who was going limp, making a futile effort to hold onto the rope around his neck.

She walked up to him and pushed the heel of her hand into his forehead, lifting it up.

"Welcome to your death, the greatest moment in all of Ku. I hope you've enjoyed our hospitality." She pushed the knife across his throat and sawed through bulging veins and tendons. His blood splattered her already wet chest, wetting the bottom row of her teeth.

Log stood a way off, breathing heavily. Filofax stood with the knife in her hand, suddenly looking awkward. Tiffin, who was holding Markie's limp body eventually let go, her hands rubbed raw. She stood looking at Filofax from between the bars.

They all stayed like that for a long time, until the third woman, the one who had been stabbed in the stomach, coughed out blood on the floor. Filofax and Tiffin picked her up and carried her to

the horses. The dark puddle on the floor told Neko she would die along the way. Log looked at Neko with seething hatred and then stumbled after the women. Neko watched entranced, and then walked to Markie's body. He searched, knowing that he would not find it. All there was in the man's pockets were a few of the useless tokens for the Grey Horn. He took them anyway and then walked back to the horses. The others had already left, and only Jagati remained. Neko leapt up onto her back without caring for her preferences. He put his heels lightly to her side and she complied, trotting hurriedly but obediently across the bridge and into Masinge.

In Masinge he walked the horse to the Markie's tavern and gave three tokens to a whore who was leaning against the wall. She drunkenly took hold of the reigns and Jagati whickered in alarm. Neko took a deep breath in through his nostrils which were clogged with blood and cocked the hat back and to the side on his head. He shook out his coat and swung it over his shoulders, and strode in, keeping his elbow pressed against his ribs and hiding the obvious bloody marks with his arm.

It was louder and brighter than he remembered inside, and his boots clipped the hard floor as he walked straight through the drinking hall and into the back, where Markie's room was. He could feel the eyes of the skew-nosed serving girl on him, and out of the corner of his eye saw her frantically signalling to a big man at the door.

Neko carried on, turning down the passage and up the two stairs. Markie's room was surprisingly quiet.

If another Keeper had seen it, Markie would have been banished. Thick brown books lined a wall along the floor; and a cracked mirror leaned against the wooden cupboard, filled with more clothes than any one man could wear. His bed was raised from the ground, and he had a chair – the kind that sat only one person – next to the bed.

The opposite wall was lined with guns. Long snouts, short ones; all polished and hung from the wall by a nail. Hung from one of the rafters was Neko's pack. He prodded at its sides, and the familiar shapes made him smile. He swung it over his shoulder and glanced around the room once more. He picked up a book at random and tried to put it in his pack, but it was too big so he flung it down again. He opened the cupboard and felt down into the corner. There was a hollow in the wood, and he sat down on the floor to see it better. The wooden piece shifted to the left, opening up a compartment. Inside was a screen with pictures, like a television. A name from his childhood flitted before his eyes but then disappeared. He could not recall it. The picture was of the šalang, and above it was a long word on a blue background.

He reached past the screen and in the corner he felt a small, soft bag. When he pulled it out he could see the glimmer of golden tokens inside, polished so that they almost glowed. He reached in again and bumped the screen. It made a soft noise like a bell and the blue screen disappeared. Now it looked like a book: the screen covered top to bottom in little black words on a white background. As he watched the words jumped upwards, new ones appearing in a neat line at the bottom and shifting the rest away. He physically jumped when it happened again, and got to his feet.

He slipped the pouch with the gold tokens into his coat and set off again. The front door of the Grey Horn was blocked by a large man, and the girl fussed uncertainly at his side.

He approached them confidently. "Markie sent me to fetch some things. There has been a problem with the cart." The big man, assured by his confidence, stepped aside. The girl squealed orders at him but Neko had already slipped around them. He tossed the remaining handful of Markie's useless wooden tokens at the whore and grabbed Jagati's reigns. He turned her and set off at a slow canter, his pack bumping his side.

He found a stable for Jagati, and then somewhere for himself to stay. There would be no use in galloping off into the night: the horse could easily fall or shy at something in the night; he didn't y et know where he was going, and above all he was exhausted.

He bathed and washed his mouth, which turned the water pink with blood. Seeing himself stripped for the first time he saw the dark bruises that covered his whole body, like some trampled fruit. He paid the boy of the house to wash his clothes and he traded one of Markie's gold tokens to buy a new shirt and thin pants which would serve him better in the hot Summer that was coming. He also traded the oversized boots for ones with leather straps. A sturdy bottom and an open top. He had grown fond of the idea of boots.

He wandered around the edges of Masinge. The girls were beautiful, and it felt like the world was filled with colour again. Spring dotted the night time with its flowers, glowing under lights. He felt drunk with the promise of the evening. He chose one that reminded him of home, and of the reason that he had left home. He dared not give it too much thought: Keeper Kipper was still looking for him? Would she still put him on trial, after all this time? He ignored those questions for now.

This girl's hair was sleek and black, tossed carelessly over her shoulders. Her hand was bandaged but he paid the full price for her anyway. One could always be generous with someone else's Metals. She had a sadness to her, and he stayed awake a long time stroking her hair and face. She stared back, her eyes wide, but did not say anything. She fell asleep and he pulled her to him. He wanted to fill himself with her scent. When she got up in the morning he lay still, his body aching again, too tired to move. She took his hand in hers and kissed it, saying "Thank you," and left. He tried sleeping for another half hour with no success. After staring for a long time at the roof of the hut, he got up and dressed.

He left a tip for his old friend the Giantess and went and fetched his clothes, which were still soaked. The stable boy begrudgingly awoke and went to fetch drinking water. Neko rubbed down Jagati, feeding her with a carrot he got from the Centre. He took his time. It would be a long journey, and he unknotted her mane and brushed her tail until they flowed like silk. He packed her saddle carefully, securing his pack so that it wouldn't bump her side, and packed some of the staple foods he had traded from the kitchen so that they wouldn't burst in the heat. He tucked the dark red pouch with the gold tokens into his coat pocket.

Masinge was dead quiet, and it seemed what Markie had said about the set- long White Out was true. This was no farming town, with people rising early for chores. It was muddy and it stank, and he was glad to leave it.

Chapter Eighteen

North Ku, Splinter Aisle

Jimmy yawned as he walked, flexing and bending his fingers. The skin on his wrist felt tight underneath the cotton, but he was comforted by the fact that at last, there was a šalang underneath it. The back of his neck stung from the heat of the day, and he looked around hopefully for a shady spot to nap. He imagined falling asleep underneath a tree, like Kamiyo, dissolving into its roots with his skin sinking into his bones; or curling up in the soft grass by the river at home, listening to the sounds his siblings made as they played or worked. He took another miniscule sip of water to wash away the dust gathering on his tongue. It turned to sludge and he drank again to clear his throat. The road seemed to be leading further into the dry veld, away from the river.

He tried to do some tracking like his brothers used to do. There was some dung on the path that looked quite fresh. Big dollops filled with grass. Back home they used to play a game using impala drolletjies: Each person had five chances to try and spit the balls into a bowl. Whoever got in the most would win. The winner could decide on a penalty for the others, which always involved eating (at least) three bolletjies, sometimes more.

Jimmy never won, but he never actually had to eat dung, because before it came to penalty time Little Timot*é would have eaten all the dung anyway. Jimmy stepped over a branch which had been broken and lay across the road. The girls weren't allowed to play because it was disgusting, so said the Old Lady. The boys agreed, because once, when they let Brienna play, she won and tried to make them eat drolletjies that had been soaked in the river.*

Jimmy stopped and admired a huge pile of droppings in the road. Green and yellow balls as big as his two fists. It smelled ripe. He walked carefully around it and then stopped. What if he went home? He had a šalang now, he could go home, and leave again whenever he wanted. Just like Adrian and Brian could have. He felt such relief at this idea that he turned around on the path and took a few steps back the way he had come and then stopped again. It would mean going back through Masinge, and by now it would be busy. Someone might recognise him and ask him where Kamiyo was. Even if he made it past Masinge, he would then have to go back to Marikasaan's village. Marikasaan would be awake, and he would find out that Jimmy had the šalang done. Marikasaan would kill him. Maybe he could find a way to loop around them without going through those villages. Going through the veld, heading south and east until he came back to his own little river. Jimmy turned around again and this time stepped straight into the dung.

"Aaah, gah!" he said, shaking his foot. He wiped his sole on the ground but the dung squished between his toes. He looked around at the thorny bushes and the stringy grass but there was nothing he could use to wipe it off. He dragged the top of his foot along the ground, hopping on the other leg. He sat down and plucked the last of the wet shit from between his toes, rubbing his fingers in the sand after touching it. 'It's just grass' his brothers would have said. Grass that has been in something's butt, he retorted silently.

A movement caught his eye. He stared at the thorny branches to his left. A bird, perhaps. The space behind the tree moved. It was like seeing a landslide.

There was a huge cracking noise from the bushes. He leapt to his feet and began to run. Branches split as the boulder pushed forward toward the path. Tearing at the branches ahead of it was the most hideous snake, thick, grey and wrinkled. The bushes gave way and the beast sauntered onto the pathway. Jimmy stopped so quickly he nearly lost his balance. The animal turned to look at

him, flaring its ears, black eyes furious. A monster the size of a hut. He had thought it just a story to scare kids. Huge ears that could hear the heartbeat of a mouse; curved white tusks that broke down huts; legs as thick as a grown man which would trample crops and people and even horses.

Jimmy crumpled onto the ground and covered his head with his hands. He cried, as quietly as possible, snot and tears falling down onto the ground. The elephant snorted and he stayed crouched, crying. When he dared to look up the monster was walking off.

He leapt to his feet and sprinted away as fast as he could for as long as he could. He held onto his water bottle and the straps whipped his side. When his chest stung and his feet ached he had to stop. He walked quickly, checking behind his shoulder. The elephant wasn't anywhere to be seen. How had he been so blind? How could something so large appear so quickly? Maybe when elephants slept they turned into rocks, and you could accidentally climb onto them. That was what his brothers had said, maybe.

His thinking became tired. A noise would scratch at his pulped thoughts for a long time before he would whip around and look for the source. His head ached. It was in this state that he saw the thing on the road. A dark blob. At first he thought it was more dung, but as he walked closer, it looked like some kind of small animal. He strayed around it, ready to run if it moved. When it didn't, he rolled it over with his foot, and then picked it up. It was a small cloth pouch, soft to the touch and heavier than he had expected. He unknotted the thin strings.

Inside were the most incredible gold tokens, flat and round. He took one out and it shone between his dusty fingers. He wiped it on his shirt, looking around for anyone that might be watching. There were fine inscriptions on the token, faint pictures and lines. He dropped it back into the pouch, tying it to the straps of his water pouch. It chinked against his hip as he walked.

The bush around him changed: there was a border where the knotted trees gave way to fields on both sides of the road. The left side gave way to a field dark and barren, ready for planting, while on the right were neat rows of seedlings.

The path was better maintained here, wide enough for a cart. The heat of the day had softened, and in the distance he could see some people working. They were bent like wilted flowers in the empty stretches of land. He shouted and waved his arms.

"Hello!"

They straightened, and he could see them speaking to one another. Eventually one of them raised a hand and waved.

Down the broadening path the village came into view. The village was in two halves, one on either side of the road, as alike as if a pod had been broken down the middle. The road, four carts wide, bisected the village. The people walked against the huts on one side or the other, never straying near the centre, like ants marching along a wall.

Jimmy felt very self conscious, walking as he was near the centre of the road. He felt that every person was watching him and he swung the arm with the bandage awkwardly, trying not to draw attention to it.

"Hey boy! Come here boy!" someone called from the right. Jimmy shaded his eyes to look for the speaker, walking towards the voice in the shade of the huts.

"No boy! Come here! Don't go that way!" Jimmy looked back. On the left side a person had stepped into the sunlight and was waving with both arms.

"Don't be foolish. They have nothing to offer you that side but lies and deceit. Come here and

we will give you food." Jimmy could see the speaker now. He was one in a group of men all watching Jimmy. He needed food. He walked to the right. When he reached the group of men they thumped his shoulder and stuck out their tongues to the other group.

"We got him you dirty sons of mud!"

Across the road, the other group hissed and walked away, grumbling. Jimmy looked around expectantly. The men had resumed their seats around a strange pattern of circular stones.

"Sorry… excuse me…" he tried, looking at the man who had welcomed him. "Umm…" he searched for the unfamiliar greeting, "Friend!" The man looked up.

"Oh yes. Go and ask the women." The man waved his hand dismissively.

Jimmy gave up speaking to him and walked along the shade. The line of huts was neat and well-kept, and he soon found a broad passageway leading into the rest of the village. He peered down it and could see some women sitting near a big hut at the end of the path. As he walked, he noticed that the huts out of view of the road were balding, the walls cracked. Broken bowls and frayed mats littered the pathway, and a baby sat in front of its hut crying. No one came to quiet it. He stood at an uncertain distance from the group of women, fidgeting. They carried on talking loudly and angrily. The ones on the far side of the circle eyed him suspiciously and the others caught on and fell silent. He began while one was still talking.

"Friends. Umm… the men sent me… the men said I could have some…"

All the women turned to face him. There was a big one, her hair like thick fuzzy caterpillars hanging over her pockmarked face; another big one with puffy cheeks like a singing bird. The skin around the thin one's eyes was stretched outward, as if her hair had been tied too tightly, and the other thin ones had spongy hair, neatly packed onto their heads.

"Hey! Where did you come from boy?" called the one with caterpillar hair. Her expression soured, and she asked incredulously, "Are you from the other side?"

"No… uhmm… no. The men said I could have some food. I just came from Masinge."

"Wonderful! Then you can settle this argument for us!"

"Yes, he can settle it," the women chorused. The women shifted and a space was made on the mat. He sat.

"Now, tell us boy, if one side of a village sees –"

"No! Don't start with that. First we have to see if he is any good at solving riddles."

"Yes, first we must see," came the chorus.

"Ask him about the… you know… the one about the really small house."

"That one is too easy."

"No, ask him that one."

"Yes, that one!"

"Ahem," the caterpillar woman began. "Who has a house too small for guests?"

Jimmy's face grew hot. "I don't know what you want me to do," he mumbled, looking down at the frayed mat and playing with a loose strand.

"We want you to answer the riddle. Then we will see if you can answer the big riddle."

His face grew hotter and he tried to move his wrist out of sight. Was a riddle like a secret password? Did all the people in the villages know it?

"I… I don't know what a riddle is."

"Don't know what a riddle is!"

"What kind of place have you been living in?"

"Masinge," he replied, and there was an 'ooh' of understanding from the women.

"Aah yes."

"They have no culture there."

"No culture."

There was much nodding.

"Well, that doesn't mean you can't learn," said the woman next to him, petting his leg.

"Yes, right," they all agreed.

"So a riddle is… A riddle is…"

"A question."

"A question, yes."

"Where there is only one correct answer."

"And whoever gets the right answer wins the village!" shouted one woman, raising her fist in the air. The others around her cheered.

"So, if I get this question right, I will win the village?"

They stopped cheering.

"No."

"But…"

"Don't be silly boy.

"A riddle is just a question and you give the answer. If you give the right answer, *we* win the village."

"But you already have the village?"

There was a silence in the circle.

"There is something wrong with this boy's head," muttered one of the spongy-haired women, staring straight at him. The woman next to Jimmy hushed her.

"We have *half* the village."

"The other side –" she snorted loudly, "used to be ours."

"We used to be one great village. And then those ones –" she said with venom, "– broke us apart."

"All our attempts at reconciling with them have failed," the last woman closed with a bow of her head.

Jimmy's mouth opened and closed dumbly a few times. He nodded as if he had understood.

"Now, will you answer our question?"

"Wha – what question?"

"The riddle. Who has a house too small for guests?"

Jimmy's head spun with tiredness.

"I don't know." He rubbed at his nose and eyes.

"Guess!"

"Okay, okay. So a house is too small for guests if someone built it that way."

"No," replied the woman across the circle.

"No?" Jimmy felt lightheaded now.

"This house was not built. It just is."

"No house is not built!" retorted Jimmy.

She narrowed her eyes at him. It was scary.

"A house that is not built is too small for guests. Is it too small for small guests, or too small for big guests?" he asked.

"Both."

"No more clues," chimed in another woman.

"One more clue?"

"The house moves."

"Why did you tell him that!"

"Now it is too easy." The spongy-haired woman rolled her eyes.

"The house – no house moves!" Jimmy was becoming angry with the woman across the circle now.

"He is no good at answering riddles. Get rid of him!" she shouted. An argument erupted, and the women shouted at each other from their seats. The woman next to Jimmy clapped her hands for silence.

"Earthers! Is this the way we behave in front of a visitor?" The noise eventually died down. Just when things were under control the woman across the circle hissed in a last word.

"He is useless."

"I am not!" Jimmy shouted. "There is no such thing as a house too small for guests that is not built and does not move!"

"A tortoise's house is!" she shouted back at him.

"Wha-" Jimmy was even more confused than before. "That's not a house. That's a shell."

"It's a house. That's the only answer there is."

"No it isn't," he replied, nearly laughing now, "If that is true, then a snail has a house too."

There was a sudden silence.

"It doesn't count," the woman eventually retorted. Then the group exploded in angry shouting again. Jimmy felt sick, as if he was going to throw up. He rested his chin in his arms and let the racket carry on around him. The dreadlocked woman next to him quieted them all down once more.

"Maybe," she began, "this is just the kind of approach that we need to answer our problem."

"Ask him then."

He felt an arm around his shoulders.

"Boy," she asked soothingly, rubbing his back, "We have a more serious question now for you. Will you answer it?"

Jimmy nodded without raising his head from his arms.

"If you answer it correctly we will give you food."

Jimmy lifted his head and looked at her. Her dreadlocks fell across her face in heavy clods. Her expression was very sincere. He nodded again.

"Earlier today a man came through the village riding a horse. Now we all saw it, it was a black horse. A little bit on its mane was other colours," she added dismissively. The women around her nodded solemnly. "Now the others, from *that* side, they always want to prove us wrong. They say, they insist, that the man who came through the town was on a white horse."

"The colour of a cloud," another woman chipped in.

"Now if we all saw a black horse, and they all saw a white horse, who is correct?"

Jimmy heaved a heavy sigh. "There are only three things that this can be. The first possibility is that one of the groups is lying." There were shouts immediately.

"Not us!"

Jimmy waited for them to quiet down.

"The second possibility is that both of you are lying." He held up his hand as the noise grew again. "The third possibility is that both groups are telling the truth. If only one of you is lying, then there was a horse that was either black or white. If both of you is lying, then the ones that saw the

black horse really saw a white, and those that saw the white really saw black. On the same horse."

"Or we both saw a brown horse," interjected a woman who had not spoken yet. The others shushed her.

"If you are both telling the truth, then we have a case where one half saw a black horse and the other half saw a white horse. On the same horse. That means out of the three options, two times it happens that there is a horse that is both black and white."

Jimmy nodded once, pleased with the rapt attention of the woman, as well as his wise answer.

"So it is most likely that the horse was black on one side and white on the other." He stood up. And then he fainted.

Chapter Nineteen

South Ku, Vaalharts

Repetition, inequality, contradiction, unevenness and disjunction are natural. Everything is flawed.

KwaDzanani's dusty chaos had settled on Genevieve's skin. The river washed the dirt away, but it could not get rid of the restless sweat that returned whenever she felt she was not moving quickly enough. Perhaps it was fear. She wore her hunting hood up, even through the blazing sun. The feeling that she was being followed tingled up her spine. In the corners of her vision lurked black shapes. She would glance past a tree and see the black jackal, more like a huge black dog, but she knew even before she turned to stare that there was nothing there.

She followed an ancient road made from black stone, up and out of KwaDzanani. Every step was carefully chosen, lest she twist an ankle on the uneven surface. The black surface burnt her feet. The road split, and she followed the left path to the river – only a trickling stream. She was glad to wash and fill her water pouch, to be able to relieve herself in the veld with no hole of shit below her. Even her stiff ankle felt better.

She was most glad to be out of the reach of gods, and of stories. The papers she had stolen were folded in her pack, along with the first ones which bent limply on their well-worn creases. These ones were stiff and bright in comparison. It had taken her an hour to decipher the first lines of the first page. It had been unreadable, until she realised that it must be two people in conversation, but written down.

NH14: …situation is well-known. No mission will be necessary, the Russ-ian Seed-Ark's repairs have been completed. Only 3% con-tamin-ation, and possibly still usable.

UKu: That is good news.

NH14: Supplies are still running low. Rations have been cut by 7%. We're using local water for everything but drinking and cooking. The new re-cycl-ing plant has been a great success, as I trust you have found too: have there been any further out-breaks of E-B-O-V?

UKu: A few isolated cases in Ku where san-ita-tion was in-ad-eq-uate, reported by Keepers who soon found reason to limit the contact with the diseased from the rest of the community. The further North the more likely the con-tamin-ation. Trying to contain the mine water in Old City, but leaks through wetlands. V-D-B still an underwater concern. Are you sending a Tanker down to re-fuel?

NH14: Yes. Be there in six months for fresh water. Chop-per fly-overs reveal alar-ming-ly high amounts of strays in the City. Is there something that can be done from the ground?

Uku: Neg-at-ive on the first count. Unless we start culling from the Chop-pers. The rad-ia-tion in the water is a slow death. All of the strays are showing signs of poisoning. Been a few abnormal births far North. Not our problem. Ten more years and the con-tract-ual obli-gat-ion is up – no possibility any Firsts last longer than that.

After this first page, Genevieve's head ached. So many of the words made no sense. She would divide them in all different ways, and then try each portion on her tongue, as her grandmother had taught her, but to no avail. Even when she knew both parts alone, a word could still evade her. Fly –

over, would seem to indicate a bird. But chop-per fly-over. The amount of chops per something that flew over? Then, some terrible thing in the water. Could you boil it out? Even words she understood she doubted herself on: were the 'Firsts' the First Ancestors? She would refold the paper then, even though she wanted to tear it, and stomp on it and burn it. She put it neatly with the others in her pack.

Along Inyoka she bargained with floating crews, jogging alongside the banks and pleading for passage. Most ignored her.

One boat pushed past her now. Big enough for a few people to live and work on. Genevieve called to the man at the wheel. He glanced at her and then looked straight forward, mumbling something into his beard. Genevieve called and waved again, but a thick clump of overhanging bushes interrupted her call. She scrambled up the vertical bank and ran along the top near the veld. When the bushes broke she could see the boat had bumped softly into the bank behind her. She scrambled down to the level of the water and jogged toward it. A stern-faced man with thin hair and arching features jumped down to meet her.

"What d'ya want?" Genevieve subdued her shock at realising that this rangy thing was a woman.

"I'm heading north and I'm looking for passage. I'm a Hunter," she held up her arm and the fresh pink scars on it, "but I can work at –"

"Can you roh?"

"I think so."

"Can you roh or can you not roh?"

Genevieve took a moment to decipher her strong accent. "I can row."

"Good." She pronounced the word with a grating 'g'. "Piers! Spring op. The gal is taking Janet's place."

The bearded man at the wheel nodded and disappeared to the cabins below.

"We're still waiting for rain. Inyoka is small now, but we'll go all the way nort' to Flowers. We have an Ox team riding too, for when the boat gets stuck. You a proper Hunter?"

"Yes." Genevieve held up her arm again.

"Good."

"Good." Genevieve practised the grating 'g'. It was satisfying, like clearing your throat of phlegm. She rhymed it with 'hood', like the woman did. The woman stopped and glared.

"We're a proud people girl, I will not tolerate your mocking."

Genevieve reddened and looked down. "Sorry."

"Moenie worry nie." Genevieve looked blank. The woman amended her statement, with difficulty. "Don't…worry. What's your name?"

"Genevieve."

"Well Jhen," Genevieve cringed. The woman pronounced it like hitting two rocks together, "You will eat when we eat, and you will roh when we say so. Good?"

Genevieve agreed. "What are you transporting?"

"Ourselves," replied the woman cryptically.

When Genevieve ate with them that night she realised that what they were transporting up the river was indeed themselves. This family – Piers, Stukkend, Pantoffel and their mother and head, Rusk – travelled the length of Inyoka every set.

"We go to the underwater city and fetch anything we can find and then we travel back down the river, selling Old World things to anyone who will by it. Shame, people really love it." The two boys – Stukkend and Pantoffel – nodded in sincere agreement. They were identical and of the same age: twins, distinguished only by the swarms of freckles on their milk-white skin, which burnt to crisp red every week in the sun.

VDB was still an underwater concern.

Was it the same underwater concern that preoccupied the boat?

"Why are you travelling up the river so late in the season? Aren't we're going to run into problems with floods?"

"We probably won't have any problems before Flowers, and after Flowers we take the Oxen with Jeanne." Genevieve later discovered this was Pier's sister. "Inyoka is only good for sailing down. We'll break up the boat when we're there." The boiled fish in Genevieve's bowl looked up at her with a wide uncomprehending gaze. She held her spoon with a hand blistered from pulling ropes and oars.

"Where are you trying to get to?" Rusk asked.

"I want to get to Mushi."

Pantoffel catapulted a fish's eyeball onto the wall, where it stuck.

"I never kept up with all of these names. What's the old name for it?" Rusk asked.

"That's the only name I know."

Piers muttered something unintelligible through his beard and then slurped his soup.

"Ooh yis man, Parys! No problem. We are going past Parys. We want to be in Crossroads for the festivals."

Genevieve nodded blankly again and sipped at the fishy water. An onion balanced on her spoon and then splashed back in the broth as the boat rocked slightly in the water.

"Do you…" this sort of question could only lead to trouble, "Do you know what VDB is?"

"VDB – Piers? Is it a place?"

"I don't know," Genevieve said quickly. "It doesn't matter."

Piers muttered something again. He spoke as if he had no teeth. Perhaps this was the case.

"Vanderbijl?" Rusk asked Genevieve. "That's the underwater city where we are going." Genevieve shrugged. Fun der bail? It didn't seem likely.

She quickly fell into the routine of the boat, which made the days blur easily into one another. Genevieve took any moment she could to be alone. She hopped off as frequently as she could, walking along the bank, looking for small meals that were made up of more than fish and water, and trying to fulfil her role as a Hunter. Her foot healed, as did the cuts on her arm, losing their pink tinge. Over the next week, Summer ripened into a white heat. Every day they would find a tree that hung its shadow over the river and they would stay there. This was White Out. The boys would splash in shallow water, unable to lie down and rest like Genevieve and the adults. This was supposed to be their lesson and story time, but Piers and Rusk took the opportunity to nap. The heat was so fierce that not even reptiles risked the full sun. The veld came to a halt. Birds would call to each other from leafy oases. Beetles would drone in exhausted throbs, their black shields making them as hot to the touch as a burning coal. Buck would walk slowly across open fields, unafraid of the predators collapsed in the shade, and seek out water.

Then Rusk would wake and begin rousing the others. They would soak their clothes in the

river and begin slowly pushing from the banks, pulling their oars once every while, because eve n the water seemed to have slowed. Genevieve adopted a pair of shorts that belonged to the former boat-mate Janet – who no one ever talked about – and her thighs tanned to a darker shade of brown.

Then one afternoon, in the middle of the White Out, the world groaned. Everyone was shook awake, and the boys stopped splashing in the river. The world had become a surreal brown, as if dusk had come three hours too soon. Thick clouds churned above them, and Genevieve lay where she was, enjoying the sight between the blowing branches. It took her a moment to notice the serious expressions on the faces of the family, and how each one had adopted certain hurried tasks.

Pantoffel and Stukkend were carrying their clothes from the boat, dumping them on the high bank and hurrying back for more. Piers and Rusk were closing the boat in ways Genevieve hadn't imagined possible. The wheel disconnected and was brought down. The oars were slotted onto the deck. The door on the deck was bolted closed, and then they all helped h eave the boat further up the bank. Piers and Genevieve carried the second anchor, and much to her dismay, they dragged it up the wall of the bank, the chain just allowing them to reach the lip of the top veld. The rain began, warm and soft, so gently that Genevieve couldn't understand the family's panic.

But they hurried on, each piled with goods from the boat – clothes and a quarter sack of grain in Genevieve's arms – across the open veld. Now Genevieve began worrying. They were stranded in the open and the lightning skirted across the sky. Birds hurtled away above them, searching out the safety of trees.

When Genevieve realised the family didn't know where they were going she took the lead, and they were soaked but safe by the time the rain had properl y started coming down – hard and cold like sharp stones. They rested under a burnt tree which had fallen onto another, a veritable cove. They hid their heads under the thick trunk, and piled the clothes over the rest of their bodies, keeping the food as dry as possible. It was a well-chosen spot, and the hail which came down in childish fits just missed the family. The canopy was shredded, and the angry orange clouds hid the setting sun and the rising moon. It rained heavily for two hours more, and they all huddled together for warmth.

Genevieve's breath came out in clouds, and when the rain abated further she set out desperately to look for something with which they could make a fire. She returned with kindling held underneath her shirt, and then went out again. The few meagre branches she found smoked unbearably and their wet clothes sucked in the stench, but it did warm them.

When they awoke their breath was wet and ragged, and they all wheezed as they made their way to the boat in the morning light. The sky was clear, and it didn't look like there would be more rain.

The debris from the river was within ten feet of the top bank, and the second anchor had been washed to the bottom bank, where it lay underwater. Inyoka had swelled unlike anything Genevieve had ever seen, and debris sprinted past them on the current. There was no way they could row against that.

Rusk agreed, and Piers was sent to find his sister. It seemed unlikely that he would find her. The last village they had seen was a long way back and on the opposite side to which Piers set off. In the meantime, Genevieve and Rusk set about hanging things in trees to dry. By the evening, some of the clothes were dry.

Genevieve shot a porcupine and set it on a skewer over the fire. The boys cro uched on their haunches and pointed at the monstrously long quills, which Genevieve had forbidden them from playing with. Stukkend's cough was the worst of all, and he seemed paler than ever. Long before his

brother lost interest he returned and huddled next to his mother, his forehead burning with more than just the heat of the fire.

Genevieve heard them before she saw them, her eyes blinded by the fire and smoke. There was incoherent mumbling, and Rusk called to Piers, who had returned. The woman he returned with was much younger than him, by ten sets at least. She had the same dark thick hair as Piers, and it was wildly tangled around her shoulders. Her brown eyes shone excitedly.

"I enter your home," she said softly. She addressed it to Genevieve, who was so flustered she forgot the response and brashly announced that this was no home. The woman smiled and sat next to Rusk. Pantoffel came and stood awkwardly behind her, and Rusk had to prompt him to say hello to his aunt.

"I am Jeanne, Pier's sister," she said, smiling at Genevieve. She pronounced her own name with a soft 'J', and when she said Genevieve's name, it ran as smoothly off her tongue.

She unsettled Genevieve. She was too soft-spoken, it seemed like an act. Genevieve had to ask her to repeat everything she said. It was too gentle. But her gaze was so intense that Genevieve could not hold it. Stukkend coughed and burned, and Genevieve boiled some rooibos and buchu leaves together. She felt conscious of every movement. She subsided into silence.

She went and found a place to relieve herself and when she returned she pretended to sleep, and the quiet conversation of Jeanne and Piers lulled her to sleep. She dreamt about Jeanne that night, a dream that she was ashamed and angry at herself for having. It was so frivolous. She could not get distracted from her mission.

The next day she threw herself whole-heartedly into the activity of disassembling the boat. It seemed so cruel. They kept the oars and the wheel, but the wood was stripped down into planks. They said they would sell it at the dam, and everything was packed into the wagon in little pieces.

Genevieve discovered the partial source of her discomfort: the next morning her breasts ached and her stomach was bloated, and by evening she was bleeding. It was difficult to be travelling during that time, she frequently made excuses to go and clean by the river. She was glad to be done with it a few days later.

And then she started to notice Jeanne. The woman was exceptionally kind to Genevieve, and seemed to always put her needs before anyone else's. Perhaps it was politeness, but when Jeanne laughed tenderly and placed her hand on the small of Genevieve's back, it felt like more.

She always stood closer than what was natural to Genevieve. Her eyes were invasive, Genevieve could not escape any question that she posed. But Genevieve was never certain. She blocked out with burning cheeks the talk at dinner that would turn to Jeanne's partner in a town ahead on the river. Jeanne barely acknowledged it, and steered the conversation away with the same quiet instruction she gave to her oxen.

They circled Flowers by cart, and the landscape around them changed. Pressure grew in Genevieve's ear. It popped unexpectedly one night when she yawned. Rusk explained that it was because they were getting higher up on the land, and indeed, every day they climbed more than they descended.

Genevieve knew this flirtation was a distraction, she enjoyed it for the way it made her feel. But it sent her into fitful tempers. For hours she would be in a foul mood, unable to think clearly, until Jeanne made some minor gesture of affection, and Genevieve felt as if her life could resume. It was a buzzing distraction from her proper thoughts, from her mission. She repeated hollowly that she was going to visit her grandmother, but on most days it didn't even seem that important.

They rolled through villages which dotted the banks of Inyoka, but never stopped long

enough to feel like they had been there at all. And yet, there was no rush. They moved slowly.

Mushi was further than she remembered, and she swallowed the panic that they had passed it at least twice a day. At the end of the half-moonth, after Genevieve returned from an unsuccessful hunt, she was told they would be in Mushi the next day. She would go along Inyoka to her grandmother' house, rather than along the road with them.

In those few moments of thought, all of the last few weeks were swept into a daydream, or some part of another person's life. Blurred and bright but unreal and detached from the sudden present. She had only been travelling with the family for less than a moonth in total, but it felt like a whole era of her life. This was how people got lost in Ku, by wanting nothing more than to live routine lives. It was all constructed to make one feel content, and to be happy with simplicity. With simple answers and trivial ambitions. She focused her mind on the strangeness she had seen in the Library, forcing herself to become unsettled, to be dislodged from this contentment with domesticity.

She took out the papers from her bag and read a few lines:

NH14: Four sightings of the Dra-gon in the last span. Cause for alarm? Kid-nap-pings?

Uku: No cause for alarm. Sed-it-tion in the mid-north being quell-ed, Bay 'a wulf on the way. Ratel is a problem solver. Kid-nappings minimal but present.

She was out of practise and she folded it away again.

She stocked her bag with herbs she had been collecting, leaving plenty for the family and strict instructions on their use. She found her folded hunting hood, the one she had long ago packed away in favour of more practical clothes for travelling. The dust made her nose itch when she put it on.

She considered slipping away in the early morning. But the moment she woke, Rusk woke too, as if anticipating her plan. She roused the others and Piers cooked an ostrich egg they had found by chance two days before. Jeanne said nothing, and Genevieve could not dislodge the sadness and trepidation from inside her throat. She gathered together the last of her things, and stood facing the family, attempting to rush her farewell and thanks. They remained unrushed. She hugged them all once, even Piers, and Rusk produced a wicker basket filled with food and other small goods. Then she hugged them all again, feeling dizzy when Jeanne slipped a small pile of Metals into her hand. She walked along the river alone.

Chapter Twenty

North Ku, Mushi

Ku will not progress. Ku will understand. Understanding is not coherence. Understanding is the inward illumination of one aspect of the world. Never can all the aspects of the world be understood at once, because the world is not a coherent whole. Relieving oneself of this desire leads to freedom. Stories, people, and answers which give the false appearance of coherence are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety. Nothing is complete, there is no end goal.

Genevieve's grandmother's lived outside Mushi proper – a liberty only a First Ancestor could take. Her house was long instead of round, with a thatch roof and the customary blue-green painted walls. She had her own vegetable garden, worked by some of the youths of the village, a flat space set into the rocky koppie. A well-crafted pathway zigzagged up to her house, and, taking into consideration what must be the old woman's growing frailty, a wooden railing had been built along the pathway. Her friends would have urged her to move into the village. Up here an accident could go unnoticed. To the left was the forest that Genevieve had lost herself in so many times in her childhood: where light was filtered through the trees and every noise was dampened by their ancient quiet. This forest of wild olives had been planted long before Meme arrived in Ku. Genevieve brushed a wet strand of hair from her face. Mist poured down the koppie and rose from the forest floor. A dark shape moved between the trees. Genevieve blinked the damp sheen from her eyes and it was gone.

She took two steps at a time up the pathway and knocked on the half-door. The top half was open.

"I enter your home," she called, but no one answered, so she unlatched the bottom, stepping through. She called again. "Meme?" Whimsical childhood sorrows – a broken toy, a boy pushing her from a low branch – were like a graze on the sober determination in her voice. They called out for someone to comfort her, to show sympathy, to see that she was hurt.

It smelled as only her grandmother's house could smell: of flowers grown inside and warm bread; like her grandmother's reed mat and clothes, and her curious habit of leaving milk to spoil. She called out again but only the soft tapping of the rain filter could be heard from outside, water running into the tank.

"Meme?" she asked.

There was no reply. To her left was her grandmother's kitchen. She would eat at the Centre sometimes, but she never cooked there. Genevieve put down the wicker basket that Jeanne had given her, and stroked the ancient wooden counter. Above it hung dried meats, herbs and vegetables, and a string of dried berries. The berry fields were not far from Mushi. Warmth emanated from the oven and she glanced outside the kitchen door, but no one was tending the fire around the back.

When they had stayed here, Akra and Genevieve had slept in the kitchen. The floor was smooth and clean, and looking at it, Genevieve fought off a yawn.

She walked back past the front door and into the bedroom. The bed was built off the floor, and heavily cushioned, with a lumpy feather blanket. Ancient objects lined the wooden shelves, some of them had the look of the Old World. Genevieve sat on the bed and stared wordlessly at their mysterious shapes, as magical as when she had seen only a handful of seasons. The papers she

had learnt to read from in her childhood were hidden away. She laid her head down on the pillow, and the scent of her grandmother overwhelmed her. The comfort made her drowsy and she closed her eyes, moving her foot onto the bed but careful not to spread any dirt on the bl ankets. She would wait here until her grandmother returned. It was so peaceful, away from everything else.

Genevieve was slow to wake. Someone was sitting on the bed with her, gently shaking her arm.

"Girl, is that you? Is that you?"

Genevieve pushed herself up, her words thick with sleep.

"Meme?" She rubbed her eyes.

"Genevieve? You looked like your mother. What are you doing here?" Her grandmother's voice was soft with concern.

"I'm sorry. I came to look for you… I wasn't even tired."

"Look how much you've grown!"

Genevieve smiled and rubbed her eyes, which itched. "A little, yes."

"What dirty clothes you have!"

Genevieve looked down to the mud she had left on the blankets.

"I'm sorry I didn't –"

"What knotted hair! When last did you brush it? Let me sort it out." Her grandmother bustled away and Genevieve swung her legs off the bed, ashamed at the dirt she had tracked through the house. Meme looked old and tired. Dark bags hung under her eyes and her hair was short and wispy. She still had a solid frame, sturdy in the way a honey badger is.

"It's fine, really, we don't have to –" her grandmother was not listening. Genevieve followed her through to the front door. Her grandmother was looking in a wooden trunk, one of many which lined the wall. Genevieve was not allowed to look in them. She had barely noticed them when she walked in. Her mother had forbidden it, so even now she kept a respectful distance. Her grandmother was on her knees, shifting through the items.

"I have a good brush here somewhere. Mud knows I don't need it anymore." She removed a pile of books, stacking them at her side on the floor.

"Meme pack those away, if the Keeper sees them –"

"You sound like your mother." She shuffled along the floor before sitting back and squeezing her lip with two fingers in contemplation. Genevieve felt a strong sense of having heard this before when her grandmother announced, "You know, I don't think I brought it." Meme stared at the trunks, and then shrugged and began returning the items she had removed. The whole day felt like the poor copy of an original.

"Shall we have some tea?" her grandmother continued, brushing off her knees as she stood up.

Genevieve agreed and brought a pot of water to the boil over the fire at the back. A te ndril of smoke crept its way into the mist which hung like a wet blanket over the side of the koppie. Genevieve stared at it until the water groused in the pot. She brought it inside and poured through a strainer into two mugs, filling them with red tea. Her grandmother looped honey into their mugs from a flat spoon.

"I didn't know you were coming child. We don't get messages like we should. In my day you could trust anyone to deliver news, and be assured your message would reach the other side. Now: nothing. If a message comes, it's all garbled: 'Grendel's gown, wool wool wool; Bay 'a wolf comes to unwind the spool.' That's their favourite.

"Bay 'a wolf?" Genevieve asked, shocked to hear her grandmother repeat a word she had read just that morning. "*Bay 'a wulf on the way*. *Ratel is a problem solver*," she repeated aloud.

"Ratel? Ratel is a Keeper from my day. An infamous Keeper. I don't see the connection. We've been getting those messages from travellers all week. I've written some down. Wigwaf keeps them somewhere. She's a Keeper now. She might know."

"A Keeper? But she lived here – she worked in Crafts before?"

Keepers were designated by the Trust, sent to whichever village they would best serve, and very rarely to their home villages.

"Oh yes. We decided she was the best one for the position."

"The – are you allowed to do that?"

"Allowed? Hell no. The Trust are livid. But they sent the most useless Keepers. Maybe they *are* sending Ratel. We needed someone to help us. We have… I don't want to scare you, but you cannot stay here long. It is not safe, especially not for children. But then –" she cocked her head to the side, sitting back and taking a sip of tea, "– you are far too old for them now. Still, you should make your stay as brief as possible."

"What is going on?"

"I would rather not discuss it, drink your tea and then we will go and see Wigwaf. She's better at explaining than I am."

Genevieve walked at Meme's shoulder all the way through town, clutching her arm whenever she looked about to slip. She steered her around puddles left by the rain and Meme in turn pulled Genevieve back on course to the Centre, and when they arrived, Meme shrugged off Genevieve's arm and walked in unaided.

An elderly woman sat at a table. She was looking intently at the woman in front of her, who was panicked and angry. She looked away only for a second to nod to Meme and let her gaze skim over Genevieve, and then back to the woman in front of her. Genevieve and Meme took a seat at another table and waited for them to finish. The Lessons were deeply notched into the wall next to them in neat, bold rows.

Genevieve assumed that the elder of the women was Wigwaf, and also that Wigwaf was a pet name that Meme had for her. No woman of such serious stature could have such a cutesy name. Was Meme a pet name too? Genevieve stared to the end of the Centre in glazed-eyed alarm. She could not possibly ask her grandmother that. She was far too old not to know her grandmother's real name.

In the meantime Wigwaf had grasped the hands of the young woman in her own, and was speaking intently at her. The woman broke down in sobs which shook her shoulders. Wigwaf took her sleeve and wiped away the tears, speaking all the while. The woman nodded and smiled meekly, and then got up and left the table.

Meme began to rise but Wigwaf had already sprung up and was walking toward them. Although she was nearly of an age with Meme – ten sets less, perhaps – she was lithe and energetic. She seemed unburdened by the slowness of age. Her skin was wrinkled in all the expected places, but smooth over her bistre cheeks. She swooped down and briefly hugged Meme, and then turned her attention to Genevieve, offering her hand in the way old people sometimes did. Genevieve grasped it and shook it, taken aback by the unusual gesture.

"Welcome to Mushi, I am Wigwaf," she announced.

"I enter your village –"

"This is my granddaughter Genevieve." Meme laughed awkwardly, cutting her off.

"It is good to meet you Genevieve," Wigwaf responded, her features relaxing as she sat next to her old friend. "What has brought you down to the Centre my dear?" she asked of Meme.

"Well I can tell you it wasn't for the food." They laughed at their shared joke, but then Meme looked down and grew more serious. "Genevieve has come to stay unexpectedly. She knows nothing of our troubles, which is troubling in itself. The messages –"

"You keep expecting news that we will not get. This is why we sent out for help with our own people. The villages will only relay what they have been told by their Keepers. Help will come."

"No one will believe our riders, and with having to hide from the Keepers, it is an impossible task," Meme lamented.

Genevieve could not follow the conversation, and Wigwaf stopped abruptly. She looked deeply troubled.

"Genevieve," she stopped again, cupping her hand over her mouth in thought and then resting it on the table. "We have a situation that can only be believed on faith. I hear that your mother is a traditional woman?"

"Very much so," interjected Meme. Wigwaf carried on calmly.

"What I am about to say to you may be difficult to understand, given the way you have been raised to trust in Ku. It is šalang, but you must understand if you are to stay here even one day. I am the Keeper of this village. I have never been to the Library, I was never trained, I cannot even read the old words as your grandmother – "

"Her too, I taught her," Meme interposed, smiling proudly at Genevieve. "You still can, can't you?" Genevieve nodded and her grandmother smiled again. She couldn't help but enjoy Meme's boast.

"That's very good, an extra set of eyes will be useful. But first let me explain. I took over because the Trust, and the Keepers they send to us, are not to be trusted. We have formed our own system of governance here, not out of vanity, but because it is the only way we are able to survive."

"Genevieve mentioned something about Ratel," Meme began.

"The Library, the Trust –" Genevieve tried to get her words out so quickly they made no sense. Her head swam.

"I know dear, it is hard to –"

"They are liars! I have been into the Library. It is filled with Old World things. Boxes with blue life inside them and –" she couldn't keep up with her own explanation.

"You were inside the Library?" Meme's eyes widened with shock, "When did this happen?"

Genevieve felt herself deflate. She thought she had found allies.

"Not now Meme," Wigwaf rebuked. "The girl obviously has a story for us to hear –" Genevieve began a response but Wigwaf talked over it "– which we will hear after we explain our own. It is good that we are on the same page, so to speak, at the beginning. Ku is contrived. The system – Keepers, Council, Trust – it is not what you think it is. We used to think we knew what it was, but it is not that either."

"I sold my life, my parents and my children to them," Meme added enigmatically.

"We discovered this quite simply through the Keepers they sent us. We lived in peace and cheer and all those good things – that is the time that Keepers are at their best. But a great evil came into our lives, and it took a long time to recognise this monster. Children disappeared from the village. All of an age where the mark of šalang had barely healed, some even younger. Some your age, at first, but then only the young ones. We looked everywhere. We scoured the river, the forest

and the mountain. We set up traps for animals, and fell into superstition. People started to tell tales of a flying monster they had seen. A fiend whose roar was so loud it bent trees as it went past. It could spit fire when angered, but no one has been able to confirm this. The Keeper cautioned against wild imaginings, and also against attempting to find this beast. He grew reclusive, refusing to leave his hut. Everywhere was turned to a field of terror, and people walked quietly with their shoulders bent and heads cowed."

"We haven't had a Post in many sets. But that was the same time we stopped getting news from elsewhere, everyone arrived with the same Trust-directed crap," added Meme. Wigwaf nodded in agreement.

"*'The Try-gone is Chinese, chopper flyovers'*" recited Wigwaf by rote. The familiar phrase sent shivers down Genevieve's back.

"We sent that messenger back twice, sure that he had misheard the Trust."

"But he had not," continued Wigwaf. "The Keeper vanished, and the Trust dispatched another. On their way up here we held our own investigation. I was still on the Council at that time, but we held an election, and I was made the Keeper temporarily. We took turns keeping watch at strategic points – on the koppie, by the river and in open fields. At some point all of us saw the beast, swooping and hovering in the distance, but we could not even then begin to understand it. We made a crèche and moved all the mothers and their children into the Centre. For two weeks we were safe, until one of the goat herds reported that he thought there might be a locust plague on its way. The wind carried in a low humming noise. It would come and go, and for three days we waited. I let the people hold a ceremony, to keep their spirits up. There was drumming and dancing, and so much noise that we did not notice until it was right on top of us. It was late at night, but the creature shone like the sun, an erratic glow, and beams of light from its nose leapt around the village, tasting every corner like a snake's tongue." She paused and ground her jaw.

"We had moved the children to another hut, and they were screaming. We could hear that above the roar of that monster, which whipped thatch from our houses and summoned a cloud of dust so that we were all choked. By the time we got to the children three of them were gone, pulled from the hut into the clearing and taken up by the string descended from the creature's belly. On it climbed worm-things without eyes or voices. Human figures with round glossy shells over their heads. Shadows, maybe. They were the ones that ran into the huts and grabbed the youngest, and then were pulled up again by the string.

"We managed to rescue two, and the older ones that they seemed to have no interest in. And then the creature flew away."

Cold tingling crawled over Genevieve's skin, and she could think of nothing to say. Meme wiped away tears that had gathered in her eyes. Wigwaf's hands were shaking.

"That was one moonth ago. The Keeper arrived and," she swallowed her fury, "insisted that we had suffered some kind of shared delusion, resulting from our trauma."

"We dealt with that fucker," Meme nodded and Genevieve gave a nervous laugh. Wigwaf smiled wryly in response.

"I resumed my role as Keeper on a permanent basis. And that is where we are now."

Genevieve's throat was dry. She pulled dirt from under her fingernails, staring at the table, her mind awash with terrifying images. Was this another lie of the Trust, of Ku? They seemed to work in a realm of reality completely separate from that which Genevieve knew and understood. As if they were in a different world, layered on top of this one. She wanted desperately to understand. Her whole life they had held her head underwater: kept her vision indistinct and her hearing muffled.

She wanted to pull up out of the water, to breathe air and hear like they heard and see like they did.

"I feel you need to tell us your story. What did you see in the Library?"

Genevieve awoke from her reverie. Her story felt meaningless when compared to this, but she told it nonetheless. Her grandmother grew pale, but did not say anything. She crossed her arms and pursed her lips, listening with an intent look of worry, especially when Genevieve explained about the papers she had read, and those that she could not.

"You could read those, could you not?" Wigwaf responded excitedly.

"Perhaps. I am getting old and I've forgotten so many of the words," Meme responded nervously, but Wigwaf was not satisfied until Meme agreed to try.

Wigwaf wanted to come and see them that night, but Meme insisted they would need until morning to read the documents. Genevieve helped her grandmother up to the house where they ate a meal of berry preserve on flatbread.

It rained again as they slept, so in the morning the koppie was delicately wet and still. Genevieve awoke first from her mat on the kitchen floor and she made a fire and boiled some water, and then she sat on the bench against the wall at the front of the house, looking down the pathway and over the tops of the huts. The ground shone, and leaves dripped. The forest hid no moving shapes, just a dark opacity out of which birds sang. She felt serene, and when her grandmother woke and sat on the bench they greeted warmly and then lapsed into silence.

"Your mother loved it here," Meme ventured at last, sipping her tea. She sighed as if the thought had put a weight on her rather than release one. "But South has always been more traditional. When you speak about the North to a Southerner, they think everywhere is Masinge." Genevieve smiled. They fell into silence once more.

"Meme," she began, but didn't know how to continue. She had heard the story told so many times by Tellers that it hadn't needed questioning before. "Did you always live in Ku?" Her grandmother didn't answer for a while.

"That question is šalang," she croaked. Genevieve sat in hot-faced silence. "In other words," her grandmother started again more warmly, "if I tell you, I forfeit my contract." She smiled bitterly and patted Genevieve's leg. "I raised your mother badly. I wanted to have made the right decision so desperately that every time she called something šalang, or when she recited the Lessons in conversation, or even when she wanted to show a suspicious object to a Keeper, I encouraged her. It was too late that I realised that I had raised someone who would never be able to understand. Wait here." She patted Genevieve's leg again and went inside. Genevieve could hear her shifting through the trunks. Meme came outside with a pile of papers, and began to undo the string and cover.

"Until I was twenty," she explained, "Twenty years – twenty sets, I lived in the Grey City. They called it a different name then. They called it the City of Gold. I lived in a village, of sorts, with a wall around it. So in a way, I have always lived in a place with a wall around it. The only difference was who owned the wall. I used to think that because I lived inside it, I did."

She looped the string around her fingers and rolled it up. "They were called 'estates'. Ku, you can read here, is 'Ukugoduko Lifestyle Estate'." She pointed to the top of the page, where underneath the symbol of šalang, this name was written. "I lived in the first estate with my parents. It was not like it is now. The world then was even more divided. There were rich and there were poor, and if you were rich you were inside the walls, and if you were poor you were what they kept out. We had the walls, I guess, so that we knew which one we were. There was a Trust then, too, of a kind.

"The city was cracked, the earth was broken. Millions of people – do you know how much millions is? It's thousands of thousands. Thousands of thousands of people fell into th ese cracks. They fell into the mines or they fell into the money. Or, of course," she laughed, "they went rocketing into space. Imagine that child," she smiled at Genevieve with a glint in her eye, "you could have lived in the stars."

She paused and looked out across the village. Many more people were awake, and the sun had left the trees. "I had a difficult decision to make. I could live, as my parents did. They lived virtual lives; they barely came into the real world at all."

"Virtual?" Genevieve asked, repeating back the word.

Her grandmother faltered. "Do you remember you described the blue boxes with life in them?"

"Yes, the ones I saw in the Library?"

"Yes, those. There are whole worlds in them, which is how we survived in the small Estates.

We made our living by working on them. But then we forgot to live at all. Well, that was the way I saw it at the time. I could have gone to the stars, to Mars, they were recruiting then. I don't know if they ever made it *that* far." She looked up at the blue sky as if for an answer.

"Or, I could live in nature. Without technology. Without artifice. Live simply and purely, as humans were supposed to live. That was how they sold it, and that is how I sold myself." She handed Genevieve the paper she had been fingering. It would take Genevieve days to read it, so she was relieved when her grandmother began reciting it.

"I, Jara 'Meme' Elisabeth Fontaine do hereby agree to the terms of the contract points I through LXII, in providing all property, accounts and investments to Ukugoduko Inc. in exchange for a lifelong position within Ukugoduko Lifestyle Estate. Ukugoduko Inc. agrees in turn to oversee the body corporate system named The Trust, to prevent against all major natural disaster and provide aid in times of any unnatural distress, terms defined here-within." The paper quivered between Genevieve's fingers.

"I wish I could simplify it, to explain it to you. But Ku is not the world. Not even the Grey City is the world. You have to go beyond the Grey City for answers. We put up walls and we made a world as fake as inside those blue boxes. It's a beautifully ugly lie, and I brought you and your mother into it. I paid with everything I owned for you to be trapped here." Tears were welling in her eyes. "And I don't know what the world is anymore. That thing – that monster – it's no creature. It's an Old World thing, and it's my fault these children are being stolen. I was one of those who chose this life for us. I thought it would be better."

Genevieve rubbed Meme's back but had nothing to say in comfort. "It's not your fault," she tried, but could not complete it. "The papers I have," Genevieve began, "they might help explain why that thing is here. I can't read all the words, if you could read it –" This had the opposite effect of what was intended. Meme started sobbing, but then she was laughing at the same time.

"It is quite useless now child," she said, wiping away tears, "I can't read anymore. It's all just little blobs on the page. I can't even see the leaves on trees. They've disappeared. My eyes are failing."

Genevieve found nothing to say. They sat just like that, looking down at the village. There was a vigorous rustling in the trees to their right and Genevieve sat up as birds raised a racket and flew out from the bushes. Meme smiled vaguely. "Wild olive wolves, but probably just monkeys," she explained without need. It was a term only Meme, Akra and Genevieve used. When she had stayed

here as a child, they found that word to describe the mysterious sounds and shapes of this exact wood so that Genevieve would not be scared of it. Meme went and made more tea.

That night they stayed in Meme's hut for dinner, and it was just as they were finished that they heard a distant hum, and saw something sailing above the Northern horizon. It was a globe of white light, like a shooting star, but too big and slow.

"Can you see it child?" Meme gripped her arm as they stood in the doorway, watching its progress. Genevieve unlatched the door wordlessly and dared not blink. The light flew lower, and she could see it above the trees. It stopped and sunk down vertically. Its noise was dampened by the trees. Genevieve walked forward three steps, scuffing her feet deliberately in the sand, drawing a line in the dirt. She watched that spot for a long time, but the creature never re-emerged.

"Meme I want to go and find it. I think that is its home."

"It's not safe Genevieve!"

"Not now," Genevieve laughed, glancing over her shoulder to where her grandmother stood, both her hands leaning on the half-door.

"Now or whenever, it won't be safe!"

"It won't be safe for anyone if we don't find out what it wants."

"What if all it wants is the children?" Meme turned away from the door and went to the kitchen. Genevieve followed her.

"If all it wants is the children, then it won't want anything with me." Her grandmother ignored her and tugged a string of garlic, pulling off loose skin and straightening the bulbs where they hung. She engrossed herself in the task, pretending that Genevieve was not standing there. Genevieve leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms.

"I can't get anything more from papers," Genevieve admitted. She looked down at the floor and shifted a piece of garlic skin with her toe. "I am tired of papers and riddles. I need to go north and see the Grey City. I need to see outside Ku for myself. This creature is part of the truth, I have that feeling. I need to try."

Meme paused, her hands still around a calabash gourd. She sighed, and took her time before replying.

"There are plenty of fit, skilled Earthers in the village who can go and find it."

"But they haven't yet."

Meme paused. "No. They haven't. They are too superstitious, too afraid. They don't understand."

"I'm not afraid," Genevieve lied.

"Then you are stupid. It's no creature, it's something of the Old World. And if you treat it as such, it can be understood."

"Then I must go and find it."

"That doesn't follow. I may be old and tiresome and scared, but I am this way for a reason. But…" there was a long pause. "I also know that there is nothing that will keep you here. Wigwaf would say that this is wisdom: to let the young be brave and stupid without you. I think it is the cowardice of old age."

She looked intensely at Genevieve, her mouth puckered inward and her eyes glazed with guilt. She nodded and walked to her room, blowing out the candles as she went.

Wigwaf convinced Genevieve to stay another day. The village had a Tailor who took Genevieve's measurements. He measured the soles of her feet, how long her arms were, how wide her ribs when she breathed in. It took a needlessly long time but in the end, clothes were found and sandals cut.

The pants were hemp, strong but rough on her legs. The Tailor sewed the frayed strap on her pack while Genevieve practised walking with the sandals. It felt so strange not to touch the ground, and she kept bumping into tiny stones and using her toes to grip the flat bottoms. There were already the beginnings of blisters when she took them off, and the Tailor suggested walking them in for a little while every day. She put them at the bottom of her pack and went back to Meme's house, where her hunting hood had been washed and was drying in the sun. Her grandmother had put lavender in her pockets, which Genevieve removed and snuck back in place in the kitchen. It was a kind thought, but she couldn't go hunting smelling like flowers.

Genevieve was allowed free range of the Centre's kitchen, and she sharpened her knives and picked out a few choice dried meats and fish. The Healer and his apprentice came with an offering of herbs, some of which Genevieve still had from her mother. She took as much as she could, some to keep away insects, others to chew or boil for sickness. There was a Shadow smith who had a good supply of arrows. He volunteered other weapons but Genevieve turned them down. There was no point in overburdening oneself, it was always better to be able to flee than to fight.

Her grandmother was quiet on that last day, but she took Genevieve's papers from her pack and rifled through them purposefully. While they sat together Genevieve picked up the paper. She began to read out loud, as best she could.

NH14: Three Keepers re-tired this week. Con-tract-ual ob-ligations filled, welcomed aboard. Dis-satisfied with arrangements, as ever.

Her grandmother stopped her, laying her hand on the paper.

"It is too much for me to think about now child."

Genevieve refolded the paper and pushed them toward her. "They're not going to be any use to me out there. Keep them. Get someone here who can read a little to read the letters to you, and you put them together. I think it's important."

Wigwaf brought with her a pair of men. She introduced the one as a Woodsman, as if this were a craft. He was a boy who could not have been much older than Genevieve. He looked plain and innocent, with dark hair swept to the side. The other who was nearly beautiful, but his nose was too beakish, his dreadlocks natty and his face too hollowed. But he had the soft looking skin, dull yellow ochre, dotted with brown freckles. He wore his faded hunting hood halfway over his head.

"Genevieve, this is Vors and Nicnac with a 'c'," Wigwaf explained, encouraging the men to draw closer. The scraggly man bowed and Genevieve laughed.

"With a 'c'?" she asked.

"For clever," he smiled. His teeth were cracked and blackened in the corners, as if he had never seen an arak twig in his life, but despite this the smile brightened his whole face.

"You can read?"

"Only words with the letter 'c'."

Genevieve laughed again. The younger one, Vors, fidgeted nervously. He had a flat leather sheath strapped across his back and held a full-length spear in his left hand.

"They will accompany you along the river in search of that… what were you calling it?"

"The dragon," answered Meme softly.

"Right. The dragon. I think that word is better. More accurate," she turned and looked at the two Hunters, "We know that this is no animal, and no mere superstition. To call it a monster would be to deny what we know, and that would put your lives in peril."

"I don't need accompaniment –" Genevieve began stubbornly.

"No, you don't. But for your mission to be of any worth we need our own people who will come back and report what you have discovered. And I know your ambitions lie with the Northern Road."

The unsentimental practicality of it stunned Genevieve into silence. She had been quietly comforted by the thought of companions on the journey and had objected only to save face. Wigwaf did not wait for her assent. They planned and discussed through the White Out, deciding to leave early the next morning when it was still dark. Vors barely said anything, and NicNac was solemn and quiet too.

After they had gone, Genevieve packed the last of her things. Meme had gone down to the Centre with them for some errand. Sitting in the hut it reminded her of that last afternoon with her family. She missed Chromeski, his beetle-like buzzing. Did he ask after her? She could imagine that he would ask after her. Would her mother have heard from Vinyl yet?

She grabbed her hood and pushed out of the door. She stalked down the pathway and off to the right, into the woods. The undergrowth was soft under her feet. Her thoughts were in the Shadows, the Old World's lingering mark on the world around them. This wood was full of Shadows. It seemed unnatural, a hundred-hundred trees all the same and planted together, but she was not scared. She kept her eyes on her dirty feet and where they stepped, remembering by heart the pathway that would lead her where she wanted to be. The trees were thick and bent, and she was stooped over much of the time. Many pathways dawdled away from the main one.

Her mother would by now be explaining how the Wild Olive was a favourite amongst buck because it was evergreen and needed only a little water. A pigeon fluttered overhead, its yellow ringed eye and stippled feathers glossy and bright in the soft light of the wood. The tree could be used, her mother would say, for this complaint and that ailment, to make ink and wood and ten other things. Genevieve ignored that voice. It was cool and quiet, and the world felt mysterious and wonderful. Not the painful, dragging incomprehension that she felt every day, but that this wood here was something to be quietly explored. She followed the pathway right as it sloped down suddenly. She jumped down the drop off and the mulch absorbed the sound of her landing. She brushed dirt off a flat rock that she knew would be there, and only once she sat did she look up.

Twisted branches framed a black rock-face. A tiny trickle of water leaked down the cracks and dripped serenely into a pond, which filtered through the roots and fallen debris on the forest floor in an invisible stream.

It was her place. Her mother had come here, as had her grandmother, but they didn't fall in love with it. They didn't stay, awed into silence. It was so still that it stilled her. Her mind unrippled, was flattened and cooled. She had no other desire than to sit uninterrupted in this place and be with these things. This rock, this water, these trees. They were so real and yet so unreal, perfect in a way that only she seemed to believe.

Perhaps this was why her grandmother had come to Ku. Perhaps she had believed it to be perfect. She forgave her, then, for bringing them into this walled-in place. Here in front of her tiny waterfall, Ku felt more like an embrace than a cage. The choking sense she felt at not understanding, not being able to see the whole picture, loosened its grip. The tightness in her throat disappeared

and she breathed so deeply it hurt. This was not somewhere that someone could take from her, not Others, not the dragon, not even the Keepers or the Trust. It was hers because she believed in it.

She could not be chased from it.

When she left it was beginning to get dark. She could smell the smoke of distant fires. The sharp breaking of a branch made her stop. She whipped right, expecting the dark-dog shadow she saw everywhere, but there was a much larger shape, as suddenly still as she was. In the next moment it took off at a gallop, limber for its huge size –taller than her at its withers. It ducked its antlers under the branches and disappeared. She smiled and walked on. It was a rare sighting, a kudu. There was smoke coming from her grandmother's chimney and she followed the pathway up.

Chapter Twenty-One

North Ku, Splinter Aisle

Neko walked with Jagati's reins in hand, not lifting his eyes off the road. It had to be somewhere on this path. He had been an hour's trot out of that bizarre village when he noticed it was missing. Nobody had come anywhere near him, but the pouch, and the golden tokens, were gone.

This was what happened when you resolved to go South. The North gave you a farewell kick in the shins. He had hoped the tokens in Markie's pouch would help him bargain his way down the river. He could sell Jagati and get work on the Inyoka trade route, but where a horse would get him a job rowing, those shiny tokens could have gotten him a cabin on his own. There was nothing the river tradesmen liked more than trinkets from the Old World. The tradesmen travelled to the far shore and over land to the edge of the Grey City. They returned with stories of buildings made by giants; of entire landscapes where nothing would grow and the dust itself was poisonous; of forest people who ate one another. Their favourite was the story of the beetles with i nvisible wings, the buzz of which filled the whole sky. They spat fire and stole children (Why only children? Nobody could answer).

Neko kicked over a dung pile and pulled Jagati forward. When he looked up next he could see the village. Or villages. The road split the two halves exactly where a Centre would have been. He wondered if they had rebuilt a Centre on either side. As he entered the calls started up a gain.

"Friend, step this way friend. We have water for your horse."

"Don't go that way, their water is full of insects. We have the freshest water…"

He waved them off, ignoring them as he had earlier when passing by this way, and continued scanning the road. When a woman stepped in front of him he nearly walked into her chin. She folded her arms.

"Greetings friend," he grinned, but he could already tell that she wasn't that kind of woman.

" I need to examine your horse," she swept a dreadlock off her nose and marched toward Jagati, who whickered and pulled her ears flat against her head. The wo man circled around the horse, and then stopped, sourly chewing her bottom lip.

"You came through this village earlier?"

"Yes I did, and I seem to have lost –"

"You came from Masinge?"

He paused.

"I travelled through it this morning." This was, after all, a truth.

"So the boy knew what your horse would look like?"

"What boy?" Was someone already looking for him? Had someone seen him at the stables, seen what had happened to Markie?

"The one from Masinge. He came this morning. I will go and wake him up. If he knows you then he is a liar and a trickster. There will be trouble."

Neko began dragging Jagati forward.

"I don't think that's necessary. I'm heading back to Masinge now," he lied, "Tell him when he wakes that I am on my way back there." After he found the pouch, he would need to find a route around this village, and carry on South. Perhaps he should take a new name. Something strong. Like 'Inja'. He knew someone called 'Inja' once. He had been ridden over by a cart.

"I knew that boy was no good. Freshly tattooed, and at his age. He is an Other. We have

notified the Keeper, who will be here soon. He arrived with a bag so full of gold tokens he walked lopsided. Doesn't know any riddles either."

Neko stopped abruptly.

"Oh *that* boy! He has brought my token-pouch! What a clever child. Take me to him immediately."

The dreadlocked woman glared at him.

"Those are your tokens?"

"My… well. They are in *my* bag, for a start. A little pouch. Very soft to the touch." What were the chances that someone else was walking down this same road with a bag of gold tokens? It had to be his. This little pickpocket shit from Masinge must have nabbed the tokens while he was leaving, and happened upon the wrong direction. Neko folded his arms, squaring up to the woman, "And I know exactly how many tokens are in there."

Jagati was tethered and provided a bucket of mostly insect-free water, while Neko was led rapidly through the village. The dreadlocked woman explained the morning's events as they walked, and so quickly that he was surprised she wasn't out of breath. They arrived at a hut and as the woman made to enter Neko grabbed her arm and motioned for her to follow him aside.

"He is not a strong boy. Anything could make him faint again," he said, processing what he had learnt. "Let me go in and see him alone. It will be less stressful." Neko nodded reassuringly and swept into the hut before the woman could protest. There was a crumpled figure on a reed mat. A thin blanket covered his dark black limbs. Neko edged his way around the bare room. He felt in the rafters and checked under the mats, but there was no pouch. The boy didn't seem to have anything with him. No pack at all. It made sense if he were a pickpocket. But if he had indeed been sent to look for Neko, he was obviously sent out at short notice, without time to prepare for such a trip. Edging forward, Neko held his hand above the boy, and then pressed it over his mouth. The boy's eyes flared open and he struggled as Neko leaned on his chest.

"Shoosh boy. Shoosh. I'm not going to hurt you." The boy grabbed at Neko's arms helplessly.

"If you stop struggling, I will let you go. Promise not to shout." The boy thrashed his arms a while longer and then went limp. He nodded. Neko lifted his hand.

"I thought you were an elephant," the boy blurted out. Neko let the absurdity of that pass him unquestioned.

"Who sent you?" Neko began.

"Who sent me?"

"Yes. Why are you here?"

"Because I…um…" Neko saw how the boy's hand reached for his šalang wrist, trying to cover the bandage.

"Don't lie to me!" Neko shook the boy with more vigour than he felt.

"Marikasaan sent me and then I sent myself," he squeaked.

"Why were you following me?"

"I wasn't following you!" The boy was making more racket than a rat's nest. Neko let him go and sat back. In the dim light he could see the boy's large head with wide eyes, contrasted against his dark skin. He had the gangly appearance of a young teenager, his hands and feet looked like anvils on his thin limbs. He seemed the correct age to start an apprenticeship. Neko changed his approach.

"I didn't mean to frighten you. I am just looking for my token pouch. Apparently you have it."

"I found a token pouch on the road."

"Can I have it back?" Neko asked. The boy had the makings of someone just gullible enough to fall for this.

"No."

Neko narrowed his eyes.

"Can I exchange it for something?"

"Maybe. What do you have?" The boy sat up.

"Never mind what I have. What do you need?"

"I don't know," he conceded, lowering his gaze. He began fidgeting with the bandage.

Was it possible that he was an Other? The bandage around his wrist looked as if it had been put on that morning. Surely not. Probably some illegitimate third child from a nearby village. The Keepers insisted true Others – people who had never lived in Ku – no longer existed.

"I know what you need. These people think you are an Other." The shock on the boy's face betrayed him. Surely that gave it away, he thought. Just to know the significance of being an Other, you had to be an Earther to begin with. Neko smiled for the boy's benefit, "I know better than that. You burnt your wrist on a cooking fire, and the skin has to heal. Happens all the time. In fact, I saw it happen. I was right there, helped take you to the Healer." The boy had the good sense to close his mouth. "I'll explain that to these people, and you will give me my pouch."

"You have to help me get away from here."

"You can follow me out of the village. We will do the exchange after we're clear of this place." The boy blinked his dumb acknowledgement. He seemed to know it was an unfair trade, but he had no other options.

"Let's go," Neko prompted, before the boy could think of an alternative.

A group of women had gathered outside at a respectful distance.

"Friends. I thank you for your kind and gracious hospitality. Take this gift of a gold token as repayment." Neko motioned toward the boy, who was tying the water pouch around his shoulder.

"Give them a token, boy."

"I don't have the pouch," the boy whispered, moving behind Neko's leg and away from the women.

"*May you have all that you need*, you kind women have kept the pouch safe." Neko stretched out his hand, and took a few steps toward the wall of stern expressions.

The women remained unmoved. Eventually the one with the dreadlocks unfolded her clasped arms and pulled the pouch from a pocket on her pants. Neko had taken the lump as just another curiosity of her bulging physique. The woman threw the pouch to the boy, who dropped it. Neko swooped down to pick it up but the boy stood on it and then picked it up himself. Perhaps there was some slyness to this one.

"We don't want a gold token." A silence followed the dreadlocked woman's statement.

"What may I offer you? I am not a man with many things. I have my horse, my son," he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, "and a few gold tokens left to me by my mother. I am making my way South to start a good life, away from Masinge." He took off his hat and dusted it with piteous concern.

"Your son?" The women twittered uncertainly. Disbelief bounced between them like a flea between puppies.

"You left your son in Masinge, while you went South?"

The boy peered up curiously at Neko, and Neko peered down wordlessly at him.

"Well, I mean, I –"

"I had been burnt by a fire," the boy held up his wrist, "and my father thought I should wait with my sisters until it healed and I could travel safely. I saw that he had left his pouch and I knew that he needed it. So I brought it back to him."

Neko grinned again. The boy's lying skills were horrific: all closely knitted eyebrows and innocent concern. But then this lie of being related was never going to fly anyway –they were unalike in every way: skin colour, physique –even accent.

"Such a good boy." He petted the boy's shoulder, put on his hat, and steered him away from the women. "Now we must be on our way. Thank you friends!" Neko nodded cheerfully.

"Wait!"

Neko felt the boy jump under his grip at the shout. They turned where they were, a little way down the pathway between two huts.

"You are lying," the dreadlocked woman spat, "You are a family of lying, thieving –" Neko leaned down toward the boy.

"Can you ride a horse?" he said without moving his lips.

"What?" the boy looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Never mind. When I start running, follow me."

"– bastard sons of mud. He knew your horse was white on one side and black on the other. You rode through to make fools of us in the eyes of those others!"

Neko and Jimmy had already started running.

There was a clank as a clay pot hit the wall next Neko's head. He ducked and pulled the boy's hand to the left, through a narrow gap between two huts. The fat woman jogged behind them, her legs held stiffly apart, her watermelon thighs banging against each other. Others around her bent down and picked up more projectiles. They struggled between the gap that Neko and Jimmy had slipped through.

Neko grabbed a tuft of loose grass from one of the low roofs and flung it up in the air. The women behind it ran underneath the falling debris and slowed to rub the dust from their eyes. Neko slipped back through the huts and sprinted out to the road. He pulled the slipknot that held Jagati to her post and swung himself up, his bruised ribs aching from the impact. He grunted to dampen the pain. The boy yelled frantically behind him and Neko pulled him up by the bandaged wrist, eliciting a pained yelp.

Neko dug his heels into Jagati who bucked forward, kicking out her back legs. She crabbed her way inelegantly down the road, running in zigzags. Neko focused on holding himself and the boy on the saddle. When they made it out of direct sight of the village Neko stopped trying to get her to run and eased her into a trot. Her ears were planted back on her neck in sheer disgust. Nobody followed them.

*

"I'm hungry."

Neko ignored it again. Jagati grabbed a mouthful of grass as they walked, uprooting it with a wilful 'thrump'. He clucked her on, pulling her head away as she yawned toward another clump.

"I'm really hungry. They promised me food. But they never gave me any."

Jagati nearly pulled the reins from Neko's hands as she grabbed for a green patch. He steered her to the centre of the path, away from the veld. She lowered her head moodily. The boy walked

next to them.

"My name is Jimmy."

It was the fifth time this had been announced.

"What is your name?"

Neko ignored it. The boy skipped up next to Jagati and petted her mane. "I've never ridden a horse before. What's your name, horsey?" he enquired, lowering his head to look into her eyes. "I think I will call you…" He stroked her patched mane, "Speckles."

Neko stared up at the cloudless sky and heaved a sigh.

"Her name is Jagati. Please do not call her Speckles. My name is Neko."

"My name-"

"– is Jimmy. Yes. I am aware of that. Can we do the exchange now, Jimmy?"

"Jagati," Jimmy repeated reverently. "What does it mean?"

"It means she will bite you."

The boy's forehead wrinkled in concern but he kept silent. He grabbed a tuft of passing grass and fed it to Jagati, who bit his finger in the process. He gave a start, staring at his fingers. Neko dismounted.

"Not like that." He grabbed some grass and held it flat in his hand. Jagati took it from him with her lips, the soft flesh and whiskers warm in his hand. Jimmy tried it again, laughing at the sensation.

In a fluent motion, Neko took Jimmy's hand and lifted up the bandage – just enough to see underneath it. Jimmy pulled it away sharply, but Neko had seen what he needed to. The šalang was fresh and raw, as if it had been done that very morning. Jimmy looked alarmed.

"Where do you come from, Jimmy?"

The boy glanced sideways, grabbing another tuft of grass and feeding it to Jagati.

"From Masinge."

"That's food for flies. Where is your home?"

Jimmy glanced up nervously and played with a knot on Jagati's mane.

"Along a stream in the veld. From the Wall."

"When did you come to Masinge?"

"I came to Ku last week."

"Last week?!" The boy smiled meekly at Neko's surprise.

Questions crammed Neko's mouth like a bite of burning food. He had no time to chew, to digest, to think. When they came out they were sluggish with inanity.

Are you alone? How did you get the šalang? Where are you going? When last did you eat? What will you do? Neko felt hot from the bewilderment.

The boy answered them simply and patiently. So simply as to make the answers all the more confusing. 'Yes'. 'I paid'. 'I don't know'. 'Yesterday'. ' I don't know'.

Neko tried to convince himself that the boy must just be mistaken. Vigil received the šalang, surely?

Neko led Jagati down a buck path which wound its way to the water, cutting down the ancient-carved bank to the thin stream. On the top of the bank the grass was soft and green. The boy flopped down under a tree. Neko retrieved some of his food from the packs. He threw a wrap onto Jimmy's lap. The boy opened it up and began eating. Neko led Jagati back up the bank and tied her reins. He sat down under a nearby tree.

Jagati tore her way through the wet grass. As if lost in contemplation, the boy looked over the river. There were crumbs on his face.

"What do you know about elephants?" Jimmy asked, at length.

"Not much," Neko admitted.

"Do they become rocks when they sleep?" he asked.

"No," Neko responded grimly. Jimmy was an enigma. Each question opened up a void, a frightening depth of possible answers, far removed from Neko's realm of understanding. How long had he been on the Wall? Had he seen the Grey City? Were there Keepers on the Wall? Were Vigil Earthers?

'Always'. 'No.' 'No.' 'No.'

These unripe answers clung stiffly to their branches, refusing to mature into anything satisfactory. The boy did not question him back.

"Will you come South with me?"

Neko was shocked by his own question. Why did he want the boy to come South with him? He was dangerous luggage.

"Okay."

Neko took a bite of dried fruit. 'Okay'. The answer was superb in its indifference. Was that any kind of answer to a proposition to go on a journey that would take a season, perhaps longer? If he had answered yes or no, Neko might have lost interest in the idea of taking him. Yes or no meant that this boy had the desire to be in another place. No, I don't want to go with you. Yes, I want to be there. Perhaps that was just the way of Others.

"It will be dangerous."

"Everywhere is dangerous."

"True. You can come, but you will have to earn your keep. I will apprentice you –"

"Can I become a Tattooist?"

Neko chewed as he talked, gathering his things and standing up. "No. Do I look like a Tattooist?" He didn't wait for the answer. "I was apprenticed in Crafts. I will apprentice you in… Never mind; you need to learn to survive in Ku. To survive you need to learn to lie. To learn to lie you need to listen to exactly what I say, because I will be telling you exactly what you need to say."

Jimmy nodded enthusiastically.

"You will give me my tokens, which will pay for *my* passage South. I will give you the skills which will pay for *your* passage South."

"I'll give them to you after I get my skills."

Neko could only laugh.

"You are learning already."

Chapter Twenty-Two

North Ku, near Mushi

The answers are from within, not from without. Those who seek answers from without seek danger. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

The knock on the kitchen door came far too early, and her eyes were glued together with sleep. She called a response to Nicnac and he said he would meet her at the Centre. She stood and went to wash her face. Everything had been carefully laid out and she ate her breakfast with cold tea. She only ate half of it, and then went into her grandmother's room. Meme sat up stiffly in the bed.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yes," Genevieve smiled and gave her a hug.

"Good luck. And promise you will come visit me on your way back."

She hesitated only a moment on the lie before responding, "Of course."

"It's always difficult deciding what to pack."

"Yes. Goodbye Meme."

"Stay safe," Meme squeezed her hand and Genevieve left by the kitchen door.

Nicnac was at the centre, as was Vors, and they set off together.

They walked until nightfall. They came across numerous clearings where the dragon had landed. These clearings would be near a village but out of sight, all the plants would be bent out from the centre. There would be shoed footprints, and two deep lines where the dragon's feet had sat. All the tracks were blurred from the wind that roared around the thing, but Nicnac was a good tracker.

When the footprints led into the village then the three of them tried to speak to the villagers. They were not met with warmth, many of the Earthers still saw the vanishings as bad coincidence, as they had been told to by the Keepers. Wigwaf had dissuaded the three of them from arguing otherwise. That could only draw the attention of the Keepers, which was not what they needed.

Sometimes the footprints came close but never entered the village, skirting around it, as if they had been watching.

The night was cool and they argued over a fire, and then decided that one without flames would have to do. Vors chopped wet wood with his throwing axe. They lay close and the depth of the night had lulled them into a deep sleep when the noise grew, like a mosquito in one's ear, until all three of them bolted to their feet.

Vors leapt up and drew a sword. Genevieve would have laughed, at another time. What extravagant Shadowsmith would waste metal on such a completely useless hunting item was beyond her. Perhaps Vors had inherited it. Or found it. Genevieve's bow tightened but as the great shrieking creature swept above their clearing she shot short and the arrow arched over the trees and fell into the dark veld. She clutched her hands over her ears, dropping her bow as it roared over them.

The dragon was beyond belief. It looked like a locust enlarged a thousand thousand times. She felt sheer terror looking up at it. Nothing that big could fly. Its wings were moving too quickly to be seen and it seemed then that what kept the thing aloft was the sheer force of its snarl against the ground. It disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Nicnac was moving faster than her and had gathered his things. His eyes were wide with terror. His hands shook as he tried to roll his mat.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm leaving. Did you see that thing? This is no thing for us to follow. It's a god. Something sent by the ancestors. The Old World. Shadows, Others. I don't know." His breathing was erratic.

"What about the children?"

"They are lost. Sacrifices. Eaten or worse." He had given up rolling his mat and stood at the edge of their small clearing. His eyes were wild with terror. He looked about to say more, but turned and ran through the veld instead, disappearing in the dark. Vors, who had been quiet until then shouted after him. He looked terrified by Nicnac's departure, his silly sword held limply at his side.

"Fuck," Genevieve spat and kicked the ground with the bottom of her foot. She collapsed down onto her sandy mat, clutching at her tangled hair and staring at the hot logs in the fire.

"You saw which direction it went?" she asked Vors, after a long while. He was still standing as before. He nodded.

"Over that koppie. North-west."

"We will go… We will go in the morning." He opened his mouth to argue. "There is no point doing anything now but sleeping." She stubbornly shook out her mat away from the fire and then laid it back down and bundled herself up, pretending to sleep. Vors did the same after a while, sheathing his sword. She only knew about swords because Chrome was obsessed. He had tried to convince the Shadowsmith in Lake Floors to make one. He loved to tell Chromeski stories of boys with swords. Boys wandering into the bush and slaying villages of wild Others, who would otherwise eat you alive. When she was sure Vors was asleep she sat up and stared at the fire. He was clutching his sword with both arms against his chest.

The next day they climbed the koppie. It was rough going, and her hands and knees were cut by the time they reached the top. They took a break and Genevieve washed the cuts with some water, taking small sips. Vors' cheeks were flushed, and they only made the rings under his eyes look worse. She looked back over the ground they had walked. She could see the blue lump that was the koppie at Mushi, but it was all her imagining when she thought she could see her grandmother's hut.

Once they had gathered their energy they crested the ridge, and made their way around a bush that obscured their view.

Down below was the dragon, sitting in the middle of the clearing. It was coloured like a dark dappled tree, as if sitting under a shadow that wasn't being cast. They waited a long time and saw nothing else – no worm creature coming to or from it, no sign that the thing was alive. Its wings were folded out of sight and two straight rods – long antennae, perhaps – pointed in opposite directions on its top.

There were some other things visible through the bush too. Shapes scattered messily across the clearing. Round or square, they all spoke of Otherness. She assumed some of them were shelters, but she could see no fire circles near them.

"Should we go down?" Vors asked. Genevieve nodded and they carried on their descent. It was steeper this side, and she moved with her feet in front of her hands, sliding along her bum.

When they came to a drop in the rock Vors took the lead, first dropping into a hollow in the rocks and then slowly reaching down for a tree that grew below. Once he grabbed it he swung down and dropped off once more onto the uneven ground. He fell with his side into the bushes and extracted himself from the thorns. Genevieve knew his side would be cut and stinging.

Genevieve followed his way down, but when she dropped from the rough bark and landed on the uneven ground Vors caught her, stopping her from falling over. She brushed herself off, blowing

on her hot hands. Every cut seemed to be on fire.

The rest of the way was easier, and she resumed her gradual sliding until she could walk again. Stones tumbled down in front of them and a movement below made Genevieve grab for Vors' arm. They both crouched. Down below, a man walked out to the dragon. He wore strange clothes: dark pants and a blue shirt. She was sure even her mother didn't know anything that would stain clothes that way, as bright as a flower.

The man strode toward the dragon, unfazed by its hard and uneven mass. He walked to the side and reached into it, his whole front half disappearing. It looked for a while like he would vanish completely but then he emerged, holding a stack of papers in his hands. He peered down at them, flipping one over after the other quite urgently and then, seeming to alight on what he needed, reached back into the thing and left the papers there. Vors' face was filled with silent horror, and Genevieve calmed the thumping in her chest before she spoke.

"Wigwaf told me the worm men – the Others – flew inside its belly. It must be hollow. Like a cart for the sky. I don't think it's alive."

"But –" Vors began but Genevieve cut him off.

"I don't think it's normal, but I think without the Others in it that thing can't do anything."

Vors gave her a hard look and then turned back to the thing. It was clear that he thought she was wrong.

They made their way down into the thicker bushes without speaking, veering hard to the right and away from where they had seen the Other man disappear. They were on flat ground by the time of White Out, and they stayed in the trees, inching their way forward. When they came across the first tent it took Genevieve a long while to puzzle it out. Of course she knew what it was, they used all kinds of shelter when they went hunting, but she had not seen one like this. They kept their distance at first, making sure it was empty by throwing stones at it. Then they approached, and Genevieve slid her hand under the cover and looked inside. There seemed to be a second door, but it was so finely woven she could see through it. A gauze for insects. They took many sets to get right, and only a few moments to break. She peered inside and there was a dark sleeping mat and a blanket. As much as she wanted to investigate them she didn't want to leave any trace that they had been here. She backed out from under the outer cover and rubbed it between her fingers. It was a thin material, and following a suspicion, she spat on it. It let no water through. This would be a useful thing to take on a journey.

She left it. They threw stones at every tent they passed, making sure they were empty. It would be hotter inside than out, so it was not a surprise they were all empty. The clearing became more visible, and seeing the dragon at eye level was no consolation. As she had suspected, its centre was hollow and she could see through it to the other side of the clearing where there were more tents, and two huge tanks which were not filled with water but a substance which smelled like sweet liquor.

Long pipes led from these tanks to the dragon, like umbilical cords on a baby and its mother. She suppressed a chill, ignoring Vors' gaze as they moved closer to the koppie.

There was a huge hollow in the rock face, so large that it was surprising they had not seen it before. There were bigger tents here, long spans of cloth held up by metal rods. There was a fire in the centre, with rocks placed all around it for sitting on. She could hear voices coming from within. There were torches like there had been at the Library: constant and bright, they illuminated little parts of the cave. She could also hear the crying of children.

They made their way back into the trees and decided on a plan. It would have been best to watch the encampment for a number of days and make out their patterns, but Genevieve argued that they didn't have that long. The children could come to serious harm before then. They decided to wait only until nightfall. She expected that they would be able to count the Others while they sat around the fire, and then once they went to sleep they could overpower the few guards and get the children.

The plan changed as dusk crept in and a busy sense of purpose arose within the camp. The pipes were removed from the side of the dragon, and the Other's clothes were substituted for even stranger ones. Bedecked with round hats which covered their whole heads, two men climbed into the dragon, and it came to life. They did look like worm-people.

Lights shone inside and from its sides, and it began at first to emit a whine, which then grew louder until she and Vors had their hands clutched over their ears. Grass and dust whipped into her face but through squinting eyes she could see more Others run toward the dragon and take seats inside it. She thought four, but perhaps it was five. In a torrent of noise the dragon flew directly upwards, so smoothly it seemed unreal. It nodded to the side and swept away over the trees. She stayed crouched, spitting grass from her mouth and rubbing her eyes. At the mouth of the cave she could see an Other standing staring up at the receding creature. He turned and went inside a moment later.

Genevieve nudged Vors, and they scurried forward, keeping low and to the shadows. When they reached the entrance they dipped down into the darkest hollow they could find and waited to get their bearings. She could make out more features than from the outside. It didn't seem so deep, perhaps five tens of feet. She could hear soft noises from the children, they seemed calm. The guard talked at the left wall, stern but calm, he waved his finger and then turned and walked directly toward Genevieve and Vors. She could feel Vors stiffening beside her, and she hoped that he would stay still.

He did, and the guard walked out into the open air.

But then Vors moved up and Genevieve caught his arm. He had taken out his short axe and glared back at her. She pleaded silently but he pulled his arm from her grip and stalked after the man.

Genevieve nearly went after him but stopped herself. She hurried deeper into the cave, feeling along the wall with her sore hands. The wall curved sharply outward to the left and she circled around a bucket on the floor.

"Who's that?"

Genevieve buckled to the floor, and her knife was flexed in her hand before she could even see the speaker. To the left of her were bars, and inside this trap was a girl younger than her, an Earther. The girl gasped so loudly that Genevieve had to rush up to the bars to quiet her.

"Did you escape?" she asked Genevieve, her knuckles going white around the bars. "Let me out!"

"How?" Genevieve whispered, quickly.

"It's a lock. The key is hanging just there." On the opposite wall of the cave Genevieve could make out thin metal pieces hanging off a strip of cloth. She unhooked them and brought them to the girl, who slid one into a solid piece of metal and turned it to the side. There was a loud click and she threw off the metal block, the cage door opening. Genevieve had no time to ponder this. The girl shrugged at Genevieve's look and took the lead.

"I have been here a long time. Did they leave in the creature?"

"Yes."

The girl ran to the opposite side of the cave and unhooked another bundle of metal pieces.

"Then there should only be one left here. They only leave one."

Again they came to a dip in the wall and a set of bars. There were at least ten children, all just over the age of šalang in the cage. It stunk of damp and piss and rotting food. The children stared wide-eyed at Genevieve and the girl, who opened the gate.

"Come children. Come quietly. I am taking you back to your mothers. Come." She commanded them in such a way that they obeyed. She made them link hands as they walked.

"When they couldn't comfort them I would have to look after them," she explained as the children hurried out. "The children trust me. I promised I would take them home to their mothers."

"Why did they take you?" Genevieve asked. She meant all of them, why did they take all of them, but the girl misunderstood.

"They seemed to make a mistake with me. Normally they take the children away after a couple of days, but I was just left there. I didn't believe their stories. You mustn't believe their stories." She looked at Genevieve seriously, and then pulled the line of obedient children forward.

Genevieve hurried forward and they crept out of the mouth of the cave and to the right.

"Go around the koppie. Go directly South and you will meet Inyoka. I will send a Hunter to meet you. He will make sure you get to Mushi safe. You cannot go anywhere but Mushi: only the Keeper in Mushi understands. The rest of the villages are not safe."

"Okay. Mushi is on the way home for me. I will take the children there. And you?" the girl asked.

"I am going elsewhere."

"My thanks, friend." The girl nodded and urged the children forward. Genevieve felt hollow hearing the salutation, but her uneasiness also came from the creeping feeling that it had all been too easy.

Where was Vors? It was no use calling out. The further the children could get with no one to know they were gone the better. Vors would catch up with them easily enough.

She wandered into the trees and found a tent. She pulled the cover up from the ground where it had been pinned down using strings and metal, and bundled it in her arms. In the dim light she could see inside the tent, and she cut her way through the fine mesh and felt around inside.

Almost immediately her hand came across something heavy and oddly familiar. It was a black thing. It was the same as the black thing she had found, that long time ago, in the box that floated down the river. Not exactly the same, but similar. She turned it over to see the little eye, and was amazed to see the back was golden. A light metallic golden, completely unblemished. She turned it again, her fingers stroking down the dimples on the front. The thing came to life: a blue screen, light coming from behind it. She nearly dropped it in fright.

It was very bright in this darkness, painfully so. On the blue screen was a small drawing of a bird, but not a drawing – a black outline on a blue sky. It was as if a whole world existed inside this thin black block, frozen and captured. There was writing on the sky too, and just as she focused to read the thing went dark again.

She took off her pack and put the black thing on top, bundling up the cover as tightly as she could until it fitted too. She waited for her eyes to adjust back to the deepening night. An ominous hum filled the air, and she was uncertain if it was just her paranoia.

She jogged back to the clearing, and by the time she reached its edge she was convinced. The hum grew into a buzz, grew into a crackling roar, and soon the dragon was hovering above the clearing, flooding it with light. A movement across the way caught her eye, and she saw Vors moving between the trees, his silver-metal sword at his side. The dragon began to descend and something

flitted from Vors into its belly. A figure dropped from way up high, forward, tumbling silently down with the axe deep in his belly. The thud as the Other hit the ground was horrifying, and the dragon lurched and swayed suddenly, roaring upwards. Genevieve watched in horror as Vors ran forward, his sword drawn. She could see blood on his clothing in the sharp beam of light that the creature focused onto him. It wasn't his. He lifted up the sword and screamed at the beast, an enchantment of a sort, just like a boy out of one of Chrome's stories:

"Monster cruel: be mine to kill in single battle!"

Bright flashes of light left the dragon. The light was detached from the loud cracks that followed. Vors body jolted with the impact and collapsed, blood sprayed all around him. The sword cracked apart when he fell, only the hilt remaining clutched in his hand. Genevieve ran away from the scene, until the roar became a dampened drone and then a distant hum. She stumbled and fell many times that night, and eventually it was impossible to carry on. Hours later she lay on the cover she had stolen and wrapped her hood around her, sleeping only because she was too cold to stay awake.

Chapter Twenty-Three

North Ku, Gantry

Jimmy and Neko had been walking together for a few weeks. The routine had been easy enough to get into. When they stopped at a village, Neko always managed to get them a meal and a bed without using any of the golden tokens. Sometimes they had to work for it. Neko would tell stories or fix something – a bench that had cracked or a fence broken down by rain – and Jimmy would help him, but most of the time Neko just spoke to a woman and then told Jimmy where he could sleep. Mornings were a rush to leave. He would shake Jimmy awake before dawn and Jimmy would have to hold in his pee until they were out on the road, like this morning.

Jimmy rubbed sleep from his eyes and stumbled against Jagati's low-hanging neck. She absorbed the bump, her head swaying. She chewed her bridle lazily. Neko sat atop her, whittling holes into a piece of reed with a small carving knife. His feet hung out of the stirrups. Jimmy checked off the names in his head. Bridle, stirrups, saddle. Those were all horse-related words. Like stable, bran and neigh. Council, Keeper, Trust. Those were dangerous words. 'What did they do?' came Neko's voice in his head. Neko himself cleared his throat and spat on the ground, unaware of the echo of his question. A Council told the village what to do. A Keeper told the Council and the village what to do. The Trust told the Keeper, the Council and all the villages what to do. The Trust stayed in KwaDzaan… i. South. All of them together made up the Body Corporate.

Grey City, Shadows. Shadows lived in things from the Old World. The Old World. Ol-D, Whirl-D. It was a bad place, so said Neko. Weren't the gold tokens from the Old World?

"Neko, aren't our tokens –"

"Shhht."

Jimmy bowed his head, embarrassed at not remembering. No talking before the sun was above the trees.

He looked to the šalang on his wrist, which was healing well. It looked a little bit scabbed, but Neko said he should just say that when he was a kid the Tattooist didn't do a good job, and he had to get it redone last week.

Jimmy stroked Jagati's mane, and began a new list of words. Hunters, Tellers, Crafts, Smiths…

They came across a village soon after the sun had freed itself from the branches of the tallest trees, thereby freeing Jimmy's tongue from its silent entanglement. It was starting to warm up already, promising a hot day.

Jimmy played with the hairs that poked out of his chin. They were walking through a beautiful place: green leafy trees stretched in every direction, with overripe purple berry clusters hanging underneath them. Fat white worms sheared the leaves and fell onto the road, and Jimmy tried to get Beans to step on one.

"What are the *Lessons for Abandonment*?" he asked a few seconds later.

"Are you asking what they say, or why they say it?"

"Both," replied Jimmy, urging Beans to catch up with Jagati. His frantic kicking had no result, and Neko didn't slow down. "I've heard people speak about them a few times."

"What people?"

"I don't know… Earthers." He tried to look for another worm to squish, avoiding eye contact.

Neko had been concluding their business in the last village and Jimmy was made to wait with

the horses so that they could leave 'as quickly as possible'. What was the quickest something could move? The question joined the queue in his mind.

The children had started quizzing him about the *Lessons for Abandonment*. They were shocked when he didn't know even the first one.

"They're something that's slowly disappearing. According to the Trust, they should be in every Centre. They're normally carved or painted into the walls. Down South people are so fanatical they get their favourite ones carved into the walls of their homes. They are directions. On how to be a good Earther."

Jimmy nodded seriously, and Neko continued. "They say things like 'All Earthers are equal, and all animals are equal. We are not their keepers.'"

"What does that mean?"

"It means that animals don't belong to us. In the Old days, people used to keep animals, raise them up, and then eat them. It was very cruel. We hunt for what we eat. That way we never forget that animals don't belong to us."

Jimmy leaned down, looking for the remains of the worm Beans had just stood on. "But what about chickens? We keep them. And then we eat their eggs."

"Can you imagine a chicken surviving in the wild? We guard chickens, and keep them safe. In exchange they provide us with eggs. Same goes for goats. We look after them. And we don't eat them. We eat their… products."

"Are Keepers our keepers?"

"What do you mean?"

"The Keepers keep us in, like a chicken pen. They make sure we have food and that we all get along."

Neko shrugged but looked concerned. "It's different."

It seemed the same to Jimmy, but Neko had adopted the tone of voice that told him this was the end of his answer. Jimmy approached the next question carefully, making sure it didn't sound like a question. "I think it is important that I learn the *Lessons for Abandonment*… for when we go South. It could give me away."

Neko nodded absentmindedly. Jimmy braced himself and phrased it more directly. "Will you teach them to me?"

"I cannot teach you everything," Neko snapped. "Some things you have to learn on your own."

He pushed Jagati into a trot. Beans followed as glibly as ever.

When Jimmy arrived in the village Neko had already dismounted and was asking for a stable. It was a big village: broad roads and many people. They were already being stared at. The main road seemed to carry on forever, leading to the Centre. Jimmy pulled Beans up next to Jagati and took out his water pouch, and waited. Neko seemed to attract shit everywhere. Somehow, wherever they arrived, the Keeper would be in a bad mood with them. Then they would have an excuse to con their way out of trouble, and take just enough advantage that they didn't have to feel bad about stealing this or that, because someone deserved it.

Jimmy shifted uncomfortably, looking to where Neko was talking with a glowing-pink man who was looking after the stable. The man reminded Jimmy of Marikasaan. Looking around, there were quite a few pink people here. Their skin looked like it had just been slapped. Neko had explained that some people were so white that they couldn't work outside in the day. These looked like those kinds of people.

They walked together toward the Centre. The village was neat and tidy, the huts looked freshly painted, their thatching clipped and smooth. It was the complete opposite of the people: they looked harassed, and moved with nervous purpose. They glanced at Neko and Jimmy and then hurried away quickly. Their clothes were ragged and dirty. There was a long queue next to a wooden beam, fitted across the spoke road. Jimmy ducked underneath it automatically, following Neko.

"Stop!"

They stopped and turned. People who had been moving fluidly past jolted with fright, pausing to watch. The people in the queue snapped to attention, watching as a heavily built man came jogging up to Neko and Jimmy. He was wearing a yellow coat. Under the roof behind him was a man with a loosely held panga, who stood up to watch. When the first Vigil reached Neko the first yellow-coat was panting. He put his hands on his knees. "You skipped the toll gate!"

Neko and Jimmy looked back to the wooden beam. On a board next to it there was a drawing of a single person and a grey disc. Underneath that was a picture of a person on a horse, and two flat discs. The third was a horse and cart, with three grey discs. He assumed it must be drawn on the other side too.

"Oh," replied Neko.

"This is the Keeper's road. It can only be used by those who pay the toll."

"Why?" asked Jimmy, and for once Neko didn't seem to cringe at the word.

"How else should we keep it in good condition?" the man thundered at Jimmy. His eyes were too close together, and his face was pockmarked with old scars and red acne.

Jimmy had never thought about that before. Who looked after the roads? They were standing in the middle of a crossroads, but it was bare. This was strange, because they were not yet at the Centre. This was a concentrated circle, or whatever Neko called them. They happened in big villages, where one circle wasn't big enough, they made another one around it. Not a single person travelled on the road. A few chickens wandered across in the distance, pecking at the ground.

"Is there a way to get to the Centre without paying the toll?" Neko asked diplomatically.

"No. Today is the Parade. No one is allowed on the road. Especially not your kind."

They had a kind? Jimmy was distracted from asking about this when a cart had just made it around the distant corner, pulled by a team of four horses. It was not a cart like Jimmy had ever seen. It was made all from metal, and it shone. There was a driver sitting at the reins. He sat on a wooden plank on the cart's sloping nose. Then there was a second driver, peering around from the inside of the cart. He sat alone on a single seat, which would have been shocking enough in itself, but in front of him was a wheel, which he seemed to be struggling to hold still. The outer shell was made from black metal, polished supremely. Between the front and middle drivers was real glass, perfect except for a flowery crack along the left hand side.

Jimmy was captivated. Atop the structure stood a handsome man, posed with one leg forward, the most wondrous cloak billowing out on either side of him. He stood on the benches that were inside the cart, which had only a few tears in their fabric. The robed man turned his head and waved stiffly to a group of rag-tag people watching from the entrance of a hut, and then he jutted his nose forward into the air, his blonde hair tousled by the wind. His off-white cloak looked wonderfully soft, and the slow procession of the cart made it fly behind him magnificently. Jimmy wanted to touch it.

He backed off the road. Neko had not moved and he ran forward and grabbed his sleeve.

"Not now," Neko swatted, and resumed his argument.

"Neko, look!" Neko saw the cart and stepped backward out of its way. The Vigil neatly hurried

to the other side of the street and stood stiffly, watching the cart pass along the inner loop.

"What in the name of mud is that?" Neko asked, pointing. He was laughing so loudly that when the cart passed by them the man on top of it turned to look at him. Jimmy saw that the blonde man's face was not as he had assumed. His lips were thin and curled up in distaste. Neko just laughed and laughed.

"I don't think you're supposed to laugh."

"But that's an Old World thing Jimmy. Oh, what are they called? Something like cart… carousel. No. But anyway, it's ridiculous. It's being pulled by horses. Did you see the wheels? They were solid wood! No wonder it creeps along like a slug."

The cart had stopped, and Jimmy noticed movement behind him for the first time. Over his shoulder he saw that the queue had vanished, nobody waited to go through the toll now. Two men watched from the doorway of their hut, pretending not to be watching. The man atop the cart pointed back at Neko, and before he could run, the Vigil tackled him to the ground. Jimmy leapt forward and started hitting the man's back with his fists, but the second yellow-coat threw Jimmy away. He landed on his hip and by then there was a panga held to Neko's throat. Neko put his hands up and lay very still.

"By order of the Keeper of Gantry, I hereby arrest you for trial on the charge of…" he faltered. The heavy one looked up at the man on the cart.

"Mockery," the blonde man boomed.

The Vigil exchanged a curt nod, hauled Neko to his feet and marched him away. Jimmy followed, limping.

They took Neko to a large hut near the Centre. They walked him inside, and Jimmy tried to follow, but his entrance was barred.

"Please friend, that's my father."

"Get away you little bastard," said a new man, his thin hair plastered over his burnt scalp. He kicked at Jimmy with a bare foot. His yellow toenails matched his coat.

"Please friend, I must get him out, my mother is ill! He was only laughing because-"

"Fuck off you little black shit."

Jimmy was too startled to retort. "Neko," he shouted instead, "I will get you out!" The man kicked at Jimmy again and he scampered away.

The streets were filled once more with people. All of them were very poorly dressed, Jimmy noticed. He also noticed what colour they were. There were the pink ones. Then there were ones like the colour of Neko, but not quite. They were shades of riverbank-brown, but none as black as him. He was a midnight sort of black, he considered, looking down. This had made him feel strong before, like a cool shadow on a hot day. But now he felt out of place. He had to speak to people, to find out about this place, to find out about the Keeper. He watched the entrance of the hut from the middle of the street. If he lost Neko, he would be lost.

"Hey, friend!"

Jimmy looked around but didn't see anyone.

"Psssst, friend!" He looked around again. Crouching by a wall was a very dirty boy. His skin was the same brown as the dust and his face was freckled. He smiled broadly to reveal a gap between his front teeth. It was a jaunty kind of smile. It dared Jimmy over.

"Hello," he replied.

"They took your friend to jail?" He waved his hand toward the hut. They boy looked about the same age as Jimmy.

"My father."

The boy hesitated, and then carried on his questioning in a different direction. "Do you have lots of Metals?"

"No," Jimmy answered on reflex. A few days before, Neko had let Jimmy carry the Metals in his pack – including their few remaining gold tokens. He said that no one would suspect that Jimmy had Metals. Neko also always said that you should never tell people you have Metals, it does you no good.

"That's a shame. You could have bought your way out. What was he charged with?"

"Mockery?"

"That's a new one." The boy shrugged. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Jimmy asked, looking back over his shoulder to the hut.

"My place. Then we can plan how to get him out."

Jimmy stopped. The boy stopped too and looked at him. "Don't worry, they won't move him. My family and I have done this loads of times before. The name's Muffs, by the way. Muffin Tin if we're being formal."

"Jimmy."

He nodded, and Jimmy followed him.

"You're very black," Muffin Tin piped up, a few steps later.

"I've always been this black," Jimmy replied defensively. It was not his fault the people here weren't the usual colours.

"I was just saying," the boy shrugged and Jimmy followed him through a narrow gap between two huts.

"What's the problem with being this black?"

"No problem here in Gantry. Now if you were across Inyoka at Verwelk you would be in trouble."

"Why?" Jimmy nearly apologised for the question but Muffin Tin didn't mind.

"'Cos to get in you have to be lighter than their signboard. If I don't wash before I go they don't even let *me* in." He ducked into a hut and Jimmy followed.

Muffin Tin's 'place' turned out to be his parents' hut, but neither of them were home. Their sleeping mats were neatly unrolled. There was three of everything. Muffs took what he called his father's mug and filled it with water, giving Jimmy his own mug to drink from.

"Where are your parents?"

"Out. Very secretive business. They are both in Crafts. My father used to be on the Council, but then it got too corrupt so he left it. Bastards!" he exclaimed in a tone that was not his own. "They should be back this evening." They took a seat on the sleeping mats. It was very dusty. Jimmy wondered when last the place had been swept. He didn't know how someone could sleep here without getting some coughing sickness.

"So you have a serious problem here, my friend. I am the only collaborator in this town who may be able to help you. I know how the guard shift works, and I know it will be three days until he goes on trial. Keeper Dustin likes a new gown made before a trial. Bastard!" he punctuated. "But don't worry, that gives us plenty of time to try and bail him out. Do you have any explosives?" Jimmy shook his head uncertainly. He had never heard the word before.

"Good mud man! How were you planning on getting him out?"

"A trick?" Jimmy replied softly.

"A trick?" Muffs responded, not keeping the incredulity from his voice.

"Everybody has a weakness," Jimmy recited, "If you can find it, they can be tricked." He tried to look stern. "Now we need to figure out the Keeper's weakness."

"Oh that's easy," replied Muffs.

"It is?"

"Yeah. His throat. You could stick a knife in there no problem." Jimmy's eyes grew wide.

"Not that kind of weakness. It's like, something, that he can't live without. If I can take that from him, then he will bargain to get it back."

Muffs leaned his chin on his hands, taking a sip of water and sighing heavily. "I don't know man. You saw him in the parade today. He's got so many things. We could try stealing his silk, but for that we'd need a couple hundred carts."

Jimmy thought back to the blonde man's sneering face. Neko had agreed that people became strange if they learned for too long, but it seemed it was just Keepers that this happened to.

"Why do we even need Keepers?" Jimmy shouted, exasperated.

"Shhh! We don't know if we're being listened to." He hopped over to the door and looked from side to side. It took time before Jimmy's thoughts settled down again. If the Keeper was the one on the cart, then Neko was in for a tough trial.

"What's silk?" he asked eventually.

"Here," Muffs left the doorframe and walked to the corner of the room. There was a plain box with dry leaves inside, and the same fat white worms he had seen on the road. "Everyone in Gantry has to grow them. Silkworms. They make cocoons and then you boil those to make silk." Jimmy held the box as Muffs went and fetched another. This one was filled to the brim with yell ow and white cocoons.

"Then you stretch them out and… Yeah. I don't know what the Tailors do, but they spin them again into gowns and stuff."

"Does everyone get them?"

Muffs laughed. "No, only Keeper Dustin, bastard!"

"So why do you all have to grow them?"

Muffs paused. "It's just the way things are. Everyone is too scared of him to say no."

"Why, what will he do?"

"Bad things." Muffs had looked to the door, suddenly very quiet. Jimmy paused, expecting a reason for the sudden hush. But Muffs just stared at the door.

"Maybe," Jimmy began, trying to change the subject, "If we could give him a really nice gown he would give us Neko. My father," he amended.

"No way man! It takes like a hundred-hundred of these just to make a sleeve. On a sleeveless shirt! You said you don't have Metals. So we can't pay a Tailor."

"Damn." Jimmy handed him back the boxes. "Maybe his weakness isn't clothes," Jimmy tried, but Muffs shook his head.

"It's definitely clothes. And wearing clothes in front of people. That's what he likes the most. If you could take away his clothes, that would be the best. He would have to go on parade naked."

"He wouldn't go on parade then," Jimmy snapped.

They both deflated at the helpless thought, and sat in depressed silence for a while. Jimmy pulled loose strands of grass from his mat. If they couldn't think of something, then Neko would

have to find his own way out. Perhaps they shouldn't try to trick the Keeper, but try and trick the Vigil instead.

"What if he thought he was wearing a gown, but he wasn't?"

"That's stupid." Jimmy felt cruel for saying so, but he didn't care. He tried to resume his line of thought.

"No, I'm serious." Muffs had climbed to his feet and was pacing back and forth, his fingers on his chin. "Make him a gown and tell him it's made from the best material in the world."

"He already has that."

"Forget silk. We can make something up. We can tell him only really clever people can see that it is beautiful."

"That won't work. He'll just throw us in jail because he can see that it's ugly."

"He won't! If we find someone to tell him it's beautiful, and we tell him it's beautiful, he'll want to pretend that he can see that it is beautiful so that people won't think he's stupid." Jimmy worked his way through the idea.

"That still won't work. He'll just say that we're the stupid ones."

"Then tell him you're really clever!"

Jimmy gave him a sour look. "He'll ask me a question like 'what is the fastest something can go' and I won't know. And then I'll be on trial too. But…" Jimmy paused. "I could do something that he can't test…"

His mind galloped. "I could say something like, only those who are not going to die in the next two weeks can see it is beautiful."

"Then he'll just take people and kill them. To test." Muffs shook his head sadly.

"He will?" asked Jimmy, aghast.

"Bastard!" muttered Muffs. They sat quietly for a while longer, immersed in thought.

"Okay," began Jimmy, "how about something like, only those who are truly powerful can appreciate its beauty."

"But that's the same as what I said. And he'll just ask what makes you so powerful." Muffs pulled a reed from the floor mat and snapped it in half.

"Okay, then only those who are truly powerful or friends to the truly powerful can see it is beautiful." Jimmy and Muffs paused, thinking it over. "He can't do anything!" Jimmy continued, his excitement growing. "He can't. Nobody will come in knowing that and say that it is ugly, because then they are admitting they are not his friend. He will say it is beautiful, because he thinks he is truly powerful."

Muffs looked sceptical. "We will have to make sure that everyone knows that this is what the cloak does. If even one person comes in and says that it's ugly… but then, the people here are so scared, they would never…" A smile slowly crept up his cheeks. "It's perfect," he muttered, "The people in this village, they're so scared of how powerful Keeper Dustin is. And Keeper Dustin is so scared of not being powerful at all. It *is* his weakness! We need a backup plan though," said Muffs, the enthusiasm only growing on his face, "I have explosives."

Chapter Twenty-Four

North Ku, Gantry

Neko paced, then sat, and then lay down. He did all the things one was supposed to do in frustrated captivity. He let his food grow cold before he ate it, and relieved himself spitefully into the provided bucket.

He could see a sliver of the outside world through the door, but he could make no sense of the action. It was a blur of legs and cart wheels.

Jimmy had come back that night and announced that he had a plan. He had huddled against the wall and told Neko as if he were proud of it. Jimmy wouldn't admit it, but there was someone there with him. Neko could hear it. Was this it? Was the boy betraying him? He had started developing the whiny sulkiness of a teenager these past weeks. If Neko got out, he would leave Jimmy. His questions had grown less revealing and more tiresome. He was always doing stupid things to try and impress Neko.

The plan he had concocted was just such an example. Neko had never heard something so ridiculous in his life, and had forbidden Jimmy from going forward with it, but he knew the boy was lying when he had promised he wouldn't. He even knew what expression he was wearing as he said it, despite the thick wall. It was a look of innocent concern, carried so heavily between his eyebrows that it made Neko angry just to think about it. He would get caught out by the Keeper in a moment, and then both of them would be stuck in this hut, on charges of mockery or some other imagined nonsense.

Neko ran his hand through his hair, brushing the sweat off his forehead. There was a deeper concern, like the bad root of a tooth. His whole body tingled with worry, and he ached from thinking about it. The Keeper had not come in to see him, but given the arrogance that the parade revealed, this was no surprise. What punishment could a made-up charge like 'mockery' carry?

What worried him was the talk he had overheard between the Vigil that were guarding him. Messages had been sent to other villages. A message had been send to Maple in Cradlewood; to Masinge and whichever Keeper resided there after Markie had been… disposed of. And finally, a message had been sent to Neko's home, to Kipper. Kipper had trie d Neko once before. If she were to find him he would be banished, sent from Ku. He ran his fingers through his hair and began pacing again. All they needed to add to that list of horror was Ratel, the Trust's problem solver.

Neko had once been to a village Ratel had worked in. It was terrifying. The people there were subdued, like chickens entranced by a line in the dirt. They worked, they ate, they slept and nothing more. The people here in Gantry were similar.

Jimmy could not be found out. If he was found to have an association with Neko, he would be banished to the real Out – the moment they quizzed him it would become clear that he was no Earther. It would not be fair.

Banishment was a punishment worse than death. You were not killed, you were remov ed from history. There was no record of you, your very name became šalang. The mark on your wrist was blighted. You undid all your rights. There was nothing to live from beyond the reaches of the villagse – everything was dead. They took you somewhere from where you could not return, a place that nobody but the Vigil and Keepers knew.

In his mind it was a flat burnt field. It stretched on endlessly until you were felled by thirst.

Neko awoke the next morning stiff, with no mat and no blanket provided in the hut. He sat and rubbed his face back to life, as there was no water to wash it with. He felt awful. His hair felt greasy. A person in rags groaned from the corner. He hadn't noticed someone being brought in. It was not Jimmy, and Neko dismissed the man and started shouting at the cell doors for some water. The person rolled over, and the stench of sour beer filled the air. Neko looked down in disgust at the vomit on the front of the man's shirt. He was hairy and filthy and stank.

"Vigil, please friend, water," he called and grabbed for a cloak that moved past the front of the bars. The Vigil ignored his pleas. The man on the floor groaned and uttered a garbled curse.

Neko stayed at the bars until midday, his nose turned toward the fresh air and away from the drunkard. He had just sunk into another bout of depression when a Vigil came in off the street, stomping dirt from his boots. Neko could just make out the conversation he held with the first.

"Just come from the palace. That one's Trial has been postponed to six days."

The man made an indistinct reply.

"Him? I dunno. Just throw him out again tonight. There's nothing we can do." They chatted for a while before a woman's voice called out. Neko watched the sliver of light blink as she stood in the doorway. She had a clear, high voice. It was a relief from the mumbled tones of the men.

"Please tell him I came by. Those mulberries will rot if we don't get to them soon." The men chuckled as they chatted, but Neko's ears pricked when the woman mentioned 'a boy at the Palace'.

"Hops up out of nowhere and addresses Keeper Dustin directly, wearing only a sheet. There were Vigil there, but Keeper Dustin is in some strange mood and decides to humour him. Now they have him off in a corner making a robe that no one is allowed to see. Some Old World material that was long lost and now rediscovered. People are calling it magic. I think it's rubbish."

The man cut her off, and nervous laughter filled the room.

"Of course I don't doubt Keeper Dustin's judgement. If Keeper Dustin believes it, so do I, but I think he's playing a game. Oh, you know how he is. And anyway, I only tell you because he bargained for your prisoner. And worst of all, he had that brat with him, Muffs, you know, the one whose parents –"

The men talked over her and Neko missed the rest. She left without mentioning it again, and Neko slumped dismally to the floor. The stupid boy had gotten himself into shit so deep he hadn't even fallen out of the horse yet.

The day slouched on, repetitive hours as knotted as his stomach. He was alarmed when dinner arrived, he had long been asleep. After he ate he spent another span of hours awake, thinking about nothing but his anxiety. Just when he had fallen back asleep the bars rattled and the Vigil came and removed the drunkard who Neko had begun suspecting of being dead. They dragged him out by his hands, his pants catching on something and ending up trailing along behind his foot. They stuck on the door frame and ripped, and one of the Vigil came back to retrieve them, holding them at arm's length and with only two fingers. Jimmy did not come visit that night. He did not come the next either, and Neko grew worried. Hopefully the boy had the good sense to flee by now. Or be caught. That would be good and proper.

Neko had taken to lying down for long spans. They were not giving him enough food or water to do anything else, and his lips were cracked with thirst.

On the third night, he heard the familiar scratching on the wall. Neko knocked to let him know it wasn't safe to talk – the guard was inside the hut. When the guard left he knocked again.

"Jimmy, is that you?"

"No, it's not Jimmy. It's Muffin Tin."

Neko drew in breath, but what to say. He had no idea who this was. It could be a trick to make him confess.

"Hello?" came the boy's voice. "Umm, Neko, hello? Jimmy says that I must say that '*Sugar Cane is… sugar cane is the land's bane but elephants really love it*. '"

"Of course he did," Neko replied, sighing with relief. That boy would never resemble a normal Earther. Neko's fondness for him was so overwhelming in that moment that it brought tears to his eyes. He sniffed them away. It was a bit of self-pity too; Neko felt the unfairness down in his bones. This charge of 'Mockery' was a sham, but it was still going to get Neko banished.

"What is going on out there. Is he safe?"

"We're safe. We're playing a trick. On Keeper Dustin's weakness. His throat and his clothes. They have us in the Palace. I just came out to get more materials and to speak to you."

"What materials?"

"Oh, just whatever women leave out. We're making a cloak of true beauty."

Neko's throat ran dry. "Oh, that's nice," he croaked eventually. At least there was a trace of sarcasm to it. "What have you been telling people?" he asked.

"Dear friends and Earthers and Dustin," the boy announced. He said it quickly, it was practised. "Only those with true power, and those who are friends to those in true power, can see the beauty of this material. That is why it is called 'True Beauty'. It is better than silk, and awesome to see, a relic of the Old World to be enjoyed by those worthy of seeing it. Reverence is inevitable."

Neko thought it over a few times. "Did Jimmy think of it himself?" He hadn't realised that Jimmy even had the vocabulary.

"I helped. Jimmy doesn't know the *Lessons*, so I included them."

" 'Reverence is inevitable?' "

"My father says that."

"I'm impressed," Neko replied. Perhaps it was three days of deprivation, but he didn't have a better plan than this one.

"Okay, I gotta go. This is getting heavy."

"What is getting heavy?" Neko asked, but the boy was gone.

He lay down and slept.

On the fifth day the bars were opened and Neko was taken outside, without explanation but with his pack. He was glad he had given Jimmy the Metals to carry a few days before: he couldn't look in it now, but his pack felt significantly lighter than it had been. He was shown to a trough and made to wash. Were the Keepers already here? It was unbelievably quick: they were two weeks straight walking from Masinge. One week on a quick horse with good weather. He was marched down the streets to the loop behind the toll gate. It was as empty as the day he had arrived, but now he could see that down the spokes, little crowds of people had gathered to watch.

Neko was pulled along the road to a ruin. It was a sprawling, dense complex of buildings both old and new. He assumed it was the 'Palace' which had been repeatedly referred to. It had been left unpainted, so it was clear where Old-World bricks met mud. Pride was the simplest weakness. Painting kept the elements off your building. There were deep cracks in the mud. The ruin was nothing special, low broad and square like most. It had been thatched, with difficulty. That much thatch was a fire hazard. In fact, he was sure that the thin tendril of smoke rising from the zenith of

the hut on his left was not meant to be there. He turned away.

The road split, and one lane ended under the Palace's roof. Neko nearly laughed again when he realised what was underneath the massive expanse of cloth – bigger than any he had seen before – the car. The word was easily recalled now, as if his brain had been quietly working on it while he had been imprisoned.

His gaze was pulled away when the Keeper, the blonde man who had called the charge of 'Mockery', walked out in the most ridiculous outfit he had ever seen. The sleeves were mismatched, and the robe uneven at the bottom. It had dark purple streaks running vertically down the back, like a bird had shat on it. It was open all the way down to the start of his stomach, and the sleeves had tears along the front through which one could see his arms. He carried a metal pole with a dimpled ball at the end, an old-world knobkerrie of some sort. It was an outrageous sight, but Neko did not laugh. Jimmy walked out behind the man looking ashen.

The Keeper was chiselled and beautiful. The muscles on his chest and arms were so clearly defined they could be used by a Healer to explain anatomy. His blonde hair was cut short and grew upwards. As he walked he pulled the front of his hair up, running it through his fingers. He swung the old-world knobkerrie at his feet, as Neko's two guards walked to his side, leaving Neko facing this panel of authority alone.

"So this is the trade-off for my wonderful robe." The smug look on his face was enough to make a donkey want to kick him. The Keeper aimed the ball-end of the knobkerrie at Neko's face, and then rested it on Neko's shoulder. It was lighter than expected.

"And he's your father?" he asked Jimmy.

"Yes, Keeper Dustin."

"Your mother must have been very black."

"Yes, Keeper Dustin."

Neko opened his mouth and closed it again. He wanted to smack the sneer off the man's face. He rarely felt that kind of unbridled, direct anger. He knew there were villages here in the North that did not allow in people of certain races, but they were not condoned by the Trust. A Keeper upheld the *Lessons*, and the *Lessons* did not distinguish between peoples' colour.

"Your son, Jimmy here, explained the reasons why you laughed in the parade." He paused, lowering the knobkerrie to his side and leaning on it nonchalantly. "But I'd like to hear it from you." Neko smiled a cat smile. What the fuck had Jimmy told him? Jimmy went as white as his dark skin would allow and subtly leaned back, pointing at the robe.

"It was your clothes, Keeper."

Jimmy shoved a finger down his throat, pretending to gag.

"I didn't think them befitting a man as beautiful… and powerful," Jimmy had flexed a bicep, "as you. Before I had time to explain I was taken away. I see my son, however, has done an excellent job providing you with the appropriate attire."

"Oh you like it?"

"Yes Keeper. It's the newest fashion."

Keeper Dustin eyed Neko, his mouth twisting.

"It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

"Well, now that we've established your skills as a liar," he turned to Jimmy, who tried to look casual, "let's see if my people like it." He clicked his fingers and the cover of the car was pulled back. It was pushed out of the garage by three men and a team of horses was hitched to its front.

Neko and Jimmy walked behind the ridiculous procession, with a baton-bearing Vigil behind them. It was the man that had first arrested him.

"Where's your friend?" Neko asked Jimmy out of the corner of his mouth.

"Muffs is arranging a little guarantee."

Neko sceptically lifted his eyebrow.

"He can be trusted," Jimmy shot back in reply, looking the surly teenager once more. They were coming to the first spoke and the first crowd of people. A sliver of sweat ran down Neko's lower back.

"Jimmy, if they laugh, run. Leave me, just run."

"No."

"Do as I say," he tried, authoritatively. Jimmy ignored him. He winced, staring hard at the people in the crowd. They were poor, their clothes were scruffy and torn, and they had the expression that people get when they look into empty Winter stores. They stared pale-faced at the Keeper, and Neko waited for the crack; the upturning of a lip and the shout of ridicule that would begin the laughter. It didn't come. At the second group there was a smattering of surprised noises and nods of approval. At the third spoke there was applause. Jimmy was grinning happily, bowing as if they were looking at him.

"Why aren't they laughing?" Neko hissed.

Jimmy shrugged. "They believed our story."

Neko was not reassured. The cloak was horrible, it was there for everyone to see. There was no magic, no mistake.

The procession ambled on. They made the entire loop back to the Palace without a single person laughing. From this angle, the smoke from the hut looked even more troublesome than before. Neko watched as the Vigil eyed it. One of them broke off from the rest and disappeared into the Palace. Jimmy nudged Neko's arm and he followed his gaze. Beans and Jagati were tied to a nearby post, saddled and ready to move. If their horses were packed, they would be let go. But his delight knocked against a hard suspicion. It was a trick; Keeper Dustin seemed exactly the type. They resumed the positions they had before, Neko facing the palace and looking up at the Vigil and Dustin. This time Jimmy stood next to Neko.

"It seems your wonderful robe has passed the scrutiny of my people," Keeper Dustin announced. And then, with a surprisingly small amount of fanfare, he twirled his hand in an off-hand flick. "Your trade is successful. The charges of Mockery are dropped, you are free to go." Neko didn't bother with extended thanks. He nodded briefly and turned on his heel to go.

"However there is the little issue," came Dustin's wheedling voice, "Of some friends who desperately want to see you, Neko."

Neko froze. "We'll find ourselves some accommodation, make ourselves useful." He smiled, but he didn't feel like smiling. Keeper Dustin stepped down, walking toward Neko. It seemed hotter here than ever before, and he wiped sweat that had trickled down his nose.

He was startled when he moved his hand away and his fingers were black. Keeper Dustin stood at his shoulder, with his hands behind his back. He didn't drop his smile.

"I know all about you, Neko. But you seem to know nothing of me." He brushed ash off Neko's shoulder. "The only thing more tattered and repulsive than my new robe is your reputation. I've heard all about your little shenanigans from Keeper Kipper." He grinned even more broadly at Neko's growing horror. "Do you want to know why people don't laugh, Neko? Because I could walk out naked, and they would still know to be scared. And in this they are far wiser than you."

Neko was further distracted by the ash that was floating around them on the wind.

"As to our mutual friends, it would be a shame if they missed you. I was hoping," Keeper Dustin said nasally, "You would continue to enjoy the hospitality of my Vigil." He nodded to the Vigil on his left, who were looking up and behind them at the Palace. Nobody noticed his barbed lines, his carefully planned malice. Jimmy and Neko were already running for their horses when the thatch roof behind collapsed in with a *whoomf*, sending up a ball of flame and smoke.

*

Muffin Tin skipped home that night. His whole body was covered with black ash. The whole town was covered with ash, but the fire had only burnt two huts besides those at the Palace. He called out as he walked inside and then backed out again laughing and went and washed in the nearby trough.

When he returned he sparked together his flint stones, lighting one of the silk cocoons and bird's nest kindling he still had in his pocket. With the cook-fire burning he lit the candles that his mother kept for special occasions. He set out three mugs and poured three beers that he had bought this morning with the Metals that Jimmy had given him, giving himself the least and his father the most. He sat down at the table and knocked his mug against the other two.

"It worked well, but we really needed more explosives." The fire crackled in appreciation of his good humour. After he had finished his small mug he shifted along the bench and took a sip from his mother's beer.

"That boy Jimmy was nice."

"I left him a present in his saddle. Good cocoons and a cloth full of eggs and leaves. I hope he looks after them."

After he finished the beer, he moved unsteadily around the table to his father's bench. The fire was dim glowing coals, but the candle made the shadows on the wall wobble with life.

"I think you've had too much."

"Keeper Dustin had too much. We sorted him out."

"He'll be back. Bastard!"

Muffin Tin lay down on the wooden bench, letting his feet dangle off one end.

"I do wonder what the charge for Mockery would be. I mean, we all know the charge for Treason." He laughed and watched the candles' sputtering dance. He sat up and rubbed his face, yawning.

"I should have been asleep hours ago."

He put down the mug and walked to his sleeping mat, taking the candle with him. He lay down and turned his back on the empty room.

"Goodnight," he called.

*

Neko and Jimmy barely stopped for two days. Neko insisted this was because he didn't want to be late for the Midsummer festival at Crossroads. It occupied the boy, who decided he would dress as an elephant. Neko tried to explain that it was an unusual choice, that people normally dressed as more common animals, like jackals and hedgehogs and dogs, but Jimmy would not sway from his choice.

It gave they boy something to do other than ask questions, and Neko needed to think rather

than be questioned. There was no doubt now that he would need to leave Jimmy behind. If Neko was being tracked by the Keepers, they could not be far behind. One man could disappear, two were easily found – especially a pair as conspicuous as he and Jimmy.

Every time the boy opened his mouth Neko felt his hackles rise. He was a burden, of less use than a blind horse. If he couldn't find his way around Ku now, after this many moonths of being guided, then he deserved to be lost. The boy had tremendous luck, too, as the incident at Gantry had shown. He had walked away richer by ten useless silk cocoons, and a cloth full of eggs that were going to hatch into worms and eat their way through some village's Winter stores. Then again, if their owner was careful he could be rich. Worms that spun silk, which could be spun into robes. It had taken the whole two days before Neko accepted that this was not just another one of Jimmy's fantasies. Neko had taken back the Metals that Jimmy had been keeping. It was pure luck that the boy had been carrying them when Neko had been arrested: Neko's pack had been emptied of almost anything of value by the Vigil in Gantry. It has been an arbitrary impulse in the first place to allow the boy to carry them, but Neko felt comforted by having them on his person.

It was dusk, and travellers they had passed confirmed that the festival was starting tonight. The full moon appeared early for celebrations. He threw back a glance at Jimmy, whose tiresomely slow horse plodded along and farted with every tenth step. Jimmy had a grey elephant trunk made of old twine tied to his face and two huge leaf ears tied to the sides of his head. He had rubbed every exposed part of skin and costume with grey ash. It was embarrassing to be seen with him. It would significantly lower his chances of finding a woman tonight.

It had been weeks since he had last been with a woman, and Jimmy had a terrible habit of interrupting Neko when he went for a stroll in the bushes. Neko would have found a quiet place and conjured just the correct state of mind when Jimmy's voice would call out from the road, checking to see if he was okay. The boy himself was obviously a late developer, because there was never any suspect scuffling from his mat at night. If he stayed up at all, it was to think up more questions to plague Neko with.

Up ahead walked a boy with a worn-out looking cow. Its udders swung loosely underneath its bony hips. Neko stopped to talk to the boy, and Jimmy caught up a moment later.

"How much?"

"At least twenty Metals, friend."

Neko cocked his head and then reached over to Jimmy's saddle, pulling out the cloth with the yellow and white cocoons in it.

"All I have are these silk cocoons and eggs."

"Cocoons?" They boy's simple brown eyes grew sceptical. Jimmy gritted his te eth, fighting the urge to grab back his cocoons and his eggs. The trick was not fair. You couldn't exchange a cow for some silkworms. The boy was as underfed as his cow. "What grows in it?"

"Worms that weave the most beautiful cloth you could ever imagine. It will make you rich."

"He's lying," Jimmy said flatly. Neko shot him a look of pure loathing, and Jimmy felt suddenly panicked. He knew how stupid he must look in his elephant costume. The other boy's expression hardened as he turned back to Neko.

"Twenty Metals and nothing else."

"You think Metals are more valuable than these cocoons? Just two villages away they would pay the weight of your cow for these. This is better than a chicken that lays golden eggs." He shot a disdaining look at the cow. "Metals mean nothing in comparison to that," he spat this back at Jimmy.

Neko trotted away, thrusting the cloth into his pocket. Jimmy pushed Beans who trotted a few steps behind Jagati. The farmer-boy threw Jimmy a look of disgust as he went past, and Jimmy felt his elephant trunk bouncing stupidly on his nose.

"Neko stop!" Jimmy called after him, but Neko didn't even turn around. "Stop, you mud-splattered ass whore!" Neko halted Jagati and turned with an ugly sneer on his face.

"Learn that one from me, did you? Think you sound like a big bad Earther? You're a child. An Other child. Everyone can see it." The words stung.

"And you're cruel," he swatted back. "You were going to trick that boy, for no reason. We don't need his cow. You just want to prove how you're cleverer than anyone else." He ripped the elephant trunk off his face, the thin strings snapped around his ears, the leaves falling crookedly. He threw it to the ground. "I don't want to play your games anymore."

He tried to get Beans to storm off, but the horse walked as slowly as ever. Neko stayed put. After a time Neko reappeared with Jimmy's dusty trunk in his hand.

"You don't know where we're going," Neko proposed, taking out the cloth of eggs too. Jimmy snatched them back. He tucked the trunk down the front of his pants.

"I don't care," Jimmy retorted angrily.

"I'm sorry. You were right," Neko sighed. "Taking from that boy would be cruel. We have enough fare to make it South, we don't need more."

"Can we just enjoy ourselves and not trick anyone tonight?"

Neko smiled vaguely. "Fine. That's fine." Jimmy nodded triumphantly, but was put off balance by Neko's admission. Neko was never wrong.

"Also, Jimmy…"

"Yes?" Here it came. The lie to smooth over the fact that Jimmy had just won this argument.

"You look like you have an elephant trunk for a cock. I'm not saying it's a bad look, but you might get some over-enthusiastic attention at the festival."

Jimmy looked down to where the trunk leaned against his thigh. Neko trotted past humming to himself.

Chapter Twenty-Five

North Ku, Crossroads

There shall be no religion: not of science, nature, nor of gods. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

Genevieve woke, and walked all the way to Crossroads that day. Crossroads was at the bottom of the Northern Road, which led to the Wall and beyond it, to the Grey City. She intended to take the Northern Road the next day.

There were the beginnings of a festival. A child sat upon an empty basket and her mother knelt beside her. Her face had been painted so that it looked like one was looking at her bones, rather than skin. She kicked her legs wistfully, impatient to play with her friends. The stalls sold foods one hardly ever saw down South. Crepes with honey, jam and cheese. Beers and ciders and even wine.

A pack of freckled men wearing hyena skins and boyish expressions cackled as a stall lined up thimblefuls of milky liquor in front of them, strong enough to clean a wound. They took it all at the same time and screamed and spat in satisfied disgust.

Genevieve dug for the few Metals in the inside lining of her hood that Jeanne had given her, and bought herself bread baked on the fire, filled with sweet corn pieces. She sat and dipped it with the Earthers into a huge black pot. It was warm and filling.

She began speaking to the family. They had not had any children disappear from Crossroads, they insisted. She didn't dare ask if they had seen something resembling the dragon. They in turn asked her many questions about the land south, and she was included when the mqombothi was passed around. She even got a sip of pulped marula berries mixed with milk and honey. It was immediately dizzying. After a time she thanked them and stumbled away to find a place to sleep for the evening.

She pulled up her hood as the night deepened. The darkness was full of laughter but also frightening shrieks, the kind that made one turn to look for danger. People bumped into her. Earthers were always the same at these festivals. They would grab your hand and think that pulling you into them was a way to get your affection and not just a slap to the face. If they saw something they wanted they tried to take it. There were those who would lean over you seductively, breathing second-hand liquor into your nose and spluttering their love with woeful eyes, hurt when you pushed them away.

The masks scared Genevieve. In the main festival grounds there were a hundred-hundred fires, lanterns and candles. Oases of light, between which she felt deeply afraid. In the dark, every mask turned into a black snarl. A forest of people turned to wild olive wolves. They would stalk her, laughing, and just when she was about to take flight some spark would illuminate the mask. It would be a wide-eyed owl; an impala, its horns tied on with a headband.

She felt exhausted, and moved toward the music. If seems she would have to sleep out tonight. When she could see the stage, but the drumming didn't throb too loudly she sat down on a small, tufty embankment. She watched the music for a long time, eventually pulling back her hood as the warmth of the alcohol kept her face hot.

"Not here for the festival?" asked a man sitting at her side. She turned to him and was immediately taken aback. As one of the few people not wearing a mask, he looked more like an animal than anyone else that she had seen. He smiled like a cat.

"No," she replied, smiling back. He was handsome, his black hair curled behind his ears.

"I am here for my son." He indicated the boy sitting watching the music n ext to him.

"What is he? Your son…" she asked, cocking an eyebrow. The boy was a midnight black. The yellow-skinned-alleged-father smiled back warmly. There was a tooth missing from his broad grin, which made him look like a naughty child.

"An elephant. The broad strokes, at least. So ,metaphorically speaking." He paused. "You don't look to be enjoying yourself."

"What makes you think that?"

"You're not dressed up."

"I am dressed."

"That is a shame. I would like to see you naked."

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," she intercepted, "Surely you mean you would like to get to know me as a person, without pretence or mask," she said bitterly, making a sweeping gesture around her. "It would be šalang, you know, for a man and a woman to fuck without pretence."

"That's my favourite kind of fucking."

"Then why did you bring your son?"

"It's not – It's, he's," he stumbled over his lie, and then just laughed. Laughed so sincerely that Genevieve forgave his crudeness. He did not seem used to being outwitted.

"The boy needed a night out. We have had a hard summer."

"Is that what happened to your tooth?" she asked, pointing to the gap in his smile.

He closed his mouth self-consciously. "No. That happened because I have a soft spot for women," he replied, grinning again. His eyes didn't smile this time, he seemed to have slipped into some reminiscence.

"It has been a hard summer." Genevieve nodded and looked back to the musicians. It had been a plentiful summer, with lots of rain and few floods. With little hail. Ku's crops would see them through the dry seasons. The man offered his drink. Genevieve took a sip. It was very strong, and it burned happily the whole way to her stomach.

"I have spent the whole summer chasing things that shouldn't exist," she announced, staring pensively at the stage and letting the fires blur in her vision. She was feeling quite tipsy by now.

"I have spent the whole summer being chased by things that shouldn't exist." He took back his drink and took a deep sip. "Mud fucked Keepers," he mumbled angrily. Genevieve felt herself – or perhaps the alcohol – warm to him. She smiled.

"Genevieve."

"I am Neko. And this is Jimmy." He nudged the boy with his shoulder, who nodded indifferently in her direction.

"My father killed an elephant once," she said, trying to engage the boy. He frowned at her for a few seconds, before looking back to the musicians.

"Where are you headed, Genevieve?" Neko asked, taking a sip of his drink and pulling a face as it went down his throat.

"North." She shrugged it off, feigning indifference.

"Masinge?" he asked, his face lit with concern.

"More North than that," she replied.

"Don't go to that town. I hate Masinge." The boy, Jimmy, had spoken up unexpectedly.

Neko smiled and shrugged, passing her the drink again.

"I don't intend to," she replied, before taking a quick sip. The boy got up and wandered away,

following what appeared to be a human-porcupine. Its quills shook with a rattling like a dying breath. The two were left sitting alone.

"You intend to go North, but not to Masinge?" Neko asked, slowly putting the ideas together.

Genevieve shrugged, trying to look indifferent.

"You are taking the Northern Road?"

Genevieve stared at the musicians, who had just started up a new song, and nodded ever so slightly.

"But why, then you must fuck me! You can't die a virgin!"

Genevieve laughed, but blushed more deeply than she had thought possible.

"Aha!" Neko exclaimed merrily, "I am correct."

"Can't you just leave me alone?" she shoved the drink back into his chest as he leaned forward.

"No," he responded. "You're too curious for that. I don't think you want me to leave," he took a sip and handed it back to Genevieve.

He ran his hand down the twenty-eight scars on her arm. He touched them curiously, lightly, and then rested her hand in his own, looking at the scratches on the palm from her climbing up the koppie the day before. It was the kindest touch she had felt since… she didn't know.

She had not thought of herself as lonely until after she felt it. When he pulled his hand away, hers felt empty.

"I've been looking for somewhere to stay tonight," she said awkwardly, trying to fill the lull in conversation after his touch.

"That is one way to proposition a man."

"No, I didn't mean it that way."

"Oh really," he grinned. "Because that sounded to me like you were asking if I had somewhere to sleep."

"That you would be so lucky."

"But I am. Or, was. Unfortunately, now that you've gone and drunk all my liquor, I'm going to have to go and buy more, and there goes my Metals for the evening." He downed the last of his drink and showed her the empty mug.

"You should not offer what you cannot give."

"I have much to give."

"No, you have everything on offer and little to give," she said seriously, but she couldn't contain her grin for long.

"That is amongst the highest order of insult." He laughed.

"Then you will let me buy you a drink to make up for it,"

"You will have to!" He handed her his empty mug and Genevieve jumped to her feet, picking up her backpack as she began to walk away. She could not let him see the black thing that she had taken from the worm-people.

"You better not disappear with my drink!" he shouted as she flitted away.

When she returned a few minutes later he looked pleased. The elephant boy was sitting with him once more. "I thought you had gone."

"No, I just don't trust you with my things," she replied, dropping the backpack on the grass next to her once more. She sat and he shifted up next to her, taking the second mug that she had balanced between her legs.

"That one's mine."

"Not any more," he replied, taking a deep sip. He watched her face for a while as she watched the musicians, and they did not speak for a while. This was his favourite part. Meeting someone was like reaching into a dark space which you did not know where it began or ended. Your fingers could abruptly hit rock, or it could continue on beyond your reach. People were only beautiful when you didn't know where they began or ended. That was why he never stayed with anyone for too long. Once you knew the shape of them, the mystery was gone. He had the sense that he could reach into this girl without finding her shape, not in a whole moonth of questions. It was exhilarating.

"Where do you come from, Genevieve?"

"South."

"How far South?"

"All the way – Lake Floors."

"Is it good there?"

"It is beautiful. And simple."

"That sounds good. I would like something simple."

Genevieve made no reply.

Neko stood up and reached down to her. She gave him her hand and he pulled her to her feet.

"Where are we going?"

"Closer to the music." She reached for her backpack. "No –" he stopped her, "– Jimmy, look after out things."

The boy gave a surly nod.

"They will be fine," Neko promised. He took her hand and led her into the crowd.

*

Jimmy traipsed through the festival grounds alone. People dotted the grass, lying where they had fallen. Animal masks stared up at him from the ground with empty eyes. Fires smouldered, and nobody else seemed to be awake. That was, except for a group of yellow-coated Vigil who seemed to be searching through the people, looking for someone. Jimmy saw a red coat and went to it, but it was not the girl he had last seen Neko with.

He took the opportunity to scrutinise the couple in front of him. The blanket had been thrown off their naked bodies, and their pale dimpled flanks rested against each other. He felt a tingling in his belly. Neko had disappeared with that girl last night, they had come and fetched their things, shown Jimmy where to sleep, and then vanished. They had fucked, probably. His brothers had told him about fucking. Jimmy was uncertain about how he felt about all of it. It seemed to occupy a large part of Neko's mind. Jimmy had been caught touching himself once back home, by Brienna, and it was embarrassment enough that he made sure that he was never caught again.

The man shifted, opening his eyes. Jimmy jerked away and tried to pretend he had just been walking past. He gave Jimmy an angry look and pulled the blanket over his partner's muscular shoulder, nuzzling against his short hair.

There was no point in calling out. Neko would be really angry then, so Jimmy just kept walking. He went past the hut that Neko had traded for them to be able to sleep in. There were five other bodies on the floor, and a gap where Jimmy's sleeping mat had been. The hut was warm and stuffy, but he still didn't know why he hadn't been able to sleep. Neko wasn't there.

Jimmy tried to get something to eat. There were many cooking pots left out from the night before, but none of them contained something that looked vaguely appetising. The group of Vigil

were sticking their heads into nearby huts while Jimmy scavenged. The pots were filled with grass and dirt and in one case, vomit. Put off, Jimmy went down to the river instead.

He walked across the Northern Road, broad and crumbling, and then down the steep bank of the river. He completed the checklist for danger before he stripped down and shook his clothes free of ash. The sky was clearing, and it looked like it would be another hot day without rain. Jimmy washed his clothes and laid them on the top of the bank in the dappled sunlight. He washed himself, and then took the mat out of his pack and dusted it off. He lay waiting for the sun to warm him, and by the time it did he had fallen back to sleep. He was not sure how long he had been asleep, but when he woke he sat up quickly, covering himself. The noise that had awoken him was a movement in the bushes, and he followed the sound with his eyes until he located the source. It was Neko, moving quietly across the far bank. He didn't seem to have noticed Jimmy.

Jimmy nearly called out, but didn't. Perhaps it was because Neko was walking as if he didn't want to be noticed. Jimmy pulled on his still damp clothes and followed just as carefully behind.

Neko crossed the Northern road and went across the village to the stables. Jimmy waited outside, he didn't know why he was hiding, but why hadn't Neko stopped back at the hut that he knew Jimmy was sleeping in? Panic filled his chest. The pair of Vigil from the group he had seen earlier walked past quickly. Jimmy tried to calm himself. Neko was probably first preparing the horses. Then they could leave together without too much fuss. Neko walked out with a strange horse, neither Beans nor Jagati. Jimmy ducked away and crouched in the narrow gap between two huts. Neko walked past, whistling softly, and Jimmy's heartbeat thumped in his ears.

It was a trick. Neko was starting a trick. Relief swelled and he stood up, his legs shaky. He waited a few moments more, trying to decide on what to do, and then he walked out after Neko.

Neko had mounted the dark horse, and was fiddling with his saddle. It was Neko's normal riding saddle, Jimmy realised.

"Neko!" he called. Neko jumped, swinging around quickly. Jimmy ran to him, feeling very alone on the broad road.

"Neko, where are you going?"

"Jimmy, I –" Neko was shaking his head, he looked tired and scared.

"You're leaving." Jimmy's eyes filled with tears, and he tried to keep his voice even. It was no use, he was already crying.

"It's for the best, Jimmy. I've given you everything you needed."

"But why?"

Something seemed to snap and Neko's shock turned into sudden anger.

"Enough. I am leaving. You have to go alone." He swung the horse around and it kept its head high, chewing on the bit.

Jimmy shouted his name again. He couldn't think of another way to convince him. To lie or trick Neko into staying. Neko began to trot away and Jimmy stood shaking on the road, crying and sniffing. He didn't notice the man until he had been grabbed and pushed to the ground. A yellow coat obscured his vision. He screamed Neko's name again, this time in sheer panic.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Northern road

To each person their skill, but their craft will sustain all. Trade shall not surpass self-sustenance.

Genevieve moved quickly after she had woken up. The man with the cat eyes had been gentle, but it still hurt. She was glad he had gone before she woke. Her forehead ached from too much drink. She cooled herself in Inyoka, washing the dark stains from her thighs.

She hadn't expected to bleed at all, but she knew that some girls did. There was a song they sang at the Confirmation ceremonies just to tease, and she found herself humming it under her breath as she left along the Northern Road. There was a commotion in the town about stolen horses and she was glad to leave it behind.

The climber clambers up the tree, up, up away.
The climber stretches out a finger, close, close, away!
The climber tumbles head and heel, branch is there to catch her,
She didn't think her first love would be so large in stature.

It made her smile to sing it, as she found her way along the ruptured black stone. The road was not hard to follow. Most of it was still intact – only the strongest grasses had broken through. She had to wear her sandals as the surface burnt her feet.

There were carcasses along the road. She imagined it getting so hot the stone would turn sticky and trap small creatures, digesting them where they fell, gritty-black dissolving down to their bones. That first day she tried to walk through the White Out. The horizon wobbled, and she became nauseous and had to rest under a low bush, digging a hole in the sand.

She passed the Wall as night began to fall. It was not as imposing as she had thought it would be. She could see no light on it, and no Vigil. It was dark and immense, but the road ran a gap wide enough for twenty people to walk through all at once – it was completely unguarded.

In KwaDz there had been a Vigil every ten steps.

The gap was full of animal tracks, and there were signs that predators used the wall to their advantage: the rocky black road was ideal to slow a buck, perhaps even break its ankle or make it panic until it ran into the wall. There were bones on either side of the gap, not more than a moonth old.

She was so attuned to any sign of danger that she did not even mark when she arrived on the other side. She was technically no longer in Ku. This was a no-man's land, not the Grey City, but no longer home. Yet there was no moment, no gasp for air, not at all like pulling her head out from beneath water.

She slept in a tree, badly. Her body ached, but her paranoia was justified when she woke up and found fresh tracks along the road. She had only ever seen lion tracks drawn for her, but these were far too long and big and there were too many to belong to a leopard or anything else. She drank from a stream in the shadow of the wall and filled her water pouch. She had lost the comfort of Inyoka, of knowing that there was water within reach. It made her nervous. She peed and then drank again.

The second day was much the same, but well before White Out she came to a long rise that became increasingly steep. Long strips of rusted metal lay on the slope ahead. They had been aged by rain and heat. When she was close enough she wandered off the road to look at one. It had been flattened by time, made so brittle that she could break off pieces with her fingers. Was it of her grandmother's time? The pieces were roughly square, and underneath them she found a rag of cloth. People had lived here.

She looked back down the slope and it seemed unbelievable then: thousands upon thousands of corroded heaps, all over the hill and down the back of it, like ticks on a dying animal. She was in the realm where only a few had wandered before. Scavengers, come to retrieve trinkets from the Old World. They rarely crossed the Yellow Desert.

Once she crested the hill she had to stop again: in the far distance was the Grey City. The true Grey City: square buildings that looked like a broken fence. She had heard tales her whole life, and it was difficult to think of it without the words of the Tellers.

The scab. It looked diseased; like a toenail needing to be cut. It also looked small, but she could see how far she was.

She wanted to turn back. She felt as if she had been put into perspective, like an ant, picked up and held on a finger. To be crushed or survive was not in her control but a matter of the shifting enormity of landscapes.

The distant city was still. It stood as a matter of fact on the landscape – not inviting, not repelling. It had no romance. Not like a tree in a field that invites you into its shade, or a koppie that calls challenges to be climbed. It yawned indifference to her ambitions. No wild olive wolves could feed there. Only Shadows, too decrepit and fat to flee before her imagination, circling the buildings like vultures over a carcass. It was not a place of Others, it was the place humans had left behind. She would need to go beyond it for her answers.

Ahead of her was a cruel expanse, everything was dead. Yellow and dead. Torrents of pale sand whipped along the land in fitful gusts. There were holes, as if this were once a riverbed and some buck had left deep tracks, gulches and ridges, which had dried and cracked. The Northern road disappeared, dipping under the sand, surfacing at a ruin in the waste. After that it disappeared again, but in the far distance was a stony ridge, and the road seemed to climb it.

Was there life beyond the ridge? Keepers? Was this where they went? – where they were *re-tired* and *dis-satisfied*? What if she made it the whole way across, just to discover that on the other side there was only more of this hard nothingness? An old metal sheet tapped on the ground below, as if awaiting her decision.

She would try for the ruin midway, now. She would try, and if it was too hard she could come back here and consider another plan.

She sat and put on her sandals. She pulled up her hood, adjusted the bow and quivers on her shoulder and, despite the growing heat, launched down the hill. As she approached the pockmarked yellow expanse her throat and chest began to burn, despite holding her sleeve against her mouth. The wind came in tantrums, sweeping up into her face from nowhere. It was like a petulant child; striking unexpectedly and then scampering away.

There was a more solid wind underneath these gusts, steadily pushing her to the left. The ruin remained in the distance, and with her eyes burning it was difficult to tell if she was truly getting closer. She held onto the knowledge that she had seen it from the top of the hill, that it was not a mirage. She had to jump over cracks in the ground that deepened into blackness. She fell a few

times, and the ground was as hard as rock.

It was uneven going, and she kept her eyes on the floor in front of her, only occasionally looking up at the ruin. As she got closer she could see that the ruin would provide little sanctity. Most of the structure was collapsed and lay in piles of sand-coated rubble. She went to one of the few remaining walls and her feet sunk into the deep sand that had quietened there. She washed out her eyes and rubbed her face with the clean inside of her coat. A lavender sprig dropped out of a fold in her pocket. She held it to her nose, breathing deeply.

She would push on. The dragon must come from beyond the Grey City, from without, somewhere. She tucked away the sprig and rested on her haunches a while longer, spitting out the brown gob that coated her mouth. It would be White Out soon, if it wasn't already. The wind made it hard to feel the real temperature, but she was sweating underneath the hood, even now while she was resting. She contemplated the tools in her pack, holding it open to gaze over her equipment.

The tent cover would be no use: one sudden gust would pull it from her, although if she had taken the mosquito gauze she would have been able to cover her face from the worst of the sand. She stared down at the black and golden thing. She should lose the excess weight, but she felt attached to it all the same. She brushed over its dimpled front and inside the bird in the blue sky came to life. The letters in the sky now said '12:45 cat' and then went dark again. A cat and a bird on a screen, and the numbers always changing. It was a wonderful mystery. She was worn out by wonderful mysteries. She nearly threw it out to the wind, but then replaced it in her pack instead.

She ignored the meagre food she had left. She hadn't gone hunting, but she hadn't seen any animals that day either. She tried to recollect seeing so much as a real bird, but she couldn't.

She tightened her pack underneath her hood and set out again. As she leapt and stumbled over the hard landscape she became sure it was just forgetfulness: she never noticed birds anyway. There had probably been tens that she just didn't remember. There was a strange clacking beat on the wind, and she stopped, shielding her eyes and looking for the source. It sounded like quick clapping hands, with a droning throng coming in and out of earshot. It sounded like the dragon. She couldn't see it, and it seemed unlikely that it was hidden from view. The only thing obstructing her sight was the wind, whipping sand into her eyes.

She carried on. The distant hill was further away than the ruin had been, and the heat grew relentless – even the wind's tantrums seemed to waver underneath it. She reached the foot of the koppie at dusk. She wanted to carry on, but the moon was hidden by thick brown clouds. From what she could see of the koppie it was very rocky, and there were many ruins on it. She found a set of rocks which sheltered her from the worst of the wind and she softened the ground by walking it down. She grabbed tufts of long grass and made herself a bed, but an unmovable rock sat dead in the middle of her clearing, and she had to lie around it.

For the second night she slept badly, and had vicious dreams punctuated by waking with a jerk and grabbing the cover back from the wheedling wind. She was not sure what time it was when she woke, but her sweaty skin had been covered by a layer of dust. The wind had changed in the night. She woke up with gritty eyes and a bad cough. She blew one nostril at a time, holding the other closed, and wiping the brown sludge with her sleeve. It took a long time before she could muster the energy to get up, and then she discovered her shoes were ruined: the seams were torn and opened further with every step she took. She felt too groggy to eat.

The rocky koppie seemed insurmountable, and every step was exhausting. The road was in such a poor state that she slid on the stones with almost every step. She stayed parallel to it, and didn't stop walking. If she stopped, she would have to start again, and she didn't know why she

would. She coughed and her throat hurt. She was almost at the top when she saw a white goat. After all this time looking at her feet, it was an effort to focus on it. It looked completely wild.

The goat watched her with its yellow reptilian eye, and then scarpered as she carried on walking. On top of the hill was a plateau, windless, dustless, and thick with grass. The Northern road – if she could still call it that – became broader. There was a barrier on either side of it, the height of Genevieve's bottom rib. The white goat was balanced atop the left barrier, and it bleated obnoxiously at the sight of her and then bounded away again, out of sight. She knew she should shoot it. But then she would need to skin it, prepare the meat, make a fire, and so on. It seemed a waste of time and effort.

The road turned and she could see the valley she had come from, and the faces of the adjacent hills. They were covered with ruins, so many it made her pause. How were there once so many people? This little area, with no water and no fertile land, could hold more people than any town in Ku. The houses were empty now. Her grandmother had said that people fell into the cracks. As if the Earth had snapped its jaws closed and entire villages vanished. The rest had gone to live on the stars. That was sheer nonsense.

She turned to the cracked-tooth city buildings, closer now, bigger. She followed the road past a thousand more rust heaps, and double as many ruins. There were at least signs of life u p here: plants and trees were yellow and dry, but they were here. They had climbed through doors and floors, inviting themselves into rooms and leaving a bouquet of bird's nests in corners. She paused in fright as something streaked from one of the ruins. A mottled grey cat, which paused to glance at her with round eyes.

The blackened fields here sent a note of caution: lightning struck often, and burnt through quickly. Guinea Fowl warbled as they foraged, and she was reassured by their presence. If there were animals, there was water.

She occasionally had to climb through and under metal frames which had collapsed into the road. The metal sheets were corroded, but sometimes when a piece had fallen together and she pulled them apart, the green colour was preserved quite well.

The landscape around her changed. There were remnants of walls: not nearly as big as the Wall, but double her height where they still stood in full. Most of them were collapsed, their metal nerves exposed to the air. Behind them the ruins were fuller than she had seen before. When White Out came she explored one. The roof was intact in a few places, and the shade gave her relief. The floor was covered with animal droppings, but nothing big enough for her to be worried about. The rooms were empty, but in one she found the frame of a bed. Underneath it lay a decomposing cat, its skin sinking below its ribs.

She waited there until the day cooled, and drank most of her water. It soothed her persistent coughing. She ate a few pieces of dried fruit, breaking off the mould and throwing it out for the birds. When it was cool enough she wandered outside. There was a storm building above her. It was huge. Lightning skidded across the sky with soft booms and rumbles. The road was exposed, and if it really came to rain she would need to move quickly to find shelter. She pulled up her hood, and walked with purpose.

It was an hour later when her search for shelter became more frantic. She followed a curling sliver of road off to the side. The trees here were surprisingly thick, old and tall. She was tempted to pause at one with purple flowers dripping off it, forming a puddle of blue -violet on the ground.

With the groans of the storm came the fleeting sounds of a much more worrying nature: a

drone as if the dragon were somewhere near. Her back prickled from the feeling of being watched, and everywhere in the storm's darkness she thought she could see the great black dog.

This was a wood of wild olive wolves, they chased her in packs which vanished under her direct gaze, only to creep in at her other shoulder. Perhaps this was what was meant when Earthers spoke about Shadows. Lives of the Old World that persisted in cracks and corners, ready to consume the new.

A house loomed over her as grey and uninviting as the thunderclouds above it. It struck out into the sky with straight angles as hard as an elbow. The surrounding trees were twisted, their bark pulled into the shape of empty faces. The parachute of a milkweed floated serenely, just above the ground. In its silk hairs it held no seed.

The thunder groaned and the house shivered in response. She felt her belly clench, as if her hunger had grabbed a fistful of intestine. She climbed in through what might have once been a window, pushing her satchel through first.

On the floor she sat still a while, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She could hear the scratching of mice and insects and beetles. There was a flash of lightning and three shapes were outlined against the light. Her heart swelled up to her throat. The rush of blood dampened her hearing.

Slowly, the room came into view, the shapes distilled. They were motionless enough for it to be known that they had never moved. She climbed up and edged toward them, her feet shuffling along the floor. She touched the top of the closest shape and withdrew immediately: it was soft. Soft, but not alive. She squeezed the thing again, running her hand along it to find its edges.

It was a bench, layered in soft materials, with cushions built into its seat. She lowered herself onto the largest one: three panels on either side. All at once she was dragged into the crack in the middle and her legs and arms flailed in panic as the thing pressed its cloth gums onto her hips and began to swallow her.

She wrenched herself free and stood up, staring reproachfully at the thing – only to laugh. The house shook once more with thunder, and shared amusement. Her stomach gave an empty grumble. She moved along to the next hulking shape. This one was smaller, with only two panels.

She pushed down on the cushion with her hand and felt something inside it move like a loose tooth. She moved away from it to the smallest bench: it had only one cushion and one panel, for one person to sit on.

It was dirty with the fine hairs of an animal, and she settled down, placing her pack next to her and curling her knees toward her chest in a ball. Her stomach felt better in this position, her thighs squashing against her belly and leaving no place for emptiness. Outside, the rain began to hiss against the trees and the steel gate and the concrete walls. She almost closed her eyes and slept there, wrapped in the arms of this warm bulk. A movement stopped her. In front of her ran a mouse, dragging something the same size as itself. When she stood the mouse fled back into the darkness, and she picked up what it had left. A number of sand coloured wafers fell out and she lifted one to her nose. It did not smell inedible. She took a bite off its corner. It was sweet, and she stuffed the rest into her mouth.

Looking for its source, she carried the rest with her around the corner, dodging streams of water which leaked through holes in the roof. The next room bustled with activity: mice and rats flowed back and forth over the floor, carrying little parcels through cracks in the walls and under the door – the rats too busy to bother the mice; the mice too taken with this feast to be afraid of the rats. All of them too hungry to notice her. She suppressed a coughing fit.

Some, like the one in the next room, were trying to drag items too big for them. Others waited underneath the shelf where treats were being showered down by those flicking food out through their hind legs; burrowing and gnawing further into the darkness.

This must have been a storeroom, abandoned not that long ago. Perhaps the worm-people had been here, from the dragon? There was food everywhere, dissected into tiny pieces by a variety of small animals. Soon bigger animals would come and claim their share.

The fragments crunched under her feet and despite her smooth movements, the mischief scattered in all directions. Those on the shelf sat back suddenly and vanished in a rustle of dry food. Genevieve picked through the mess, trying to find something to eat.

She moved along the shelf and felt a handle on the cupboard. She jerked it open and some of its contents tumbled out – including two mice. One hard container fell down to the floor with a clang and its contents began seeping out. She reached down and rubbed some of the red liquid between her fingers and sniffed it. It smelled sour. She wiped some onto the tip of her tongue and pulled it slowly back into her mouth. It was a vegetable. Mashed and watered down. Tomato perhaps, but mixed with something else: metallic dust blown off the city or blood sucked from a small cut. She turned the container around a few times. It was metal, the tops were perfectly round – it was of the Old World.

Or perhaps, not the Old World, but the world outside Ku. Perhaps this was where the worm-people stayed? It seemed unlikely that she would stumble upon their only hideout.

The food wasn't rotten. Everything she encountered told her that the Old World had carried on without Ku, just perhaps, not here. The city was in ruins, she saw no living signs of other Earthers – other humans. She collected containers that looked the same as this one from the cupboard and took them back to her seat.

Genevieve sat sucking out the red juice and eating the last of the mouse' s biscuits, glad that her seat was not underneath one of the many holes in the roof. It was better not to eat too much at once; her stomach was already in spasms digesting this little bit. The tomato had made her thirsty and she climbed from her seat once more to find some water. Little pools of it were now collecting outside and she placed her water pouch under a stream coming from the roof, leaving it there after an idea struck her. She pushed open all different doors until she found it: an obese white cocoon with a spout attached at one end. It could be filled with water. You bathed in it, a 'bath', one of her grandmother's words, not as something you did, but as something that was. It stood on four stubby legs.

She climbed softly through spider webs into its belly and stared at the spout. She turned around so that her head lay directly beneath the pipe, and she brushed the dust away with her sleeve, coughing, and waiting for something to happen. Perhaps a blue screen would appear if you touched it. It did not. Maybe it needed to be filled with water before that happened. She sat up and knelt with her hands folded on her lap. It was a bizarre thing, a bath, but dull. She climbed out and wandered further into the house.

Through one of the other doors was a large room. The ceiling groaned under the weight of water which congregated in the centre. A bulbous depression with liquid dripping from the cracks – as deep as those you sometimes saw on the heel of a person's foot. The rivulets made puddles on the bed below, which was large enough to fit three or four people.

In the next room she found another bed, raised off the ground. Stuck along the walls were papers, reproductions of the same young face, its outlines just traceable through the curling edges and smudges from damp and age. These papers reached every corner, compulsively covering the

wall, with no thought for the larger effect. Perhaps the face belonged to the inhabitant of this room?

The faded cheeks were round and full, the front teeth set slightly apart. It was difficult to see if it was a girl or a young male. She couldn't make out the meaning of the flowery writing above it. It was all joined up and the letters strangely distorted.

A breeze pulled its finger down her back. The wall was like the face of a fly, its eyes repeating the same image a hundred times over. As she turned to walk out of the room, a movement on the far end stopped her. A window, but facing inward, toward the house.

She leaned forward to move, and it leaned forward with her. She advanced toward it, and the shadow in the frame grew larger. She reached out. The shadow raised its hand to meet hers. Its touch was cool.

A reflective pool, hung on a wall. But the figure in it was unfamiliar. Its face was blackened with dirt and its eyes shone with menace. It leered, with teeth sharper than hers. Its hair was knotted and frayed, hanging down in clots above the shoulders. She reached her hand out to touch the reflected person.

"Two" she said, and the girl in the mirror snarled back at her, a jackal.

"Three" replied a deeper voice.

A shape advanced from behind her in the reflection. She bucked, reaching around for its head.

Her hands met a smooth surface that she could not hold. The Shadow grabbed for her arm and she pulled it free. She leapt away and hit the wall as her attacker crouched on the floor and then sprung forward. In that brief moment she could see him clearly: it was one of the worm-people from the dragon. The shell around his head was black. She forced herself to remember that this was an Other, a human, in costume. She kicked for his head but he twisted to the side and she lost her balance and fell to the floor.

He was on top of her, crushing her arms against her chest and before she could free herself he plunged a long thin piece of metal into her arm. She yowled in agony as it sunk through taut muscle and she tried to bite him. But she felt dizzy and weak, and like in a dream, the strength sapped from her muscles and the worm-person climbed off her. She rolled onto her stomach and started climbing for the door but the room had become dark and she wasn't sure which way the door was. She could hear him panting. He grabbed her by the shoulder and rolled her onto her side, where Genevieve could do nothing but gasp like a fish thrown from water. The worm had taken off his helmet, and black hair tumbled out. His features were unkind, cheeks blotted red from exertion. "We got you." He smiled.

Genevieve came to her senses slowly. It was filthy dark, but where she lay was soft. She sat up and keeled over, her shoulder thumping painlessly against a wall. Her body felt numb. She was on a mat of sorts and she felt its edges. There was hard flat stone all around her, cold and eerily smooth. She stayed where she was. The top of her head felt unnaturally light and exposed, and when she lifted her hand to it she recoiled in horror. Her hair had been cut so that it prickled like short fur. She ran her hands over her shaved head and shouted in fear. Light flooded the room.

"I am glad you are awake."

Genevieve threw up her hands to shield herself from the light and at the sound of the woman's voice she scrambled backwards until she hit the wall behind her. Her chest went into spasm and she coughed wetly.

"You are not well. We've taken you in to look after you for a little while."

Genevieve tried to stop coughing, but it was like a catch in her throat. When she tried to clear

it away she would begin coughing again, to the point that she felt she might throw up. Her eyes were slowly adjusting to the harsh light, but they were watering so much she couldn't make out the figure in front of her.

Eventually she managed to calm her coughing, and sat leaned against the wall, breathing carefully through her nose. The woman was crouched on the other side of the room. Behind her was a door, which she had left slightly ajar. Her black hair hung like solid cloth. She was wearing brightly coloured clothes, just as Genevieve had seen before on the Others. She seemed barely human, so intense was her strangeness. She spoke strangely too, as if she were a child who needed to concentrate on forming each word.

"We have given you a bath and changed your clothes. We had to cut your hair, I'm sorry, it was too knotted and full of bugs to wash." Genevieve's hand flicked up to her head. "We found you through the Sybar you took from the outpost." Genevieve began coughing again. "It emits a GPS signal. But you have no idea what I am talking about." The woman smiled, and then carried on.

"You're under our care, you're not our hostage, but for your own safety we will lock you in until such time as you want to leave." The woman had stood up to go, and Genevieve eyed her with suspicion.

"I want to go." She fought down a cough.

"What?"

"I want to –" her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. The woman ducked her head out of the door, scanning the outer room. She came back in and closed the door, speaking quietly.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that. Stay for a meal, stay and I will explain what we're doing here."

"Where are the children?"

"I'll explain if you stay." The woman was backing away. "Just stay and we'll explain it."

"Where the –" Genevieve began but her throat didn't permit her to go on. The woman slipped out of the door and suddenly her face appeared in a window which had slid open.

"I'm going to leave this open for you. We're getting some food together for you. Good food, full of vitamins." And then she was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

North Ku, Gantry

Neko had hoped never to see Gantry again. The people here were scared; he could feel it in the air. He took precautions so that he would not be found. He left his beard, already growing thickly, to creep up his cheeks and over his top lip. He exchanged his boots, his hat, for an ugly brown hemp thing that looked more like a sack than a hood. He took to carrying a long stick with him, leaning on it as if for aid.

He had tried to find Jimmy, but he was not in the Vigil's hut. He had tapped patterns and whispered to the wall from the other side, desperate for a sound from within. The town spoke of nothing but the upcoming trial, and the three Keepers that had come to oversee it.

Already the Earthers had decided that he should be cast out of Ku. They called him an age nt of the Shadows. To be banished. The word sent chills through Neko.

Neko spent his days in taverns, learning the procedure for this trial. Three days were usually spent creating a new cloak for Dustin. His vanity meant that now, clothes were being made for all the Keepers who would oversee the trial. Neko couldn't see that going down well with Kipper.

Her name gave him a knot in his stomach. They had summoned both Maple and Kipper, expecting to find Neko, but they only had Jimmy.

Kipper had no compassion, only cold reason. She had chased Neko from his home town, and he had thought it was over, but she had continue to hunt for him.

Maple had hit him over the head last time Neko had seen her, but Jimmy and he hadn't really stolen anything valuable: all those Metals had been fakes. They couldn't really be in trouble for that.

Neko found a place to stay on the outskirts of the town. He traded the horse he had stolen and worked in the stables in the mornings, clearing out the dung and bringing it to those who were tending the fields. He missed Jagati, and wondered what had become of her. He hoped every day that she would appear in the stables here, but she did not.

Working at the stables also meant that he had to pass the tolls at least twice a day, sometimes more, just to get to the Centre for food. Small dirty children would sneak through by holding onto the sides of wagons on their way over the road. They would often get caught, and dragged back to their starting point just to begin again. Neko w as too large for such antics, so explored his options: certain sized wagons were allowed through at a set fee, and groups of thirty people would pay to be allowed to climb onto any available space behind the overloaded oxen and hang on just long enough to get to the inner circle of the village. The trick was to get a place not too early or too late. Too early, and you were boxed in, squashed by hips and sweaty strangers coughing and talking onto over and through you. You wanted to be on the outside of the w agon, in the fresh air, ideally not on the roof, off which many people fell –there were no handholds and it was so packed a single jolt could send you off balance, dragged down by others near the edge – but rather on the sides, pressed against the wagon's structure. Those on the roof would sometimes still fall on you. The back of your legs were stiff by the time you reached the other side. Parents would also pay to have their children ride on the backs of the white oxen, two at a time. It was a ridiculous sight.

The trial began on his fifth day back in Gantry. The wagon was full of people absconding from their duties, come to watch the spectacle. Neko hadn't even washed his face before he joined the queue,

too late, and he paid his way across on foot. The passageways were swamped, and in front of the Palace, much of it gorged by fire, a dais had been erected from wood. On one side was a bench behind a table which held water and other drink. On the other side was a reed mat, flat and empty. Neko could only see the mat after he pushed his way near the front. A few moments later Vigil appeared, escorting the three Keepers. Neko pulled his hood over his face and stepped back onto someone's foot.

The first Keeper was Dustin, naturally. His gown was ridiculous: hemmed with bright red beads, dyed a dark purple. He went bare-chested, the sash of blue words pronounced on his sculpted, hairless chest. The second was Maple. She wore one of those ridiculous dresses from Cradlewood. What had Jimmy called them? –cloud dresses. This dress was an egg brown with black streaks down it – like she had been shat on by a bird. The third he had hoped never to see again: Kipper. She wore plain, simple clothes. She had grown old. The stern features he remembered so well from when he was on trial had not softened. They were enveloped in wrinkles, her jowls sagged almost imperceptibly, but her jaw was set forward and her lightest-blue eyes seemed to miss nothing. Except him. He moved behind the shoulder of the man in front of him until she had taken her seat.

Jimmy was lead out, his hands and feet bound and a Vigil on either side of him. Kipper stared at the boy intensely for a brief moment, and then snapped at Dustin, who looked instantly reduced, like a cooked potato squashed flat under a spoon. He leapt up and crossed over to the Vigil, violently waving his hands and reproaching them for binding the boy, which had undoubtedly been his idea in the first place. Jimmy was not dressed in his own clothes, but rather an ill-fitting rag with a tear at the ass, which he immediately covered with his hands when he stood on the rug. The people around Neko sniggered. His shoulders shook as he cried, staring down at his feet, and Neko swallowed and took a deep breath through his nose to stop from crying with him.

Keeper Dustin took back his seat, making sure his coat settled dramatically over the back of the bench. He offered a drink to Maple and Kipper, who both waved him off. Only then did he look at Jimmy. He stood up once more, leaning his knuckles on the table in front of him as if filled with concern.

"It is a sad day when one so young stands accused of such serious crimes. Please, first, state your full name."

Jimmy gulped his name down, drowning it in sobs, and Keeper Dustin repeated the question.

"Your full name please. Loud enough for us to hear it."

"Little Jimmy."

"Your name is 'Little'?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Jimmy," he stuttered.

"But you said Little?"

"It's the name of my father. I was once called Iguba."

"So your name is Jimmy Little Iguba?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"Please boy, if you're going to be so difficult this trial could continue on endlessly. Please give us your name."

"I don't think we need anything more than 'Jimmy', Dustin." Kipper's voice was clear and strong, it cut through the hushed crowd and even Jimmy looked up a second, as if out of relief.

Neko flinched; he wanted to warn Jimmy somehow: she was not to be trusted. She seemed kind and understanding until she sentenced you never to return. Keeper Dustin recovered quite

quickly from her reprimand.

Kipper must be coming to the end of her tenure: nearly ten sets and a half had passed since Neko had left home. She was Dustin's senior in every sense, and even he seemed to recognise this, despite his grossly inflated sense of importance.

"Your offences are listed as follows." Keeper Dustin paused dramatically, closing his eyes. "Mockery, trickery, reverence, impersonating a Craft, spreading dangerous falsehoods, causing physical harm unto a Keeper, theft, damage to shared property, undermining the fair result of a trial, assuming a false persona, travelling with a person wanted by the Trust for severe crimes against Ku, arson, entering Ku from the Out, encouraging malfeasance in public officers –" the muttering of the crowd overwhelmed G's speech. 'Entering Ku from the Out' was a crooked way of saying 'Being an Other.' How had they discovered Jimmy was from the Out? A chilled gust of wind blew through the crowd, and clouds settled in front of the sun.

Maple shouted above the noise for quiet, while Kipper sat back, folding her arms over her chest. Keeper Dustin resumed his seat, whipping his coat over the back of the bench once more. When the noise had quietened down, Kipper leaned forward and addressed Jimmy.

"How do you plead?"

Jimmy shrugged. Keeper Dustin shot from his seat once more, pointing an accusatory finger.

"Such insolence will not be tolerated, answer the question posed to you –"

"Please Dustin, maintain your composure!"

In the silence that followed the sky gave out a low groan. Some people began to hurry off. The temperature had dropped drastically, and the clouds were a deep purple. It looked like it would hail.

"Jimmy," Kipper began, "What we are asking is did you do these things, or did you not do these things?"

Without looking up, Jimmy shrugged again. Dustin gave her a pointed look.

"Let's start from the beginning. What was the first? – ah yes," she continued without pause, answering her own question, "Mockery." She looked to Keeper Maple as if for confirmation. "Mockery is not a punishable offence. Dismissed?"

Keeper Maple paused, but then nodded. "Dismissed."

"How is Mockery not a punishable offence?" Keeper Dustin shouted.

"I am sure I do not have to remind you about the central tenets of our law, but I will run us all through them," she nodded at the assembled crowd, "before any of us become unduly impassioned." Neko could hear her message being relayed back to those who could not hear it themselves. "The first is to establish harm. Does Mockery harm an Earther, animal or system preserving the well-being of Ku?"

"Yes. This mockery was in fact aimed at myself, and as a Keeper –"

"– You should be above the need to reprimand a child for petty insults." Dustin's face flushed. "Come now," Kipper continued, smoothing over the rebuke, "let us focus on what is important. The sooner we do that, the sooner we will be able to garner true information from Jimmy that may help us on the path to catching the real fiend."

Dustin swallowed down his retort, nodding sullenly.

"So," Kipper began once more, "Mockery, dismissed?"

"Dismissed," repeated Maple.

"Dismissed," repeated G, in a strained voice.

And so it went, until only four charges stood. Spreading dangerous falsehoods, theft, arson

and entering Ku from the Out. The first spots of rain had started falling on the crowd's heads, the afternoon becoming chilled. Jimmy shivered where he sat.

"I will ask you again," Kipper looked at Jimmy. "Are you guilty of any of the se things – did you do them?"

Jimmy had calmed down enough to be able to speak, but his voice was still too soft to be heard, even from where Neko stood. The crowd had thinned significantly, but the stolid shoulder remained in front of him, concealing his face from view.

"I did not do them to hurt anyone."

"But did you do them?"

"Yes."

Neko felt dismantled. Never admit to anything. Keeper Dustin looked smug, as did Maple. The crowd muttered, vindicated. Some of them hissed at Jimmy, spitting on the floor near the stage. A crack above their heads set forth the rain, which came down in a heavy torrent, interspersed with hail. There was immediate confusion, and Neko tried to run toward the dais, but he was pushed back. He shouted out Jimmy's name, but Jimmy had been wrenched away by the Vigil, and Neko ran for cover as hail stones the size of dove eggs pelted down. He ducked into a hut filled with people seeking shelter. The clever ones had run for the spacious Centre.

Neko pushed his way into the darkness of the hut and sat down against the wall with his head in his hands. Perhaps if he could find Jimmy's little friend? But he had no idea what the boy – what was his name again? – looked like. It was hopeless.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Grey City

Ku will not progress. Ku will understand. Understanding is not coherence. Understanding is the inward illumination of one aspect of the world. Never can all the aspects of the world be understood at once, because the world is not a coherent whole. Relieving oneself of this desire leads to freedom. Stories, people, and answers which give the false appearance of coherence are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety. Nothing is complete, there is no end goal.

It took Genevieve some time to be able to stand, like a new-born buck finding its legs. She staggered against the wall until she reached the hole in the door. She had a good view into the room beyond. There was a wooden table at which two Others sat. The first was hunched over papers, and the second had his feet on the table and was eating something from inside a paper box. The woman she had spoken to was not there. The second man's eyes flitted to hers, and he removed his feet from the table. Both of them sat in single chairs.

He 'tsked' at the man reading, who glanced up at Genevieve and back at his paper. They had a quick conversation, but it was incomprehensible to Genevieve. It was like the quick chatter of small animals, light and furious. She did not recognise a single word.

The man chewed and stared at her. He looked like a cow chewing at the cud.

"I want to leave." She waited for a reaction. He stopped chewing and swallowed, and said something to his companion. His companion shrugged and the man turned back to her. He shrugged, excessively lifting his shoulders with his hands upturned. The woman came back into the room carrying a tray with bowls and from her inflection it was clear she asked a question. The man shrugged again and the woman turned to Genevieve.

"I will give you this food, but you must go to the other side of the room before I come in." She nodded at Genevieve, who backed off and sat down on her mat. The woman entered and placed the tray near her feet. She left the door wide open this time, and sat down, eyeing Genevieve's bare and scarred arm.

"You eat, and I will explain."

Genevieve looked down at the tray of food in front of her. There was a strange white grain, like bloated fly eggs. It was covered in a dark brown fluid which had brown squares in it. She thought she recognised a pepper, so she plucked it out and chewed it to be polite. The sauce tasted like a nosebleed. She picked up the apple from the side of the tray. It was impossibly big and round. Its skin shone. She took a bite, and the flesh was sweet.

"We're part of an organisation. We find people. Ku is a private community. Owned by, umm…" the woman seemed to be trying to conjure a word out of the air, her fingers caressing something intangible, "You call them the Trust. The Trust trains internal agents called Keepers, who are promised a life outside Ku after their tenure. But it's not what they want. The life they get is so much less, they can't adjust – they're too old. The children, the one's who aren't marked, they do well up there." She waved her hand upwards. "So we began rescuing children and taking them to people who would look after them."

Genevieve stifled a cough. The woman pushed a cup filled with bizarre coloured liquid toward her. The girl in the cave, she had said 'You mustn't believe their stories', before she left with the children they had rescued. Genevieve kept that at the front of her mind: the children these people

had stolen, and the dragon ripping through Vors' body.

"It's juice with all sorts of vitamins you're lacking. Calcium and…" she stopped. "I forget how limited the vocabulary is sometimes, I'm sorry. It's juice. Made with fruits."

Genevieve took a sip and it tasted nothing like juice. It tasted like someone had squeezed a sugar bush into a cup. She forced a trite smile as it trickled down her throat. She held the half-eaten fruit between her two fingers.

"I want to leave."

The woman shook her head.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go out of Ku."

"You are out of Ku. You want to come with us?"

Genevieve considered it for a moment and then shook her head.

"I want to see the Out for myself."

"There's not much out there. Especially not in the city. Nothing for anyone to live off. The only reason Ku survives is because the corporation is bound by law to protect the first citizens. Do you understand that? In ten years – sets – everything will be gone. The river won't be cleaned, vaccines won't be added to the system. The toxins will flow straight through and poison the crops. And the Keepers will be withdrawn. It will fall into chaos, and then the Out is going to come in and claim all the arable land they can. There will be a war, and you will lose."

Genevieve shook her head, trying to loose these sticky lies from their holds in her skull. "No."

"God damnit, it's there in your lessons: Nature will not preserve you!" The woman grabbed

Genevieve's wrist and shook it as she spoke. "You Earthers cannot be so blind." Genevieve pulled her wrist away sharply.

"No. What do you do with the children?" *Answers which give the false appearance of coherence are dangerous.*

"We take them to be educated. We nurture them, and bring them into the twenty-second century. We give them the futures they will not have here."

"Where are they now?"

"Who?"

"The children you have taken?"

"They are fine." The woman's eyes flickered to the left, back to the door. A chair scraped in the other room. "They are taken to a safe place. To live with families who will care for them."

"To the Arks." The man had spoken from the door, he had a thick accent, like his words had waded through water to come out. Genevieve had not seen his face when he had been reading, and it seemed as if it had been put together skew. He folded his arms across his chest, and said something to the woman, nodding his head. She seemed quite frantic, waving him off.

"Apollo she can't understand yet," she said to him. She turned back to Genevieve. "Apollo is a liar. Don't listen to him."

He cut through her, speaking directly to Genevieve. "Children in space is shit. We take good children from here. People pay for good children." He turned to the woman, "Let your pet free – she has wasted enough time."

"What do they do with them?" Genevieve asked as the woman leapt to her feet and walked over to the man, pushing him in the chest. He was unmoved.

"They pretend we will survive." He turned and walked away, giving the woman a harsh look as he went. She turned back to look at Genevieve, her mouth agape.

"It's not like that. Reproduction on the Arks is a difficult matter. The foetuses –"

Genevieve was not listening. She had gotten to her feet. "Where is my hood?"

"You cannot go."

"Why do you want *me*? If you're rescuing children only, what do you want with me?"

"You don't seem stupid like the rest. You could survive on the Arks. You could adapt. It's better there, healthier."

Genevieve pushed her way past, falling into the wall.

"You would really like it! We have everything there. Like they Sybar – you liked that –"

She was still very unsteady. The apple was clenched between her forefinger and thumb.

"Where is my hood?" she asked the man who was standing awkwardly at the other side of the room. It had been newly laid out on the table, and the man named Apollo gestured to it.

"You will not survive out there," the woman tried to grab Genevieve again. "Everything is desolate. The city is dead. Everywhere else is war between those who have and those who do not." The woman followed behind Genevieve as she pulled on her hood. It scratched against her bare scalp. "Help me stop her!" the woman pleaded to the men.

They looked indifferent. "Dust and dusted. We don't have time for looking after pets that can't make us UDs. And you won't even let me fuck her." Apollo grinned, evidently enjoying the woman's discomfort. The other man stood dumb and uncomprehending, uncertain of how to react.

Genevieve slung on her pack, but her bow and arrows were not there. "Where are they?" She mimed pulling the bow.

Apollo shook his head, laughing.

Genevieve turned and walked from the room, in the direction she hoped was the door. It was not, and she had to walk back through the room. The three Others stood where she had left them, the woman shouting frantically at the man in a language Genevieve did not know. She walked through the kitchen, sweeping a handful of what she hoped were dried meat sticks into her pack as she left through the open door.

She found herself in a beautiful walled enclosure, tall trees and lush green plants were all around her. There was grass cut short and soft underfoot growing around a pathway of round stones. She nearly ran when she saw the first stone statue: the most intricately carved hare, so carefully done she had expected it to bound away. There were all manner of creatures frozen and shrunk out of proportion: birds yapped wide mouthed at toads sitting on stone leaves. She walked toward a stone pillar and basin next to the wall when suddenly the barred gate pulled to the right. She could see no hand moving it, and the only thing resembling a human was a nearby fat stone child with wings. Light poured suddenly from inside a box atop of the wall, as if it were an eye opening, watching her. It lanced through the soft light, its beam falling in a line across the gate.

She ran through the widening gap, leaping over the sharp glow. Her wheezing breath made her stop not far away, and she coughed painfully, stumbling forward. Outside the walls the plants were stiff and dry. Nobody followed her.

She was on a road, not broad like the Northern road, and the black stone could barely be seen. It was sand and rock, with tracks made by wheels running along it.

She walked through the forgotten places of the Grey City, all the time further away from the horizon of jagged buildings. The trees had grown with ancient revenge out of the moulded hollows of ruins.

They grew huge, and she wondered at how far they must reach to pull water. She walked

without direction, her lungs damp. A black shape emerged next to her and she turned indifferently to gaze at it. It did not disappear, her wild olive wolf. Its fur was coarse and heavy and it panted as it walked, tired from their long journey. It sniffed the purple blanket of flowers underfoot, tracking a scent. She slowed to follow it, because its yellow eyes knew something about this Shadow place.

She did not know what time it was when she had left the others, or what time it was now. Was it nearing dark? Should she start looking for somewhere to sleep? Her body ached.

The forest around her receded, more as if it had pulled back from her than she had walked from it. She could see its clear border, where the inexplicable richness folded to yellow veld and the petty, tangled bush she was used to. The yellow eyes disappeared into the veld, but there was a road in front of her, and a ruin arched over it, like a bridge over a stream. The concrete structure was crumbling, and there was a little square hut to the side of it with a badly thatched roof. She could walk around it through the long grass, but it seemed too much effort. She continued straight on, coughing, putting her head down and walking. She stopped to look at the writing scratched into a flat rock placed before the arch.

She swayed as she read: 'All ye who leave here' had been scratched through, replaced with 'All ye who live here'. It had been scratched through again, and the last simply read 'All ye who live.' She knew that inscription, from above the *Lessons*. She wondered at its age, when last had someone been here? Sweat covered her body in a cold film as she walked toward the gate.

"Halt Earther," a voice called from a window in the hut. She jumped. There was the sound of the door being unlatched and she braced herself, ready to flee. Out of a dark doorway appeared a Vigil in an old yellow coat. He seemed at least fifty sets old. He stared at Genevieve, who started immediately down the road again.

"What is your business here?" He had a long-nosed gun slung over his shoulder. Everyone knew about guns. They were the most šalang thing in all of Ku. Tellers drew pictures of them and warned children what to do if they ever saw one: fetch a Keeper.

He did not raise it, but stood where he was. He eyed her in silence for a while. "Stay right there."

She carried on walking. He disappeared into the hut.

"Hey!" he had reappeared behind her. She ignored him. "You can go out there. But you won't find anyone." He hopped from one foot to another, calling to her from the doorway. He scampered in front of her, motioning to the pink afternoon sky, "They left us." He grinned, as if the revelation pleased him. She did not answer.

"They floated away, like lanterns. Fireflies. Ballistic flight. Hard steel missiles, cylinders with fire attached! They threw themselves into eternity." He keeled over, landing flat on his back. "The others are just bastards." Genevieve coughed and carried on, and he scrambled up to follow her.

"Well actually, they threw themselves onto some planets at the creamy end of the Milky Way, but best of all, they used up all the Earth to get up there, and then they found a way to live without it."

"Without the Earth?" When she turned around his face was nearly pressed against hers.

"No food no water. No wood for warmth and ground to walk on. Nothing real anymore. Not even air. The sky stops, you know." He twirled his hand upward.

She couldn't resist: "That's a lie. They are up there. I've seen them. They have their… those things they live on…"

"Planets!"

" No! Arks. I don't know. They still need the Earth. Nothing can live, otherwise."

"Tell me, when you close your eyes, what lives there?"

"Nothing lives there – it's just blackness. It's the back of my eyelid." Genevieve felt dizzy and angry.

"Exactly."

"That doesn't make sense."

"When you look into the black of an eye, what lives there?"

"That doesn't, I don't understand."

"Have you heard of a creature, living in the black of a well?"

"No."

"When a wound goes bad, what colour does it go?"

"That's not exactly black it's –" she tried.

"Nothing lives in the complete darkness. For something to be real, don't we have to see it?"

"No you just said – I know it's the back of my eyelid, even though I don't see it."

"But you said you see the blackness."

"But my eyes are closed."

"So what are you seeing?"

"Nothing."

"So nothing is blackness."

"Yes, in this case."

"The others went to the space between the stars. Which is…"

"Blackness."

"They are nothing now, out there behind the stars. It's all just a lot of nothing." He puffed his cheeks and blew air into her face. His breath stank.

"But, but you just said that, that the humans live there now. They found a way. The milk and planets. The rest, of…" the word caught in her throat.

"Us," he finished for her.

"No," she replied, "Others."

"Can you even think on it: After all that effort, the tales accidentally became the truth. Because they are Shadows to us dearest, out there, they are just a metal idea."

Was he an Earther? "An idea didn't fly out beyond the sky. People did. You just said – people flew out there."

"Aha! Yes, very rich people. And they left all their dying and birthing behind them. The world out there is dead. Except for those other tiresome bastards, of course. They burnt it up with their rockets. When they took off. Weee!" He began to spring up and down, turning in circles at the same time. His gun bounced up and down against his hip.

"Stop it. Stop it." She held him by the shoulders until he was only rocking back and forth on his heels, humming.

"Tell me what's out there."

"In there."

"In there, then," she conceded.

"Only if you can answer this riddle."

"If I answer your riddle, you'll tell me where I can find more answers? You know… not, not in Ku. Out – In there."

"That is what I just said isn't it?"

"What if I lose?"

"If you lose…" he moved closer and although he was small and his back crooked she took a step backward. His skin was so worn and brown it looked like a stretched out carcass.
"…I can take whatever I want from you. Just one thing." He pushed back her hood and laid his h and on her shaved head.

If she lost, she would run. She could see the wide metal grid that stretched along the floor between the two walls. She could make it across the grid quickly enough to escape the advances of this creature.

"Deal."

"Yes!" He clapped his hand and bounced up and down.

He flipped the gun from his shoulder, spinning it twice and thumping it into the ground. Genevieve took a step backwards. His back straightened and his gaze fixed on some distant thing. His face now looked almost handsome with its thick shag of beard. His uniform straightened into hard lines. The dust seemed to fall off it.

"What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three in the evening?" She had heard this when she was only a handful of seasons. "A human."

"Wrong." He picked up his gun and slung it over his back, which curled like bark in a fire. He lost all lucidity just as quickly as he had gained it.

"What do you mean wrong? It crawls, it walks and then it walks with a stick. That's the same answer it's always been."

"What nonsense. I know because I made it up right now. What human have you seen crawl in the morning, walk in the afternoon and then use a stick in the evening?"

"It's a metaphor. For a whole life."

"You are incorrect. Now, I will take what was promised." He took a step forward, and she took a step back – swiping away his hand.

"Liar! What is it then?"

He paused. "You can't answer now, you know? You've already lost. If I tell you the answer it's not your answer – it's my answer."

"Yes okay."

"Yes." He crooked his finger and guided her face towards his.

"BABOONS!" he barked and started hopping from one foot to another, cackling to himself.

Genevieve stared, nonplussed. "That does not make any sense."

By this time the Vigil was wriggling on the floor in paroxysms of laughter. He stopped abruptly. "Of course it does."

"No it does not."

"Yes it does."

"When does a Baboon go on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?"

"Have you ever even seen a baboon, girl? They do it all the time!"

"You're not explaining how."

"How? Why just yesterday morning I watched a baboon running on four legs with his friends."

With as little movement as possible she pulled the straps of her pack closer, she didn't want her meagre supplies falling out.

"All afternoon they remained on the mountainside, picking fruits from trees. On two legs." He swished his index and middle finger past each other as a visual aid.

"Oh sure, and then he suddenly lost a leg?"

"Not lost! But he held it up like this –" he hopped onto all fours and curled his hand up to his chest as if he were a limping animal. Genevieve bolted. He barked out behind her. Genevieve ran on through the arch. A dip in the road revealed a grid of metal bars, spaced widely apart. The metal bars had rusted and broken in places, the jagged teeth of a predatory hole. It was too late to change direction. She leapt for the most secure looking bar and felt her foot make contact. She urged her body forward, but the pole couldn't support her. It gave way with a metallic clang that sounded like a shot from a gun. Her chest thumped down onto the far side and she pulled herself forward, the rust and gravel tore into her arms and legs. She gathered her body underneath her and sprung up.

She needed to put as much distance between her and the Vigil as possible. Her ankle twisted as she turned to run, and she was stopped by his nose in her face.

"How did you –"

"Halt stranger!" Genevieve's breath heaved as she fell to the floor. She pulled her injured foot toward herself, coughing out dust and spitting it on the floor.

"What is your purpose stranger?"

"Fuck off."

The Vigil looked startled.

"Madam I am here to assist you in whatever way necessary, and also, to welcome you to the Lifestyle Estate of Ku. Before proceeding I ask that you present your corporate identification documents, work permit and inoculation certificate, as well as notice of your intended date of return."

"What are you doing?" The Vigil had that strange straight-up look about him once more as he reached into his belt pack and produced a balm in a rusted tin.

"This may burn a moment." He scooped some of the green stuff onto his palm and massaged it first into her ankle and then into her scraped knees. Before she could stop it he had untied her waist belt and slipped her pants down to her knees. The sand rubbed her bare bottom as he massaged the ointment into her thigh, plucking out one or two small stones. As she began pulling up her pants he grabbed her hands and repeated the process. He reached over and undid her water pouch with the careful accuracy of a Healer or a Tattooist. He grabbed her by the wrist, pouring a small amount of water onto the bloody palm and then applying the ointment. He stepped back and proceeded to salute.

"What…. What happened?" she asked, motioning back to the grid they had both somehow traversed.

"I don't want to alarm you madam, but one of the native Earthers attempted to defect. It sometimes happens that one or two lose their senses and attempt to forfeit their contract. Unfortunately there is nothing else to do but send them back to their village of origin and allow the Body Corporate to find an appropriate punishment. They cannot be assimilated i nto normal society. Our family has been doing this for sets ma'am, and we haven't given up a square foot of our border – even when all the others moved it."

Genevieve felt dizzy and confused. They were nowhere near Ku, she was almost north of the Grey City now – surely? "What happens to those that try to escape again?"

"Please madam these cases are so isolated…"

"What happens, to those who try again?"

"Oftentimes… they become violent. We are forced to react with equal violence. For this we are well equipped." He laid a hand across the nose of his gun. "But please madam, don't fret. Wait – where are you going?"

Genevieve had knotted her pants back on and slipped her pack back over her shoulder. She did not reply. She had been going North this whole time. She was nowhere near Ku, or any of its borders. She was North of the Grey City. This madman was not worth speaking to.

"I did not mean to alarm you. Madam! Please, it's perfectly safe to enter if you have a guide and basic know-how of wild animals."

Genevieve continued on the dusty path. She heard him call after her a few more times but she did not turn around.

The grass was clumps of hardened spine; the earth around it scorched. The path became a sliver – wide enough only for a single person. She walked north, leaving the city behind her, because that was the only direction she knew to walk.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

North Ku, Gantry

Jimmy sat on a bench, which was far more uncomfortable than the reed mat had been. The Keepers had insisted on it, however, so that he could be better heard. Every time he answered something they told him to speak more loudly.

He was tired. This was what it must have been like for Neko, with his own endless questions. These Keepers had nothing but questions, and he wasn't allowed to say anything that wasn't in answer to their questions, so no matter how much he tried to explain, they made him keep quiet. And then shouted at him for not answering. He had not been able to pay much attention for the last half hour. His bum had grown numb and tingling, and the back of his legs ached.

They had asked about the fire, but Jimmy had done a good job on that one: he explained that everyone saw him in the parade, so how could he have started the fire? Keeper Dustin had to concede when one of his Vigil admitted that after Jimmy and Neko had left they had found and punished the boy responsible. That made Jimmy sit up, but he wasn't allowed to ask what they had done to Muffs. Jimmy mulled over that for a long time: in the back of his mind he had concoted this idea that Muffs and Neko would collaborate and free him.

"Jimmy, please!"

He snapped to attention.

"I will ask you again." It was the old lady. Keeper Kipper, her name was. "Did Neko not speak about his past?"

"I don't know a Neko." Jimmy replied, wishing it were true.

"We know you do," spat Maple. She hated Jimmy for dropping the box on her foot. He hated her too. He wanted to stick his tongue out at her. She had said that he had stolen the gold, but when he tried to explain that the gold was all fakes she wouldn't listen.

"Jimmy, please. He cannot hurt you here. What do you know about Neko?" Keeper Kipper was persistent. Jimmy shrugged guiltily but didn't say anything. He felt bad lying to her. She had gotten him nicer clothes and come and visited him in his cell and just told him stories. He liked her, but she was scary.

"He's not going to answer anything," said Keeper Dustin sourly, waving a piece of dried fruit in his hand. "Can we please move onto something else," he said, fruit in his cheek. "When the boy arrived here he called Neko his father. I have a score of witnesses. His admission is not needed." Keeper Kipper frowned at him, but when she turned back to Jimmy her frown was gone.

"Alright. Jimmy, we're going to try and deal with the charges of Entering from the Out now, is that okay?"

Jimmy nodded. He didn't think he had that much choice in the matter. He pulled at the tiny little hair underneath his chin. It had broken in half from all his touching, and he wished it would grow faster.

"Which is your home village?"

He had prepared for this.

"Masinge."

"This is the village that you originally come from?"

He nodded. Keeper Kipper seemed satisfied.

"When did you receive your šalang?" Maple butted in.

"When I was younger."

"Then why when you arrived in Cradlewood was it scabbing?" Maple asked.

"I burnt it in a fire."

"And I doubt Neko was responsible enough to take you to a Healer?"

"He did take me," Jimmy lied, easily.

"So you do know Neko?"

Jimmy stopped. Maple leaned back triumphantly in her seat, and the crowd watching them, which he had forgotten about, broke into discussion, and it was a while before they were quiet enough that he could be heard.

"Quiet, please, Earthers!" called Dustin , but he was grinning too.

"I would like a moment in private with my fellow Keepers and Jimmy," Keeper Kipper announced unexpectedly. Keeper Dustin looked confused, and only signalled to his Vigil after she had already stood up and was walking off the platform. Everyone rushed behind her, the Vigil bumping Jimmy along. They were hurried into the Centre, and the Earthers working in the kitchen were sent out with much grumbling about important chores.

Jimmy was sat on a bench opposite the three Keepers, and the guards were sent out. Keeper Dustin objected.

"I am sure we can handle a single child," snapped Keeper Kipper.

Jimmy felt more nervous now than he had all day.

"I want to speak to you about Neko," she began.

"I don't know Neko."

"Enough!"

Jimmy flinched. He had not thought she would ever lose her calm, but now that she did, her light blue eyes blazed with cold intensity. Just as suddenly, her features softened again. Her voice did not.

"I am going to tell you what I know about Neko. You can insist on knowing him or not knowing him after I am finished." She steeped her fingers on the table in front of her.

"I was Keeper in the village where Neko grew up. It is a town not often spoken about, to the far East of Ku – further than Masinge. I arrived when Neko was ten sets and a half, and I apprenticed under the then Keeper. In six seasons, she had left, and I was in charge. The town was stable, with no major issues. None, at least, that I thought I was unprepared for, until rumours started to come in of a šalang relationship between a young man and a very young girl – a set and a bit, around your age. So we called together all the parties concerned, and the Council agreed that it should go to trial, which I oversaw. Neko confessed almost immediately to having a relationship with her, and so did the girl. They insisted there was no harm, but neither of them were Confirmed – not that the girl could be at that age. The girl's family insisted there was harm, and it soon became clear why they did: she was pregnant. I had a difficult decision to make, but Neko made the decision for me. He ran away. Evading trial has only one punishment: Banishment. Soon after he left, the girl miscarried and died. I don't think he even knew this."

Jimmy felt like he had swallowed a cold stone. He knew how Neko had relationships: this girl had no chance against him. But then Neko never did it just to be cruel, he really seemed to like all the women he slept with.

"My concern is that he has done something to you. Has he forced you to do anything you don't want to do, Jimmy?"

Jimmy shook his head. There were lots of things that Neko had made him do which he didn't

want to, but he knew what she meant.

"Please Jimmy; it doesn't help trying to protect him."

Jimmy sniffed, holding back tears. He didn't want to protect Neko, but he didn't want to speak about him either. When he had been grabbed by the Vigil, Neko had turned his horse and ran.

"I don't want to speak about it," he sniffed, wiping under his nose with his arm.

Keeper Kipper leaned back. "Jimmy, will you please excuse us a moment. I want to speak to the others alone."

Jimmy sprung to his feet and went to the door. The Vigil jumped with fright when he appeared between them, but instead of taking him away they kept him right there by the door. He was alarmed to realise that he could still hear what the Keepers were saying. He didn't want to ruin his chances in the trial by being found eavesdropping, so he did his best to pretend he was ignoring the discussion.

Keeper Kipper was speaking. "I don't want to let him off without punishment. It is clear that he is a danger to himself and others –" she was cut off.

"He may simply be an accomplice, but that he will not tell us anything of *that man's* whereabouts bodes ill," interjected Keeper Maple. "That should be our central bargaining chip. If he tells us how and where to catch him, we can find an amicable solution."

"I would be willing to take him into my care." Keeper Kipper spoke heavily, as if she were lifting a great weight, "try and set him back on the right path."

"Is your term not near its end?" asked Dustin, a curious tone in his voice: brooding excitement, and hunger.

"It is, but I am unsure of what I will do afterwards."

"What?" choked Dustin, alarmed, "Why not? You have spent your whole life working for them, and now you have the chance to retire and live like a human being rather than some primitive ape."

There was an indistinct reply until Maple interrupted once more.

"Let us focus for now on the task at hand."

There was quiet, until Keeper Dustin spoke up venomously. "I say no bargain. This boy barely knows how to speak a word of truth. It is his reflex. On his own he has caused considerable damage."

"Which he would not have caused had he not fallen in with the wrong people. Person. In fact."

"Which brings us back to the public trial: we must establish first of all from where he comes. I don't believe for a moment that he comes from Masinge. *The truth is kept by all of us*."

"Vigil!"

Jimmy was pulled to the side as the Keepers emerged from the hut. Keeper Kipper smiled meekly at him as she walked by, the other two ignored him. They made their way back to the dais, and Jimmy was engrossed in his own thoughts.

Keeper Kipper was on his side. Keeper Maple knew he did not come from Masinge. Keeper Dustin wanted him to be more truthful. When he had been led back to the bench on the dais he did not wait for them to ask the question.

"I do not come from Masinge," he announced. The crowd, which was still distracted swayed and rumbled, like a swarm of bees changing direction. He looked at them, because the anonymous faces were easier to look at than the three Keepers. His eyes unfocused as he spoke.

"I came from a house on a stream south of Masinge. I lived there with my mother. My older brothers had the šalang, but I did not. I did not know anything about Ku until a few moonths ago. I

paid for my šalang, because I wanted to be an Earther."
There was stunned silence, which Keeper Dustin immediately directed onto himself.

"You are confessing to coming from the Out?"

"Not that far Out. We were still in Ku, I think –" but the noise of the crowd overwhelmed his objection. They were jeering at him. A clod of mud flew past his arm, and the Vigil stepped in front of the Keepers as they called for calm. Through the yellow coats he could see a sliver of moving faces, and one very still. Covered in hair and filthy, but there was no mistaking his eyes. It felt as if Jimmy's stomach had fallen to his feet. Neko stared back at him, intently. He was not smiling. His eyes were red with tears. He was only a few rows back. Had he been there the whole time? He mouthed something at Jimmy, and then turned and hurried away.

The next day was the sentencing. Jimmy barely looked at the Keepers. He stared into the crowd, looking for Neko. The Keepers spoke for a long time, but once he realised he was not meant to answer any questions he stopped listening. He was asked to stand, and his legs felt weak.

"Jimmy Little, we have found you guilty on charges of theft, spreading dangerous falsehoods, and entering Ku from the Out, the suggested sentence of which is banishment to the Out." Keeper Dustin paused and turned back to Keeper Kipper, who spoke next.

"I speak against this sentencing, and volunteer to guide this boy into becoming an asset to Ku, which I believe he has the potential to be."

"All right," Keeper Dustin spoke, clipping the end of her sentence short.

Maple stood up, "I speak against this sentencing, on the condition that Jimmy Little helps in the capture and conviction of Neko Maître. Otherwise I speak for this sentencing." The crowd was in turmoil, and Jimmy's hands shook with fear.

"I speak for this sentencing. Do you have any response?" Keeper Dustin had asked it so offhandedly that Jimmy barely noticed it had been addressed to him.

Neko had said 'I'm sorry'. Jimmy stared at the clouded sky above him. Some people, he decided, were like the ell of grass he had loved at home. Kamiyo was one of those. You fitted into them. This place had elbowed him out. These people were cruel, and he did not want to live here. He wanted to go back home, to the Wall. Or better still, to the Out. He shook his head.

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The cart that brought him to the Out was merely a small platform on wheels, drawn by a pair of dongkeys. He sat in the centre of it, blindfolded but not tied. Two Vigil sat in front, talking only to each other. Jimmy ignored it and focused on the road. It had been smooth going at the beginning, but then became rough, the road was not well travelled. When it disappeared entirely they got off and walked.

Jimmy took note of all the things around him so that he could find his way back. It wasn't that far. There were ruins all around, and he was sure he could find shelter that night. They way Earthers spoke about the Out made it sound like it was one desert of black, but it was really just more veld.

The Vigil drank from water pouches but wouldn't give him any, so he was thirsty when they arrived at an old staircase, which led up a steep embankment.

He pushed down on his knees with his hands to keep pace, taking big strides. They walked over a rusted old fence at the top and in front of them was a pit with smooth off-white sides, cracked like a broken egg. It was perfectly square but with rounded edges. Along the dirty fringe he could see deep-blue stones, in the shape of jumping fish, splashing as if in water.

At the bottom was a dark pile of clothes, strewn in the stagnant brown water in an awkward way that made his heart jump to his throat. He looked away quickly, and stood as instructed at the edge of the white pit. The Vigil stood facing him, not smiling but not grim. One had taken out a metal thing that had been tucked inside his belt. It seemed to make the other Vigil nervous.

"What's that?" Jimmy asked, fidgeting from one foot to the other. They ignored him. The one Vigil pointed to something on the metal thing and the other pulled it back with both hands. It clicked loudly and they seemed pleased that it would now work.

The Vigil stayed where he was in front of Jimmy, and lifted the black thing up so that the small round hole, like a black eye, was looking at Jimmy's head. It blinked once, loudly, and the rest of Jimmy fell backwards into the pit.

Chapter Thirty

South Ku, Lake Floors

Lake Floors was quiet, and as far South as Neko could go. Quiet and traditional. The girl had told him 'simple'. It was. He leaned back on the bench, the wooden figurine and a stolen carving knife held loosely between his hands. It had been a long time since he had a hut of his own, a home. He smiled as the little boy ran around the corner, having sensed immediately that Neko had stopped working.

"Is it done?" he asked, reaching out for the carving.

"Yes. Your namesake," he presented it with both hands. The boy grabbed the bee and held it up. It was fat and round, with thick wings and antennae that weren't going to be too easily broken.

"If you come back tomorrow I will stain it for you."

But the boy had galloped off already, the bee soaring through the air, in his hand. Neko brushed off his own hands. He had not yet grown accustomed to the markings which covered their backs, on the left hand, '*We must unlearn our destruction'*. On the right, '*Nothing is complete.'*

"Inyosi?" came a voice from next to him. A woman turned the corner. She seemed familiar, but he knew he had never met her before.

"Sorry, friend. I am looking for my son. Chromeski – Inyosi."

"The little bee?"

"Yes," she smiled. Her face complied on some basic level, forming all that was needed for the appearance of pleasantness. Her lips turned up at the corners, her eyes narrowed and her cheeks puffed. But the smile was a scar, the healing lines of a desperate wound. It only closed the gaps.

"He ran off that way."

She followed his outstretched finger, looking in the direction he had pointed, and at the black markings along the back of his arm.

"You are new in the village?" she asked. It was polite.

"Yes. I grew tired of the North," he said with finality. He was a mystery, and he would remain so for as long as he could.

"They say you are a prophet of Ku."

"They are mistaken. *Reverence is dangerous."* It was his turn to smile falsely. The woman nodded her stern approval. It had been a test. He had passed. He didn't care.

Chapter Thirty-One

North of the Grey City

Stories are to be shared. Stories are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

Her scalp hurt where the exposed skin had burnt from the sun, and her hood rubbed uncomfortably against it. The old road she had found led upwards, through a deepening range of hills and valleys. The ruins were scarce here, completely overtaken by the bush.

Once again she would catch glimpses of buck which would canter away at her arrival. There were familiar tracks on the ground, and birds and insects buzzing in the trees. There was order, here. Not like in the city. She sometimes heard the reassuring patter of footsteps behind her, but when she turned she could see nothing. Her wolf was disappearing.

She could barely move forward anymore. Every step she would cough, and the pain in her leg from the metal grid would make her stumble. She would have laughed if it had not been so painful. That grid bit the same leg as the crocodile, two sets of jaws clamping down on her foot in only a few short moonths. How little had that hurt compared to this, and the grit embedded in her thighs from where she had fallen in the gravel. Why did everything want to bite her?

She sucked in a miggie of the group that had clouded around her face and coughed again. Some moments she forgot why she had ever left home.

She tried to recall her mother's voice, reproaching her for aimless wandering, for not knowing where the nearest river was, for the sweat on her forehead that was a fever, for the way her chest wheezed and the sweet-and-sour smell of the cut on her leg. But instead she could only hear the noises of the veld. Her cheeks were flushed and her ears hot.

She tried to recall Chromeski. What did his eyes look like? But it was impossible to think of him as a being, floating in empty space, to be scrutinised and observed. Remember Chromeski, as a presence. Doing what? Playing with his wooden-carved warthog. On that evening, when they had discussed what they would call him once he was of age. Chrome wanted something old-worldly he explained, through mouthfuls of pap: Neon, Sonic, Lan – he had stories for each of them. Neon was a colour you couldn't imagine, Sonic a sound so quick you weren't sure if you had heard it, and Lan… She couldn't recall what Lan was. The memory stalled, and she tried a different avenue.

Why had they been eating in the hut? Chrome had come home late. He had been working on a rainwater tank for their neighbour.

It was like seeing the room reflected in a raindrop: every part of it was small and far away, but now it was all there: Lan was a way for people to be connected, even if they weren't in the same place.

Her mother's preferences were different: Shade, Thorn. They had tried combinations too. Lanathorn. The other children would call him Lantern.

He needs an insect name, Genevieve insisted, as Chromeski left his wooden carving to chase after a moth. He's always buzzing around, she said. Chrome and Akra had laughed.

Genevieve came to a halt on the road. Not with purpose, more like a trickle of water that has made its way through sand, crept around rocks and moved twigs; only to find that somew here at its source it has run dry. There was a broad, helpless clearing in front of her. She could walk over this space,

she could walk forever, and there would always be something in front of her to walk. There was no place to find answers. The world was empty.

She swayed, and stumbled right. The old road had been built into the mountain, and on her left was a steep rise. On her right was a tree, with a little shade. It looked over the cleft between this hill and the next. She sat down underneath it, and held her water pouch over her face until a drop trickled out and landed on her lip. She raked it in with her teeth.

The valley was full of trees. There would be water at the bottom. A trickle, maybe part of some bigger river that had broken off, gone its own path. How long had the river been here? What were its thoughts? Why did it flow, only to be sipped at, muddied, pulled underground, never to resurface? It had no end. It flowed because some part of it before had flowed, and this pushed it forward. She did not want to be the river. She took off her hood and spread it out on the floor, lying on top of it.

She did not sleep, but dreamed. She grew cold and pulled the hood over her sides, mosquitos biting her ankles. There were no walls here. There was no use in walking any further. She dreamed a heavy weight settling on her chest, roughly pushing her aside. Its fur tickled her face.

Nature will not attempt to preserve us. Ku is life.
- Lessons for the Abandonment of the False Myths of Progress and Reason

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He slapped the pilot on the back and threw out the ladder, sliding down as quickly as he could. He tapped off the screen sensors in his helmet and turned on his torch. It was the girl, wrapped in a red coat, like a fox. She was covered with ants. They crawled around the corners of her mouth and over her shaved head. He was surprised that she had made it this far. The last report, two days ago, put her in the centre of the city.

She was far too old to be taken in on Salvation, which is why Apollo's team had left her in the first place. He switched back on the sensors again, to check.

There was the first heartbeat, and a second – fast and faint. This fox had a kit. Her body was only faintly warm, but her belly glowed hot. He knew what his supervisors would say. Don't interfere. He turned away from the limp figure under the tree.

They had seven more months on Earth, and then they would return to the Ark with their takings. Was seven months enough? A newborn child could be sold at a high price, to the right people. Imagine if he could have her birth it in space! It would be an event.

He gripped the ladder, and looked up to the glaring lights in the helicopter. He almost raised his hand to signal for them to pull him up, but looked back for one more moment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Detritus Cycle is a Speculative Fiction novel which uses a number of fairy and folk tales in its narrative. It is set a century into the future in South Africa and follows three central protagonists as they traverse Ku – a fictional area covering the future Vaal and Orange rivers – and unearth details about the world around them as well as what has come before. It was completed over a two year period at Wits University for the Masters in Creative Writing course. The first part of this essay focuses on the workshop process under which it was devised and the current draft presented, exploring the advantages and limitations of this process. The second part focuses on the ideology behind the text, and how this was presented through the genre of Speculative Fiction – looking too at why this genre is becoming increasingly popular amongst writers in South Africa. The third and final part of the essay seeks to explain both the intention behind the use of fairy and folk tales in *The Detritus Cycle*, and why subversions of fairy and folk tales can be seen as a valuable project for South African writers.

2. THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

The Detritus Cycle was completed over two years, part time, at Wits University from February 2012 to March 2014. Out of the ten students which began in 2012, only one other completed the course this March. This is quite significant as it can help illuminate methods for an approach to the workshop process that may help others entering such a course in the future.

Having completed my Honours in Creative Writing degree in 2011, the workshop process was not completely alien to me when I began work on *The Detritus Cycle* in 2012. It is interesting to note that the other student completing his work in early 2014 also entered the Masters course straight from a concomitant literature honours degree. By my observation, the simple fact of being naturalised to studying afforded us the advantage of not re-entering university from a working space. In my case, the self-discipline required to balance part-time work and study was set in place and thus a daily, weekly and monthly routine with self-prescribed tasks and deadlines was comparatively easy to maintain.

In the course, a student is called to present their work on average at least once a month. I took every opportunity to present my work, including adopting sessions not originally intended for my critique but available through other student's absence. I attended every fortnightly session throughout the two years, regardless of whether or not I was presenting. I not only attended, but made sure to arrive prepared for every other student. From the beginning I adopted the policy that I would make at least one critique per presenter. This may seem a small matter, but to my mind it is the cornerstone upon which a course like this is based. The ability to provide critique on the work of others is the very foundation for writing courses based on the workshop form, the merits of which will not be expounded unnecessarily. By subscribing to a course in the workshop form one has already acknowledged that it is a useful manner of engaging with written work. However, adopting the policy to make a minimum of one critique per presenter was not a policy adopted by most of the other students in this course, which seems contrary to the above assumption: that students enter

with the understanding that the workshop process is most valuable when it is used to both provide and receive critique from lecturers as well as fellow students.

For a course of this nature to be a success, this basic tenet must be fulfilled by all its participants, and I attribute this as one of a number of reasons for the high drop-out rate, seemingly particular to the class which began in 2012. It became apparent that silence or by participants at workshop sessions is an indication of deeper problems. There are a limited amount of legitimate reasons for the unwillingness of members to participate in class. The first is a disrespect of the etiquette of the workshop process. Even when one feels unable to provide substantive criticism of another's work, to acknowledge this fact to the class by providing a word of encouragement rather than criticism was a skill only a few members of the class developed. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assert that almost any student at this level can provide a few textual edits for the rough copy of a text, which makes a fair substitution to the method mentioned above. Silence in class may be excusable for a few sessions, until the student builds up enough confidence to speak in this forum, but there needs to be some form of intervention when a student remains completely unresponsive to the work of others. It is only in this way that the coupling of established writers and freshly graduated university students can become one of mutual respect and value. The second reason for an unwillingness to participate in class discussions is unpreparedness. Without the required pre paration and as a result of reading too hastily, many misunderstandings arise which diminish the overall standard of critique. This applies to both submitting and receiving work – to readers and presenters. The last possibility returns to a disregard of the etiquette of the workshop ,but more so, shows a disregard of the workshop process itself: being uninterested in the work of others. Through my course I had occasional conversations with fellow students who claimed to be uninterested in the nature of some of their fellow student's work and gave this as a reason for their reluctance to comment. Of all the scenarios, this one is the most deplorable, because it is an active dismissal of the value of the work of those around one, as well as one's own ability to comment outside a specific range of ideas or genres.

Many people mistake writing for a purely solitary pursuit, but the workshop form defies this idea : it is only through engagement with others that one can improve. The routine I formulated loaned itself to this. The week after the workshop was spent implementing newly received comments. The subsequent two weeks were devoted to formulating new content, and the final week was a mixture of both writing as well as reading the work of others. The idea that I would both ed it and produce new material was treated with scepticism by a number of parties, the concern being that this tedious process may stall progress for the novel. This indeed seemed the case in the first year: by January 2013 I had only completed eight chapters. Considering that *The Detritus Cycle* came to a total of thirty-four chapters, this is quite significant. A large part of the first year is undoubtedly spent finding an idea and formulating the proposal. Soon after presenting a first round of chapters and receiving criticism, a few students repeatedly submitted these same chapters. However, where my work managed to break free of this was by limiting the resubmission of material seen by the group: instead, this was sent to my supervisor. In this way, while old chapters were being carefully edited, the novel was nonetheless moving forward. For the rest of the year I wrote just above a chapter a fortnight: a feat only possible because I had carefully dwelled on the tedious and seemingly unproductive planning stages for long enough that the narrative and world were quite

clearly distilled at this point. This task is very important in the genre of Speculative Fiction, which requires a relatively clear vision of the entire world in which characters act.

A rough draft of the novel was completed at the end of October 2013. The intention had been to finish it a month or two earlier, thereby allowing enough time to work on the completed product. At over 100 000 words, *The Detritus Cycle* is quite a lengthy product for a master's course. The following two months were spent editing this completed draft once more into a coherent product. This led to the final challenge with regard to the work-shopping of material: every person in the group had been a part of the process, and thus their critical eye could in many ways be argued to be dulled to the final product. After thorough discussions in class and out about my work and intentions, it was difficult for readers to notice gaps in the work as a whole. To this end I had 'reserved' a creative writing student from the 2012 class, hoping that they could receive the manuscript in this complete-as-possible form and make critiques based on its overall effect. This plan unfortunately fell through for personal reasons. All however was not lost, and I managed to receive feedback from a fellow fantasy and sci-fi writer, Gerard Mullen, who had no contact with the work before this point. This turned out to be immensely valuable. The only other person from my class who managed to read the whole novel was Tammy Baikie. An instant where having an external reader such as Gerard became valuable was during editing of the Kamiyo saga. While Tammy, having discussed it at length in class, was sure of the outcome of this sequence of events, Gerard had not realised that Kamiyo had died. This called for a clearer description of the scenes leading up to her suicide, as well as her death itself.

In conclusion, the two primary issues facing the workshop process seem to be a lack of commitment on the behalf of other participants, and the inherent restriction on the ability of classmates to critique the full product at the end of this process. Both these problems can be averted very simply, but not necessarily with the greatest of ease. Having external readers who are quite specialised and can provide useful feedback is a luxury not many people have, but undoubtedly one that students can plan toward. As to the engagement of classmates, there can only be a call for greater intervention by those in the authoritative positions when attendance and participation dwindle. There are, of course, limitations on this: it is ultimately up to any student entering such a course to understand how to derive the greatest benefit from the workshop process, and to invest themselves thoroughly in this process by both providing work, and engaging with all the work provided.

3. SPECULATIVE FICTION AND IDEOLOGY IN *THE DETRITUS CYCLE*

The Detritus Cycle contains three central explorations. Each chapter or incident – which is the preferable term here, as some incidents run over many chapters – is intended to explore aspects of these themes. Firstly, *The Detritus Cycle* provides an investigation of the myth of progress. Secondly, it is an exploration of gender and sexuality. Lastly, it considers the possibilities of subversive retellings of fairy and folk tales. The first and second aspects will be dealt with in this section. Above and beyond these themes, *The Detritus Cycle's* primary intention is to suggest the importance of critical thought, in all realms of real and imagined life. Its intention is to show that no assumption is beyond revisiting and rethinking, and that this is necessary for any healthy future world. This indeed seems to form the fundamental premise of much Speculative Fiction, and before moving onto themes and ideas particular to *The Detritus Cycle*, it is useful to look first at the aims and possibilities of the Speculative Fiction genre; and then to Speculative Fiction as a growing genre in South Africa.

3.1. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR CRITICISM IN SPECULATIVE FICTION

The intention of Speculative Fiction (SF) is not to predict the future. In the introduction to her 1969 novel *The Left Hand of* Darkness, Ursula Le Guin argues that only a part of Speculative Fiction is extrapolation: taking an existing set of circumstances and applying a fish-eye lens which distorts and exaggerates them. There are many facets of *The Detritus Cycle* which are extrapolation, but at its heart it is a thought experiment which asks the fundamental speculative question 'What if…'. Le Guin argues that while all fiction is metaphorical, Speculative and Science Fiction use the future as a metaphor, drawing from the dominant ideas of contemporary life. This is very much the intention of *The Detritus Cycle* and as Le Guin argues of her own novel, it is not a presentation of what ought to be. It is above all other things a description of a particular set of circumstances. What Speculative Fiction is thus exceptionally good at confronting is large, complex ideas such as race, gender and class structure.

As a thought experiment, Speculative Fiction can have very large boundaries. It can ask the most fundamental questions, and challenge the very structure upon which we base our societies. It is tempting to say that it presents a world that is either utopian or dystopian, but it is barely ever as simple as this. However, in all Speculative Fiction there is a fundamental optimism in imagining a different world: by creating an alternative, one is suggesting a possibility for a different kind of life. This is the same imaginative optimism that drives social movements which concern themselves with forms of political, economic and philosophical thought and seek out a coherent alternative to the globally prevailing system of capitalism. In some cases this belief is Millenarianist: It claims that the unjust status quo will meet with a dramatic change. This pseudo-religious, apocalyptic strain of thought, expressed in newly-fangled religions such as Scientology, is highly problematic; and a number of instances of this kind of thinking can be seen in Ku – as will be discussed below.

Speculative Fiction often plays with historical and well-established forms of social structuring: Capitalism, Marxism and Anarchism (to name only a few) and the many derivative forms of these ideas. While the Millenarianism mentioned above in many cases provides a Straw Man with which to wrestle, Marxism and Anarchism provide serious criticisms with which a speculative project such

as *The Detritus Cycle* can engage. Speculative and Science fiction have long challenged all forms of political ideology. H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* (1895) expressed the author's socialist views; Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) challenged many economic and ecological concepts; and Le Guin confronted issues of an anarcho-syndicalist utopia in *The Dispossessed* (1974).

It is from these real ideologies that Science Fiction draws its inspiration, and this is true of *The Detritus Cycle*. While *The Detritus Cycle* does not suggest an alternative to capitalism, it is highly critical of a future projection of capitalism, especially in light of the impending ecological crises facing human societies. Both Marxist and Anarchist critiques of capitalism's failure to deal with the ecological crisis of our age rest on the fundamental notion that capitalism is inherently unable to deal with this crisis. As the South African anarchist organisation, Zabalaza argues, this is due in part to capitalism's never-ending drive towards profit and expansion, which does not allow room for efficient, sustainable and less wasteful practices (McGregor, 2013). An example makes this point clearly: High-end retailers Abercrombie and Fitch claim they would rather burn faulty clothing than give it to poor people (Alexander, 2013). This kind of thinking emerges when false value is attached to exclusivity, and this notion is explored in many ways in *The Detritus Cycle*, indeed: Ku exists only because there is a notion of Otherness and of exclusive belonging. Furthermore, the world created in *The Detritus Cycle* advances ideas of writers who do not identify with these primary streams against capitalism. Writers who oppose globalisation (and who advocate 'the intensely local') such as Wendell Berry and Naomi Klein – who has written for *The Dark Mountain Project* (to be discussed at a later point) – hold such ideas.

Thus it is clear that Speculative Fiction allows for substantial criticism of the fundamental ideas on which our society is based; but that does not mean that all of Speculative Fiction's descriptions are grand or epic in scope. In *The Detritus Cycle* one can see a criticism of capitalism, anarcho-primitivism and the fundamental myth of progress, but there is also minefield of smaller criticisms of our current society. The three characters are expressions of such criticisms. They are grounded and shaped in the belief that hope is the most indefatigable human state, and for this reason humans will always be seeking deeper understanding and truths about the world they live in. The characters represent a struggle to create meaning in a world where one is defined by others, but also the three characters all struggle against meaninglessness. They are both formed by this world and formed against it.

3.2. SPECULATIVE FICTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Speculative and Science Fiction is a growing genre in South Africa. It is curious to note that within the 2012 and 2013 creative writing masters' classes at Wits there were five students working with the intention to create some form of Speculative Fiction (this mutated into other genres for some authors). The now well-renowned Lauren Beukes as well as Charlie Human (*Apocalypse Now Now*) came from an equivalent course at the University of Cape Town. It is difficult to hypothesise why young and new writers feel such a draw to all manner of Speculative Fiction. It may be because South Africa is a country sensitive to and overridden with questions of race, violence, gender inequality and other seemingly unsolvable issues, and Speculative Fiction allows some distance from these problems.

There are a number of exciting writers and publications in South African Speculative Fiction at the moment. Lauren Beukes is most well-known as a result of her winning the Arthur C. Clarke award for her novel *Zoo City*. In the Hollywood stratosphere above her is Neill Blomkamp with the films *District 9* and the work in progress *Chappie* (I exclude *Elysium*, his last blockbuster, as it was neither set in South Africa nor dealt particularly with South African issues). Charlie Human's book *Apocalypse Now Now* has been less well received critically, but was broadly marketed and anticipated in the light of South African Speculative Fiction's growing successes. S.L Grey, a collaboration between Sarah Lotz and Louis Greenberg has published a number of short stories firmly set in the Speculative Fiction genre. Ivor Hartmann's collection Afro Speculative Fiction spans the African continent, and collects some of the best South African short Science Fiction stories. The very landscape of South Africa has become popular for filmmakers working within the Speculative Fiction genres, most notably the new version of *Judge Dredd* called simply *Dredd*, which used apocalyptic versions of Johannesburg's landscape, visually similar to those imagined in *The Detritus Cycle*, as the setting for its action.

As explained above, the intention of Speculative Fiction is not to predict the future. At times, it magnifies ideas, bloating them out of proportion and to their logical extremes. South Africa is a rich field for this kind of observation. Mired in the issues of the past which trigger a recurring pattern of social and political problems, there is very little breathing space for commentary and reflection that is not overdone. And by overdone, it is truly meant here: burnt to a charcoaled crisp by every blog post, opinion piece, Facebook post and Twitter sensation. What the magnification by Speculative Fiction allows one to do is to pull out subtle textures so rarely seen in the current, frantic, black/white writing. This seems surprising at first, given that Speculative Fiction is a genre of extremes. But this is exactly why Speculative Fiction cannot be seen merely as a tool for extrapolation: Speculative Fiction allows the space to completely ignore some issues. For instance, in *The Detritus Cycle*, race is purposefully underplayed in favour of less discussed social realities.

Deidre Byrne argues in her article "Science Fiction in South Africa" that two recurrent themes in South African Speculative Fiction are landscape and racial difference. She argues that by setting the stories in these hostile landscapes, writers are able to foreground the scarcity of resources and the inevitable competition for them. In reality, these conditions are the primary source of the inequality along racial lines in South Africa, and thus it seems natural that such concerns are often reflected in South African literature. In *The Detritus Cycle*, these divisions are rerouted along the post-Apartheid lines of class and wealth privilege instead, which are the growing divisions of this 'new' nation. However, that is not to say that there are not cultural 'others' in the text. The situation magnified for *The Detritus Cycle* was that of those within walls and those considered without. Diverting race issues into other forms of otherness is a pattern that can be seen in many other South African Speculative Fiction texts: *District 9*'s prawns are a direct analogy to poor, black township dwellers; in *Zoo City,* convicts are 'animalled' and ostracised.

While Speculative Fiction is a growing genre in South Africa, it is still far from being as established or as well-respected as it is in America and Europe. In the last decade, sensational texts such as Michel Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy have garnered significant literary acclaim. This may simply be a matter of time: Speculative Fiction is a young genre in South Africa, in part because almost all of its writers are young – under forty years of age, where overseas, writers of this genre have a firm legacy and personal history within the genre. Perhaps in

the next decade, as the writers themselves mature, so too will the stories of South African Speculative Fiction.

3.3. THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

"The tears of the world are in constant quantity" – *Waiting for Godot,* Samuel Beckett

The myth of progress is one much discussed amongst philosophers, writers and thinkers at present, and the reason for its primacy seems intricately bound with the real and inevitable catastrophes of climate change. Ukugoduko, or 'Ku', is the combination of two streams of thought. The first is an attack on meliorism, which is succinctly explained by Jane Shilling as the belief that every day, things are getting better for humankind. We believe we are better off than before the Enlightenment, and that this betterment comes in gentle forms such as:

> Education; a respectful relationship with the environment; the eradication of poverty, ignorance and disease; and, of course, capitalism (properly regulated) – all leading to a moment in the not unimaginably distant future when peace and prosperity will cover all the world.
>
> (Shilling, 2013)

Where there is meliorism, there is (of course) a critique of meliorism. John Gray, a British social philosopher, has a critique of this Western vision of progress most similar to that seen in *The Detritus Cycle.* This will be discussed in full below. The second stream of thought shown in Ku is the 'green revolution', and the (anarcho-)primitivist, survivalist and homesteading fetishes that have resulted from this. A key source for this is *The Dark Mountain Project* and its contributors, which formed the basis for much of the thinking in *The Detritus Cycle*. In *The Detritus Cycle* there are interactions with two societies: the residents of Ku, and the people who come from the Arks – thermosphere-bound spaceships. *The Detritus Cycle* uses both to conduct a thought experiment that follow through some of the ideas and critiques presented by John Gray and writers within *The Dark Mountain Project*.

John Gray's primary critique is against the myth of Western progress, which he calls 'the Prozac of the thinking class' – in much the same way religion was charged as being the opiate of the masses by Karl Marx. Simon Critchley aptly summarises Gray's view:

> We are a killer species with a metaphysical longing, ceaselessly trying to find some meaning to life, which invariably drives us into the arms of religion. Today's metaphysics is called "liberal humanism," with a quasi-religious faith in progress, the power of reason and the perfectibility of humankind.
>
> (Critchley, 2013)

This quasi-religious faith in the modern world and progress will become important when discussing fairy tales and the intersection of magic and technology. Gray is not alone in such ideas: in his essay *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition,* Wendell Berry rebuts the related idea that science will provide solutions to all the world's problems and mysteries, if given enough time. For now it is enough to point out that Gray sees the drive toward reason and perfection as disillusioned obsessions which are damaging to both individuals and to humans as a species. Gray's solution is that human beings must relinquish their destructive search for meaning. He argues that the aim of life is a release from meaning. Similar sentiments can be seen in *The Lessons for Abandonment of the False Myth of Progress and Reason* (or simply the *Lessons*) seen in *The Detritus Cycle,* which are

referred to throughout the novel, and head each of Genevieve's chapters. These fundamental rules for Earthers (inhabitants of Ku) suggest that "Nothing is complete. There is no end goal"; and that "There shall be no religion: not of science, nature, nor of gods." Similarly, we see Gray-esque notions in this lesson:

> Ku will not progress. Ku will understand. Understanding is not coherence. Understanding is the inward illumination of one aspect of the world. Never can all the aspects of the world be understood at once, because the world is not a coherent whole. Relieving oneself of this desire leads to freedom. Stories, people, and answers which give the false appearance of coherence are dangerous. Danger is not to be revered. Reverence is dangerous. Respect is safety.

Indeed, it seems that Ku provides a sceptical take of Gray's vision. Critchley draws from Gray's ideas that the ideal realm for the passive nihilist is a small island from where "the mystery of existence can be seen for what it is without distilling it into a meaning. The passive nihilist learns to see, to strip away the deadening horror of habitual, human life and inhale the void that lies behind our words" (Critchley, 2013). In this way it seems that the projects of Ku are a fulfilment of the type of living that Gray advocates.

However, *The Detritus Cycle* is critical of passive nihilism. This is seen in the struggle *for* meaning by the central characters. At the conclusion of the novel, Neko's character finally chooses to inhabit this small island using the nihilist lessons that Ku has provided for him rather than apply critical thought and see them as a source for the grim events he has witnessed. Yet there is an unresolvable contradiction afoot. The reader is lured into hope by the possibility of Genevieve's child living on after the novel, which is a form of meliorism: a deferral of hope and faith to some future generation. The conclusion thus neither celebrates nor condemns the answers of Gray or *The Dark Mountain Project*. It shows the difficulty of finding a critically reflected position: one that submits neither to undue negativity nor undue optimism. So while the main characters' actions show them not to be nihilist, their fates may lead the reader to assume that such as position is taken by the book itself as their difficult struggles come to no patently meaningful conclusion.

However, one must reserve judgement until after an exploration of the hypocrisies and capitalist foundation of Ku. There is another layer of Ku that remains to be discussed: that this anti-meliorism is not the authentic project. Ukugoduko, we learn, is a lifestyle estate – like others that can be seen in South Africa today. It is run as a business and maintains law and order only to fulfil its contractual obligations. One of capitalism's greatest strengths is its ability to re-appropriate any culture that is anti-capitalist. Whether it be the vacuous reproduction of the image of Che Guevara; or the significant injustice done to Anarchist movements in the abuse of the term and image of 'anarchy'. With capitalism as globally entrenched as it is today, *The Detritus Cycle* takes a bleak view of any project that does not fully consider this power for opportunistic re-appropriation. This provides one critique of Gray's vision: this nihilism is easily packaged and resold to consumers who buy into the slogans once branded as 'revelations', thereby bringing us closer to me aning, rather than further away, as happens with Neko. Ultimately, capitalism will adopt this counter-culture into mainstream liberal thought, giving only 'the appearance of coherence' with a world view that is anti-capitalist.

It seems that this kind of project is already underway. The central discrepancy between Gray and *The Dark Mountain Project* is the focus on the role of myths and literature in the process of what

they refer to as 'uncivilisation'. One of the central stories *The Dark Mountain Project* claims underpins notions of civilisation is 'the myth of progress'. This is crucial, because *The Dark Mountain Project* advocates the view that the looming crisis of humanity can be faced only once we subvert these harmful myths of our age. They dispute the centrality of humans and seek to challenge our disconnection with nature through not only storytelling, but storytelling which advocates a mode of interaction with the world that falls somewhere in the range of anarcho-primitivism and neo-luddism. Capitalism uses aspects of the 'green movement' (the word 'movement' is itself suggestive of progress) which benefit the existing hierarchies of power, indeed, capitalism by nature cannot sincerely embrace something non-capitalist, which many of the remedies for environmental damage are: expensive, and undermining of the existing social order. As mentioned above, there are extensive Anarchist and Marxist critiques of capitalism's inability to effectively deal with the ecological crisis. Presenting this in any adequate depth however may well derail the focus of this argument. There are indications that 'anarcho'-primitivism (and the associated movements of survivalism, off-the-grid-living and homesteading) will be marketed back to the benefit of the existing social order, rather than forming a new one. As a trivial example, *The Dark Mountain Project* sells all of its writing, and even has a CD. Merchandising and selling materials in this way is dangerous territory for an organisation with an anti-capitalist agenda.

On *The New Statesman* website, Gray provides another argument against the views taken by *The Dark Mountain Project*. He argues that the fundamental belief of *The Dark Mountain Project* – the apocalyptic vision of a global collapse as inevitable – is itself melioristic; that "the authors have swallowed the progressive fairy tale that animates the civilisation they reject." (Gray: 2009). Gray's version of events is far more similar to those seen in *The Detritus Cycle*. He presents the following situation:

> Ecological catastrophe will not trigger a return to a more sustainable way of life, but will intensify the existing competition among nation states for the planet's remaining reserves of oil, gas, fresh water and arable land.
>
> (Gray, 2009)

Gray goes on to argue that this is not apocalyptic, this is history as usual. This aligns with Byrne's idea on the fundamental premise of Science Fiction in South Africa: that it is always based in a competition for resources. Thus again, while *The Dark Mountain Project* and the work of John Gray form part of the inspiration for *The Detritus Cycle*, it attempts to critically reflect on the ideas and arguments they present.

In the South African context there is an even stronger suggestion that off-the-grid living will be capitalised: the prevalence of private estates, or gated-communities. According to Liezemarie Johannes in her thesis on Gated Communities in Gauteng, the primary reason for moving into a gated community is to increase a sense of security. What follows quickly on from this is a sense of exclusion: a distinction from what is outside the community and a sense of belonging in the homogeneity of the primarily white, middle class area (Johannes, 2012, p.3). The oldest and most obvious example of this is the whites-only enclave of Orania in the Northern Cape. On the other end of the political spectrum is Jacob Zuma's homestead, Nkandla. However, neither of these captures the current trend in South Africa toward self-sufficient, rural-esque, 'green estates'. The term 'Lifestyle estate' is flaunted primarily by organisations such as Jackal Creek which claims on its

website to be "Modern Golf Estate Living." The planned Steyn City (owned and operated by billionaire Douw Steyn), five times the size of Monaco, and intended to not only *exclude* cars, but *include* private schools, shops, medical facilities and the bedrock of many estates: a golf course. Ultimately, a person could school, live and work without leaving this estate. This trend is exploited and taken to its extreme but logical conclusion in *The Detritus Cycle*: a gigantic private, self-sustaining, middle-class estate, where governing bodies play an instrumental role in the creation and maintenance of certain "forms of social behaviour, by enforcing rules and regulations that uphold certain values,"–as the system of Council, Keepers and Trust do in *The Detritus Cycle* (Johannes, 2012 p.3).

Ultimately, while *The Detritus Cycle* provides an attack on meliorism and capitalism, it does not provide a solution. Communities such as *The Dark Mountain Project* attempt to break free of capitalist hierarchies, but it seems inevitable that capitalism redirects them to its own ends. However the intention of *The Detritus Cycle* is to provoke critical thought rather than provide answers, it can be hoped that the least it will do is create room for reflection and discussion on the direction humanity believes itself to be going, and on a localised, smaller scale, to consider carefully the future of private estates in South Africa.

3.4. GENDER, SEXUALITY AND FEMINISM

"Plus, many of Sci-Fi's most famous authors — like Robert Heinlein and Philip K. Dick — have positively *deranged* notions about the inner lives of women. But the worm is turning." – Clive Thompson

A crucial part of *The Detritus Cycle* is its conscious and careful representation of gender and sexuality. Speculative Fiction has a long history of female authors, beginning with Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* in the 1600s, to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818, to Ursula Le Guin and Angela Carter in the 1960s, to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985. In this time the number of women writing Speculative and Science Fiction increased exponentially, especially those dealing with utopian and dystopian feminist themes. Despite this, Science Fiction is still considered a genre dominated by male writers and characters. Issues of gender and sexuality fall firmly within the realm of Speculative Fiction, especially Utopian fiction, which allows for worlds that exist outside of the grip of patriarchy. Marleen Barr in her book *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond* points to Cranny-Francis' interpretation of the usefulness of Speculative Fiction as a literature of estrangement:

> The convention of estrangement… enables writers to displace the story setting to another time and/or place, immediately denaturalising the society portrayed in the text and the events and characters set there. So (sic) readers and writers are freed from the restriction of a realist reading which tends to restrict representation to an imitation of contemporary social practices.
>
> (Barr, 1993)

The representations of femininity and masculinity, sex and gender in Speculative Fiction have been diverse. Noah Bertlatsky lists some of the most poignant moments in the feminist Speculative Fiction tradition of the last hundred years. Included in this list is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* from 1915. This female utopia relies on asexual reproduction, and there is no war or conflict. Included too

is Joanna Russ' 1970 novel *The Female Man*, which jumps between a number of worlds, exploring different gender interactions. In one world, men and women are literally engaged in a battle of the sexes. Women trade children for resources, and men deflect their sexual desires onto neutered young boys. Bertlatsky's focus however is on Shulamith Firestone, who presents a Marxist vision of a feminist utopia in *The Dialectic of Sex* which was very controversial. First and foremost, Firestone argues that women's labour is the prototype of all labour, and she insists that pregnancy is barbaric. She suggests that undoing the family unit would aid in undoing class inequalities. Not only this, but she argues sexist inequality is the root of all inequality – including economic exploitation and racial prejudice. As is clear from these few examples, the representations of gender and sex in Speculative Fiction are potentially limitless.

It is crucial that one differentiate between the gender politics of Ku from the gender politics of the book. Neko may persistently treat women as means to his ends in the book, but the decision to represent him as such forms part of the conscious feminist endeavour of writing *The Detritus Cycle*. The attempt in *The Detritus Cycle* was to show a world where some progress has been made: labour is largely divided along the lines of practicality rather than antiquated ideas of correctness, there are a number of appointed female leaders governing to their strengths, and crucially, homosexuality has been constructed as a cultural norm. However, this entails a number of persistent injustices. There are gender-divided rites of passage (the 'Confirmation'); and continued hierarchies of power assert what is correct and incorrect sexual behaviour, governed by the needs and desires of the society rather than the needs and desires of the individual. Representation of these inequities is another outlet of the novel's sceptical meliorism, and harks back to the intended desire to provoke critical thought that does not hesitate to reach back into the furthest depths of assumed traditions.

The traditional roles of men and women are neither celebrated nor deplored in *The Detritus Cycle*, an idea that Sarah Zettel draws attention to. She explains that "In fantasy literature there is a school of thought that holds that women must be treated precisely like men. Only the traditional male sphere of power and means of wielding power count. If a woman is shown in a traditionally female role, then she must be being shown as inferior." (Zettel, 2005). Work as Farmers, in the Crafts, as Tellers needed to be shared between genders without the delicacies of modern thinking in order for this society to survive. The attempt was to keep this view as unromantic as possible. For example, Genevieve may be a Hunter – a role assigned by the San people only to men (the San hunting tradition is the inspiration for the incisions made after the first kill); but this was no sinecure. In constructing her character, someone who travels alone over an immense tract of land and can look after themselves, one would need a person with a particular set of skills and disposition, and most crucially someone who could survive. This is not to pretend that every woman could hunt – Fanta, her father's partner, is one such example. I felt that Fanta in fact best exemplified this idea. Before the funeral for the lizard she returns from working in the fields and picks at a blister on her hand while speaking to Genevieve. Although we have a sense of Fanta's frivolity and delicacy, she has a role that must be completed in the village, and this is unromantic and mundane, and for centuries has been filled by both men and women. This case by case basis seems the only fair way to approach gender issues. Making unconscious assumptions or representations with regard to gender is absurd to any modern text, no matter its literary tradition.

Nancy Jesser argues that for feminist Science Fiction (and here I apply it to Speculative Fiction) to deliver on its promise, its dreams must be distinguishable from past patterns of domination: it must overcome binaries such as "man/woman, human/animal, black/white, self/other, and their concomitant subjugations" (Jesser, 1997). For the people of Ku, their ontology points to ove rcoming these boundaries: as one can see in the *Lessons* – "Earthers, animals and the land must unlearn their destruction." However, despite this ideological project, these boundaries become more pronounced than ever: the distinctions between human and animal and self and other are the most problematic of all in Ku. However, there is one distinction underplayed by *The Detritus Cycle*: the issue of race. For the most part, race is not discussed in Ku. The intention of downplaying race is not to avoid a controversial and much (un)beloved South African issue, but rather to argue that in a hundred years, the primary division of the people in South Africa will not be race.

In the context of *The Detritus Cycle*, it is unfeasible to assert that race would be a primary issue. Ku is formed from middle-class peoples of diverse racial, but similar cultural backgrounds. The middle class and elite of South Africa is becoming increasingly racially diverse, with real opportunities for advancement being provided to those in a fortunate enough position to take it. This says nothing of a sweeping change in the socio-political landscape, simply that a few pawns have been shifted around the chessboard. A logical extrapolation (one, it must always be emphasised, of many) was that the middle class as largely educated, socially conscious, literate people would not hold so closely to racial distinctions but rather to wealth and class divisions: people who would buy into a lifestyle such as that promised in Ku would be the hippies of thei r age – ostensibly for 'free love', peace and equality. *The Detritus Cycle's* intention was to avoid a stifling preoccupation with race, but this did not mean its complete exclusion, which would not successfully convey the full extent of the hypocrisy of this 'free love' community. Thus there is reference to a village 'Verwelk', purportedly on the opposite side of the river to Gantry, which is an all-white village. Furthermore, Jimmy, being black, encounters a number of racial slurs while he is in Gantry.

However, the relative omission of racial issues in Ku should not be taken as a reflection of a lack of consciousness of race in this world. In the edit of the novel before the final submission, the origin of Jimmy was altered such that these ideas are brought more sharply into view, conveying information that relativizes life inside Ku, showing it to be primarily formed by white, former middle to upper class citizens. This is done through revising the Vigil's status as non-Earthers (and foregrounding race as an aspect of this division between Earther and non-Earther), but also by showing a black Other and his status compared to Earthers. This was the final amendment in a number of processes intended to effectively convey background information of the world. At stages in writing I wrote a number of chapters from Meme, Genevieve's grandmother's perspective. Sometimes these were 3rd person narratives, sometimes diary entries. While they helped clarify the history of the world for myself, adding yet another character to the expansive list (a challenge discussed at a later point again) was an incongruous anachronism for the reader. How ever, what these chapters contained more clearly than the current historical inserts from Ku, was the realisation that outside the private estates lived the majority of the poor black South African population, failed by an uncaring government and physically severed from the other classes. Ku is a corporate, mythical island in the midst of an apocalyptic nightmare for the people outside of it. Johannesburg is a sink hole, fallen to acid mining and poor governance. South Africa as an arid zone is in drought and the people have fled North; to the coasts; and onto the overpopulated tenements in space-Arks for refuge. Yet the scale

and significance of this proved too challenging to include seamlessly in *The Detritus Cycle*, until this attempt to introduce Jimmy as a class of such outsiders. However, emphasising this aspect of the world remains a primary motivation for a second book, to follow the story of Genevieve's daughter by Neko – Kit, as she looks at Ku from the life on one of the Arks. This is not to say that *The Detritus Cycle* is incomplete, it provides a thorough perspective from the inside of Ku; but I believe the world contains rich enough material to substantially explore again from a perspective outside of Ku.

An essential statement that *The Detritus Cycle* makes about gender and sexuality is the proviso that homosexuality is standard practice in Ku. The trump card here was, again, the world-building speculation. What better way to control a population with established liberal views than by promoting non-reproductive sex? Again, the people buying into the system would be socially conscious, as misled as it may be, and believe themselves to be both 'forward' and 'free' thinking, unlikely to be controlled by antiquated religious ideas of abstinence. There are many historical instances of nations where homosexual practices are more or less common: and this is where the large distinction must be made. The argument is not that homosexuality can be legislated and propagated until it is a common social practice; but it seems likely that *if* homosexual acts were viewed in exactly the same positive light as other non-reproductive sexual acts, many more people would choose to partake in them, for the same reasons that people engage in non-reproductive sexual acts: companionship, enjoyment, sexual release, intimacy and so on. This throws into light heterosexuality as a normative social construct, and it could help lead a reader to the point where they ask 'If I were not raised in a society that thinks in this way, would I be more likely to engage in homosexual acts?' This is exactly the kind of critical thought about the basic assumptions upon which we build our societies that *The Detritus Cycle* attempts to evoke. The next step Ku takes, however, is to create homosexuality as a normative social construct against which other sexual acts – particularly heterosexual ones – are judged negatively. This is an undesirable outcome, but perhaps an inevitable one any society that requires unequal hierarchies of power to exist.

Ultimately, *The Detritus Cycle* deliberately attempts to engage representations of gender and sexuality, issues that have long been overlooked in favour of race and politics within the South African context. The drive was not to provide a utopian view of a greater equality between the sexes and a place where homosexuality and heterosexuality are on a more equal footing, but rather by showing a changed yet still imperfect society, the attempt was to draw attention to the inherited biases in our present culture.

4. SUBVERSION AND THE PROBLEM OF SOUTH AFRICAN FAIRY AND FOLK TALES

The Detritus Cycle employs a number of fairy and folk tales, incorporating them into its own narrative. The two genres – futuristic Speculative Fiction and fairy tales at first glance could not seem more incongruous – one deals with future projections of the world, is morally complex and uncertain; the other deals with old landscapes and moral didacticism. Delving deeper into these traditions reveals that this distinction is not so clear. Furthermore, the modern literary trend of retelling fairy and folk tales aspires to complicate and refresh these tales so that they have substantive value for the modern reader. This is a rich and rewarding project. Furthermore, this is a

potentially crucial project for South Africa, where no such attempt has yet been undertaken on any significant scale.

4.1. SUBVERSIVE FAIRY AND FOLK TALES

"After all, weren't we all frightened as children? Nothing has changed since Little Red Riding Hood faced the big bad wolf. What frightens us today is exactly the same sort of thing that frightened us yesterday. It's just a different wolf." – Alfred Hitchcock

The Detritus Cycle used fairy tales to a variety of ends, but the question remains, why use fairy tales at all? In Jack Zipes' work *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation* he discusses the 'Liberating Potential of the Fantastic' in the re-writing of these tales, which many contemporary writers find too backward looking, "too sexist, racist, and authoritarian" with the general content reflecting the concerns of "semi-feudal, patriarchal societies" (Zipes, 1983, p.170). Importantly, Zipes goes on to say:

> What may have engendered hope for better living conditions centuries ago has become more inhibiting for today's children in the western world. The discourse of classical fairy tales, its end effect, cannot be considered enlightening and emancipatory in face of possible nuclear warfare, ecological destruction, growing governmental and industrial regimentation, and intense economic crises.
>
> (Zipes, 1983, p. 170)

Zipes suggests that the reason for re-writing fairy tales is exactly because in reformulating these stories, one has in mind a "fantastical projection of possibilities for non-alienating living conditions" and that in this the fairy tale can "represent our radical and revolutionary urge to restructure society" (Zipes, 1983, p.172). This is a similar urge to what drives Speculative Fiction, a fundamental question that asks 'What if' – is it possible to do away with the assumed myths of progress and reason, to live without them? This is one part of the 'What if' question that appears in *The Detritus Cycle*.

Fairy and folk tales, myths, biblical tales, stock figures, images and symbols all feature in *The Detritus Cycle*. To list the sources used would be reductive: in some cases one fairy tale provided the narrative arch for one character, as is the case with Genevieve, who is Red Riding Hood – with the red hood to prove it. However, that does not preclude her being Goldilocks while exploring an abandoned house in the Grey City, or being both the Abrahamic Eve and Snow White simultaneously while eating a dangerous apple of knowledge one mere chapter later. St. Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, is said to have been born from the wolf's womb. Neko's name is a hint too: Neko Maître means Cat (Japanese) Master (French) and was a play on the original tale *Le Maître Chat*: "Puss in Boots". But Neko is a trickster figure, and behaves more in line with his type than with a specific canonical fairy tale figure. (Little) Jimmy is completely open: he does not start out as a character, even though at times he fulfils certain roles; such as the wolf in the "Three Little Pigs" or the trickster in "The Emperor's New Clothes".

The tales themselves overlap: while the incident with the dragon makes explicit reference to *Beowulf*, it is also an adaptation of the story "The Enchanting Song of the Magical Bird" as it appears

in *Nelson Mandela's Favourite African Folk Tales*. Sometimes it is merely a glancing image in which we see the reflection of a familiar tale. The jagged scars on the foreheads of the 'Potterians' are a reference to possibly the most enchanting text of our time, *Harry Potter*; the 'Sword of Light' that Genevieve leaps over while escaping the worm-people is a reference to the garden of Eden; and Neko's offering 'magic' silkworm cocoons to a poor boy named Jack (who owns only a cow) are instances of this. So what to make of this bog of tales? – especially when one considers that the stories these are based off are indistinct versions themselves, which intersect, loop and circle one another in a mess of limbs? The only hope for a tale as rich in other stories as *The Detritus Cycle* was to keep their use as playful as possible, allowing for imperfections and blurred boundaries. Jack Zipes in *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* points to two strands of fairy tale retelling: remaking and recreating classics; and what he calls 'mosaics' which "draw on an assortment of fairy-tale fragments to evoke a sense of wonder, if not bafflement. The images are otherworldly, bizarre, and lush" (Zipes, 2012, p.137). *The Detritus Cycle* employs both of these means of representing fairy tale narratives.

This richness at points was problematic: during the course readers overlooked details, or became so caught up in a certain image that they lost track of the novel's own narrative. These problems still provide a challenge in the latest version of the text, which required a careful simplicity and clear explanation of action at all times. It will take a number of edits still, perhaps, before every action is distilled enough for a reader to see both the fairy tale narrative as well as *The Detritus Cycle*'s narrative layered over one another. But there was an even deeper problem: the fantastical threatened to overtake the real. Or rather, the fantasy at points threatened the science-fiction. For example, the reader, attuned to the magic of fairy tales, became especially concerned over the real possibility of a wild elephant following a person in order to eat sugar cane. There was a temptation to provide 3rd person omniscient explanations for this: Putin the elephant, in my personally devised and unshared history for him, had belonged to someone who had trained him using sugar cane. There are cases of (Indian) elephants showing an especial fondness for sugar cane, and this was part inspiration for my idea. Changing perspective to unattached, 3rd person omniscient was played with a number of times in the text and ultimately removed, it was too jarring, and added a layer of complication difficult to follow as a reader. Thus it became a project of leaving clues and traces leading up to such an event in the context of the text – having a character overhear a conversation about someone once having trained an elephant, for example.

An aspect of this overwhelming sense of richness was the sheer cast of characters. As a picaresque novel, containing three different journeys by three different characters, this was almost inevitable. Failing the inclusion of a list of *Dramatis Personae* a strategy needed to be developed to help readers keep track of the characters. However, at the same time, the intention was to enhance the 'liberating potential' of these tales, to bring them into the modern world, and as such, reverting to the flat, stock characters that occupy the world of most fairy tales would be counterintuitive to the aims of this novel.

In the eyes of someone such as Phillip Pullman, *The Detritus Cycle* could not be considered an attempt to tell fairy tales, and I agree. Pullman argues that some of the most essential features of the fairy tale are the stock figures; the serene and anonymous narrating voice; the celerity and lack of anything but the most obvious imagery. Pullman explains that "there is no psychology in a fairy tale," – that good people are good, and bad people are bad, and that "one might say that the

characters in a fairy tale are not actually conscious." (Pullman, 2012). This is reflected in their lack of names. Furthermore, the narrative voice of the fairy tale is free of stylistic fingerprints, "a tone licked clean". This seems intimately connected to the sparse but poignant imagery, and Pullman explains that there is no "close description of the natural world or of individuals." (Pullman, 2012). Lastly, there is speed unmatched in any other style, moving from one event to another. Pullman expl ains that "You can only go that fast, however, if you're travelling light; so none of the information you'd look for in a modern work of fiction – names, appearances, background, social context, etc. – is present." (Pullman, 2012). *The Detritus Cycle* sits in opposition to all of these things: almost every character is named; there is a convoluted, personalised tone and thick imagery, with close descriptions of the natural world; and at a sprawling length over 100 000 words it is not a nimble text. The intention, furthermore, is to add around 20 000 more words, to do justice to the ignobly fleeting second-half of the text. When the pressures of times began weighing heavily on the project, it was forced to leap from one event to another with sparseness unlike the rest of the text, and which I hope to flesh out and revise in future drafts.

With these characteristics in mind, it is immensely clear that the characteristics *The Detritus Cycle* adopts are those more inherent to the Speculative Fiction genre. Fantasy, if not also Science Fiction, is renowned for their lengthy narratives, and their plump cast of characters with toothsome back-stories – as in *The Lord of the Rings,* for example. However, the power of fairy tales is their endurance, and the reader's ability to recognise and delight in them no matter the battering or subversion they undergo. Yet the problem still remained on how to cope with secondary characters that were neither flat nor overwhelming. Julie Barker, a fellow student, guided me toward the following piece of advice on writing non-flat secondary characters: provide each character with their primary trait, and then one curious detail. The treatment of Marikasaan, Kamiyo and Giant Tess halted the progress of some readers, and they were disappointed to discover these characters were impermanent features in the text. It is thus a challenge that still faces *The Detritus Cycle*: how to introduce characters who are only temporarily important and balance their representation so that they are neither so dim they become indistinct and fade into the background, but not to make them so detailed that they draw attention away from the primary thrust of the text.

4.2. THE PROBLEM OF SOUTH AFRICAN FAIRY AND FOLK TALES

If one Googles 'South African Fairy Tales' the first result is a text written in 1910 by James Honeji. The intention of that book, stated in its introduction, is to preserve the memory of the ancient habits, customs and traditions of the 'native races' in the face of the quick progress of South Africa toward 'civilization' with a 'z'. This book, and others like it – including *Native Fairytales of South Africa* by Ethel L. McPherson (1919), *Outa Karel's Stories South African Folk-Lore Tales by* Sanni Metelerkamp (1914), and *Old Hendrik's Tales by* Captain Arthur Owen Vaughan (1904) – are representative of the landscape of the most easily accessible and predominant form of fairy and folk tales from South Africa. In researching fairy and folk tales for use in *The Detritus Cycle*, it became obvious that there are two primary streams of folk tales in South Africa: 'Indigenous' tales about black, tribal African life, collected before 1990 by white South Africans; and those same tales re-appropriated by all races after 1994, further bowdlerised into cutesy stories for children.

Noverino Canonici in his book on Zulu folktale tradition explains that folk and fairy tales have their origin in oral traditions and thus in oral societies, where the memory of those in the society is the "only storehouse on which one may rely for information" (Canonici, 1993, p.3). In a literate society these stories are different: meaning is fixed onto the page, and the interpretation of events, vision and feelings toward it are captured, classified and collected. Once meaning is affixed in this way, one can have the rewriting of such a tale: a purposeful subversion of the images, meaning or some other element in the story. For this reason it is useful to refer to any version of the tale, oral or written, as a 'telling' – which acknowledges that any version is exactly that: one of many representations of the story being told.

The tenuous transition between oral and written story may provide one explanation as to why the rewriting of fairy tales in South Africa has fallen short of the subversive potential seen in its international counterparts, by the likes of Neil Gaiman and Angela Carter. Capturing an oral story, classifying and collecting it with a new methodology and a new audience is an act of subversive writing (if not quite rewriting) in itself, given the landscape that exists after Apartheid with regard to fairy and folk tales. However, this has come with a bias: the belief that fairy and folk tales are *only* for children, and the subsequent neutering of the dangerous elements in these stories. Perhaps for this same reason – the belief that these stories are only for children – the possibilities for subversive post-colonial, anti-capitalist, black consciousness, modernised, feminist tellings seem largely unexplored.

This goes some way to explaining the intention behind my use (which often felt like 'abuse') of fairy tales in my own narrative. Both Western and African (terms used expediently so as not to detract here from the central argument) stories were used in *The Detritus Cycle*. With limited exceptions, I did not use the tales collected by people in contexts such as those of Honeji. One exception is Neko's telling of 'Hlanganyane and the Old Woman', a tale very similar to the one in *Folk-tales From Mpondoland* collected by John Cantrell. In most cases I found these texts fruitless to work with, and I would argue much of this is due to ignorance by the collectors and readers of these tales (including myself, as a white middle-class South African) toward the vocabulary of symbols of the oral stories.

The Detritus Cycle is aimed at a middle class audience: the same people who, in the context of the narrative, would be the most likely to have the economic and cultural inclination to buy their way into a lifestyle estate such as Ku. Taking myself and the people I have contact with as an example, if you mention a girl wearing a red hood, any story that follows will be in conversation with the version of "Red Riding Hood" that they know best. If you mention white pebbles like those seen in Neko's dream in the first few chapters of the novel, this requires a different set of cultural knowledge to understand that what is being implicated is the Tokoloshe, and the significance of this is easily lost.

For the larger purpose of the text, there needed to be both a sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar. This was needed to achieve the unsettling defamiliarisation required for this text to successfully explore its thematic concerns. Thus with regard to the fairy and folk tales used, there first needed to be both a sense of recognition and a sense of strangeness to achieve the *unheimlich*, the 'uncanny' – as Freud conceives of it, something that is old and familiar, emerging again in an unsettling form (Freud, 1919). *The Detritus Cycle* however makes no claims to being an 'uncanny' text, although in many ways achieving the *unheimlich* was part of the desire of using old, fantastical tales in a realist setting. Freud touches on the issue of fairy tales, explaining that their uncanny

events are not experienced as uncanny because the reader has already adjusted their sensibility to the fictional world. Thus to achieve the uncanny, a story must first present itself as realist and then break this trust with the reader by presenting supernatural elements.

In many ways, the effort of *The Detritus Cycle* was the reverse of this: what appears to be a fairy tale world is interrupted and disintegrated by elements of the real. Thus when the fantastical enters the text for the characters – in the form for example, of the dragon – the reader understands this as an element of the real world rather than fantastical danger, making it all the more dangerous. For this reason I chose to use easily recognisable fairy and folk tales, where for a large part the reader is expected to know the course of events, important symbols and the outcome, so that this could be effectively subverted. Nonetheless, a number of lesser known African and South African myths, fairy and folk tales were used for the purpose mentioned before: as a wilful act of subverting their existing meaning into those aligned with the themes of the book.

For instance, in the version of "Kamiyo of the River" told by Hugh Tracey in *Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales* (The South African title being *Madiba Magic: Nelson Mandela's favourite stories for children*) Kamiyo is carved from wood by her husband, and then stolen by two young men who claim 'such an old man may not have such a beautiful young wife'. Her husband sends two doves to retrieve first her apron, then her marital headband, and eventually her life, when she turns back into a tree. Kamiyo is an object to be shifted around the game board, with no will of her own. In my telling of the story, Marikasaan (equated with 'the husband') is seen as jealous, filled with rage and importantly, castrated: despite Jimmy's belief, he is not a real physical threat to Kamiyo. It is Kamiyo's own conscience that makes her send him gifts, acknowledgement that she is the reason for his undoing. Jimmy's childish lens turns Kamiyo into a tree, where really we know that she has committed suicide. Furthermore, she defiantly bequeaths only an olive branch to Marikasaan, and gives all of her wealth to Jimmy to help him escape as she could not. The intention was to empower the titular character Kamiyo (part of the reason for retaining her real name), thereby providing a feminist critique of the telling by Hugh Tracey.

It is said that fairy tales are the Science Fiction of the past, and this is a very significant idea for both the themes of the novel, and the intentional project of making the familiar strange. Zipes argues that what the rewriting of fairy tales allows for is a "fantastic projection of possibilities for non-alienating living conditions" (Zipes,1983, p.172). Furthermore, the 'counter-culture' intention is achieved when:

> Alienating techniques (which) no longer rely on seductive, charming illusions of a happy end as legitimation of the present civilizing (sic) process, but make use of jarring symbols that demand an end to superimposed illusions.
>
> (Zipes, 1983, p.172)

The above is very similar to the intention of Science Fiction and more broadly, Speculative Fiction, which seeks to expose the flaws of our current society by logically extrapolating them to often unpleasant ends. This understanding was a crucial foundation for the combination of the Speculative Fiction and fairy tale genre in *The Detritus Cycle*.

The largest intersection at which fairy tales and Speculative Fiction meet in *The Detritus Cycle* is at the crooked avenues of magic and technology. In our everyday understanding, these two aspects of

our imaginative life are at opposite ends of the spectrum: technology is everything that magic is not. It is explained and understood. Magic is defined in opposition to this. It is found in things that are unexplained, not understood and unordinary; synonymous with the miraculous. For this reason we have headlines about 'medical miracles': phenomenon apparently beyond the explanatory powers of science. This example is double-edged, and in fact provides an entry point to the view put forward in *The Detritus Cycle*, that our current view of science relies on magical thinking, the religion of 'reason and progress' – as Gray would argue. It is difficult to name even one personal acquaintance who single-handedly knows how to build a cell-phone. On the other hand, I have difficulty naming an acquaintance who does not own one. We may be able to operate this technology, but as laymen we do not understand it. Magic in this way operates in our thinking every day. We assume and treat as expected that we can transmit our voice, text or other information via these mechanisms, just as within a fairy tale, an enchantment, magical being or fated coincidence is treated without suspicion.

This intersection of magic and technology is intended to create the sense of something familiar, changed, and to draw attention to our poor critical thinking about science and technology. The characters' explanations of the technology they see around them in magical terms is no more scientific than our assumed understanding of technology. This was vital to the central aim of the text in critiquing myths of progress and regress. Any uncritical thought is dangerous, and much of our 'understanding' of technology as fitting into a coherent, scientific and rational world view is not as coherent, scientific or rational as we would like to think. In many ways it resembles religious faith and even fairy tales: we accept the magic that we live in as part of the conditions of our world when they are narrated to us by sources we trust. To return to the words of John Gray, "Our secular myths are just religious myths rebottled, but with most of the good things taken out" (Niederhauser, 2013). In the 21st century, being able to see the bias of the narrator is the most important skill we could develop, because it is this kind of uncritical thought that leads people to be convinced by the *Lessons for Abandonment*. The *Lessons* mimic real life instances of dangerous pseudo-scientific and political nonsense, using slogans such as "Nature will not attempt to preserve us". While at its heart, there is absolute truth in this, its intention is to mask truth rather than reveal it. That is the way Ku makes its citizens interact with such slogans: the way all such ambiguous statements can either be used as ethereal marketing catch or as a point of consideration on the route to enlightenment. The only difference is intention. A consumer culture forces this into the realm of nonsense rather than truth, used to represent a set of profitable ideas rather than interact with such ideas on a real level.

Much of the initial idea for the *Lessons* was taken from *The Dark Mountain Project's* "Eight Principles of Uncivilisation", which uses beautiful but potentially arbitrary and vacuous language – such as *"*We write with dirt under our fingernails." Uncritical thought is dangerous, but when the intention is to take such ideas and be critical of them, they can become something truly valuable. This is the distinction that the *Lessons* repeatedly draw between reverence and respect. Language that intends to invoke reverence before careful thought is problematic. The characters each deal with these *Lessons* in a unique way, but the most significant similarity is that they have all learnt the *Lessons* by rote. To learn by rote is not to absorb or reflect, but simply to repeat. In this way, the truth does not matter.

Indeed, this brings one back to the critical retelling of fairy tales, intended as subversive tools rather than stories to be repeated by rote. *The Detritus Cycle* refuses to lay out the laws of the story

immediately, not answering whether it is fantastical or real for much of the text. At many times this confusion became overwhelming for readers, and it meant that every aspect of the text not necessary for this project had to be astoundingly clear and straightforward: calling for a distillation of terms in a glossary, and indicating exact locations on a map. I hope to further clarify these confusions while still retaining this fundamental disorientation in future revisions of *The Detritus Cycle*.

Using familiar fairy tales and subverting these was crucial to this aspect of the project, but this research also revealed the lack of subversive tellings of South African fairy and folk tales. The intersections and conflations of magic and technology are the cornerstone of a larger ideological intention of the text: to encourage critical thought on all levels of engagement, a tool necessary for any reader in the modern age.

5. CONCLUSION

The Detritus Cycle is a project of ideas and both Speculative Fiction and fairy tales lend themselves to this kind of exploration. They are also both fascinating genres for South African writers and readers: the former experiencing an explosion in its exposure, and the latter still largely ignored as a cultural project. The three central ideas that make up the text: the critique of both the myth of progress and the solutions touted by modern philosophers; issues surrounding gender, sexuality and feminism and a strict belief in the potential of subversive retellings of fairy and folk tales, are not as important as their overall intended effect: to encourage critical thought, question and discussion around what we take to be fundamental and unchangeable aspects of our society and culture.

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