

Bangor University

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Fearest Enden: Including: Fearest Enden, a fantasy novel Saviors, Scapegoats & Sacred Trees: A Critical Discussion

Haslam, Stephen

Award date:
2018

Awarding institution:
Bangor University

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 25. Apr. 2024

Fearest Enden:

Including: Fearest Enden, a fantasy novel

&

Saviors, Scapegoats & Sacred Trees:
A Critical Discussion

A thesis submitted to Bangor University in Candidature for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

By Steve Haslam
2018

Abstract

Biblical literalism can be dangerous, especially when scriptural exegeses shape standards for social norms. According to the 2nd version of the biblical creation story of Adam and Eve for example, all of mankind must suffer for Genesis's account of the choice of one woman. As many peoples have historically viewed this ancient story as fact, despite various changes, the ambiguous and often contradictory language of the text, and preconceptions stemming from philosophical interpretations, women have been regarded as inferior to man largely in part to Eve's role in the story, or more specifically, man's rationale of her role in the story.

Similar to the role the Eve's treatment plays in the description, man's gift of "dominion" over nature has historically allowed for more destruction than stewardship. It is difficult to imagine, given the central role that trees play in not only the biblical creation, and The Fall, but also the redemption of mankind on the cross, that man's subsequent and continual choice to dominate nature can have such little effect in comparison to the original sin.

Using the events of the biblical Eden as a backstory for the plot of my 90,000 word novel, *Fearest Enden*, pivotal elements of the Edenic story were changed to paint Eve as hero rather than scapegoat. The novel follows Elias Hughes, a descendant of Eve who must rely on ancestrally endowed talents to stop the first earthly evil, Cain. Eve's choice(s) are recognized as the main motif of *Fearest Enden*: sacrifice in the name of love and fear. As a secondary theme, as in Eden, the treatment of nature, and trees specifically has a direct impact on the spiritual and physical survival of the novel's characters and their world.

Part two of the thesis: Saviors, Scapegoats & Sacred Trees: A Critical Understanding & Reflection, examines more closely the underlying themes of the novel. Preceded by acknowledgements, an introduction to the title of *Fearest Enden* will analyze the central themes and clarify the novel's title, meaning and history.

The first critical argument focuses on Eve as savior and scapegoat. Examining both the ambiguity and literalism of early chapters in Genesis, I will argue that Eve was set up to fail because she was entered into a pact without her signature; that Adam was present when Eve spoke to the devil and that they partook of the fruit together; and that the only deceiving serpent(s) in this history, walked upright, contriving stories to defame Eve and women. I will argue that the choice, her choice, should have been defined a heroic sacrifice, making her the first and perhaps greatest human hero of all time and thus reversing, in a sense, the purported origins of original sin.

The second argument is that fundamentalism and biblical literalism has led not only to man's unjust ruling over women, but also over nature. The consequences of the latter must be both terrestrial and spiritual. Terrestrial, because the first and continued choice to take improper dominion over nature, like the original sin, is irreversible; spiritual, because trees play a central role in both the fall and redemption of the souls of mankind. Examining the sacredness as well as life-saving and life-ending properties of the trees in Eden and Golgotha, but also in a number of myths and stories from various cultures around the world, I will postulate the need to redefine "dominion" for the purpose of saving what earth man has left to steward. The final sections of the discussion will include influences, a conclusion, and bibliography.

Contents

I. Acknowledgements

II. Creative Novel: *Fearest Enden*

III. Critical Discussion: Saviors, Scapegoats, & Sacred Trees – (Pg. 224)

A. Introduction: An Examination of the Title: *Fearest Enden*

1. The Sacrifice of Eve
2. The Sacrifice of Animals
3. The Sacrifice of Elias

B. Motifs

1. Savior & Scapegoat: A Defense of Eve
2. Scapegoats & Saviors: Sacred Trees

C. Influences

D. Conclusion

E. Bibliography

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge all of the people who made this project possible. First and foremost I would like to thank my sweet wife Jamie for suffering through the financial toil necessary to make my dreams a reality, and for always pushing me to do my best. To my daughter Lucy for giving me the faith to challenge the impossible and for giving me the smiles that lifted me from doubt. Secondly, I would like to thank my family for being my critics and biggest fans during my life and during the construction of the novel. Thirdly, I would like to thank my supervisors Emeritus Professor Ian Gregson, Professor Helen Wilcox, and Professor Carol Rumens for being the life preservers in this often black and heavy gale. Your guidance, encouragement, critiques and expertise were crucial in completing this adventure. Fourthly, I would like to thank my godfather, Poet David Lee and my high school creative writing teacher, Danna Sides for inspiring me to be someone beyond expected and for seeing light inside of me when I only saw darkness. Lastly, but most of all, I would like to thank my Heavenly Parents for providing me with the imagination and talents possible to dream up imaginary worlds and conjure characters and words from empty thoughts and space. I owe it to you all.

Fearest Enden

By Steve Haslam

Contents

Prologue -	8
I. Into the Clouds -	9
II. Bane -	14
III. High Woods Impenetrable –	23
IV. Homeward Returning –	28
V. With Man, as with His Friend –	32
VI. As When the Sun New Risen –	49
VII. Solitary Flight –	55
VIII. From Mortal or Immortal Minds –	58
IX. To Hide	65
X. The Trepidation Talked -	71
XI. Of Guardians Bright -	78
XII. From the High Neighboring Hills, A Stranger -	86
XIII. Phantasms & Dreams -	102
XIV. Secrets of Another World -	110
XV. Into the Heart of Eve -	123
XVI. Thus to Eve Renewed -	133
XVII. Embattled Ranks -	145
XVIII. Founded in Reason -	155
XIX. His Great Purpose -	172
XX. His Journey's End & Our Beginning Woe -	179
XXI. And Best Prepared Endure -	186
XXII. Familiar -	193
XXIII. The Dark Descent -	195
XXIV. The Heart of Hell -	205
XXV. Deep to the Roots -	216
XXVI. Against the Day of Battle -	222
XXVII. Of Foe or Seeming Friend -	228
XXVIII. A Bridge of Wondrous Length –	235
XXIX. Anointed Son Avenged -	240
XXX. And What Thou Fearest, Alike Destroys All Hope -	244
XXXI. In Captivity -	251
XXXII. A Solemn Council -	254
XXXIII. With Him, or Who Deceive -	260
XXXIV. War Then, War -	265
XXXV. Hell Shall Unfold -	286
Glossary -	292

Part One

Prologue

No ten-year-old should ever want to bury their past. Nevertheless, Elias Hughes frantically scraped at the ground, moving any soil he could find to fill the open grave. How would he explain the wounds on his arms, on his face? What would be his excuse for sneaking into the house in the wet, cold middle of the night? He was supposed to be asleep. Thoughts raced through his mind as shredded clouds passed through the moonlight. He knelt in the mud, moving masses of wet leaves and dirt towards the staring hole. The true darkness came from what lay beneath and he knew that if he didn't bury it now, his family...his friends...they'd never be safe. The ground seemed to breathe as he sealed the opening with mud. He threw stones, sticks, and soggy logs on top of the grave, assuring himself that nothing dead or alive would make its way out. Once the hole was sealed, Elias limped out of the forest and across the field towards his home. As he quickly hobbled through the tall dead grass, he made himself a promise. Six others knew about what had happened on this eve of nightmares, and for the rest of his life if he had to, he would keep their secret safe.

I. Into the Clouds

Seventeen years later.

Mr. Elias Hughes' classroom was a student favorite. A plethora of desks had been arranged in a giant circle for discussion, beanbag chairs lined two of the walls, and shelves with magazines and comic books lined the others. Two of the walls were covered in mosaic tiles depicting suns in yellows and reds. The other walls were plastered with student artwork, collages, and photos. If a student needed a place to sit and dream, this was it. Elias Hughes taught Twelfth Grade English, Journalism, and Creative Writing. He also held a degree in counseling, and he tried to keep his planning period available for students who needed to talk.

Over the past two years, Cloudland High School had lost most of its Art classes to test preparation courses. As an advocate for having art in schools, he tried to give his students as many artistic opportunities as possible. He was also a big supporter of Cloudland athletics. Therefore, today being Friday, he was more than willing to have students spend class time creating signs for the soccer team. Keeping the noise level down on a Friday would be difficult, so he gave the kids some crayons, some paper, and let some music play in the background.

Elias lay back in his teacher's chair, one leg crossed and resting on the other. One arm rested on the side of his chair as he slightly rocked in his seat. His left index finger twirled through a bit of his shaggy hair, which hung slightly over the ear. The twirling of hair was a habit that he had formed as a child, a habit, which always came with moments

of deep thought or flashbacks. Mr. Elias Hughes was daydreaming. Something he had been doing a lot of lately; inexcusable really, for the middle of class, and especially for a teacher. Things weren't normal though. For the past few weeks, during the day and during sleepless nights, he had been seeing images in his mind. Images eerily familiar, like a childhood memory blocked out for a good reason.

The dark images sent shivers dancing from his neck to his wrists. It didn't matter that the central heating in Cloudland's classrooms breathed uncontrollable fire through the classroom vents. As students worked both on their artwork and on controlling their excessive sweat, he shook from the thoughts of humid, cold nights, open graves, and secrets buried long ago.

"Mr. Hughes," an impatient female voice spoke over the intercom. The sound wasn't enough to break his stupor.

"Mr. Hughes!" The voice shouted.

"Yes m'am," Elias said, his voice cracking, as he scrambled back towards reality.

"Why did you not respond when I first called your name?"

"My apologies Dr. Elliot, I was in a conference with a student," he lied. "What can I do for you?"

"I need you to come to my office during your planning period."

Elias hesitated to respond. He knew it was not a good idea to keep the boss waiting, but few things he despised more than using his planning period for something other than what he had already scheduled.

“Yes m’am,” he said. “I should arrive shortly after the end of sixth period.”

Without thanks, the intercom clicked off and he knew he was in for something unpleasant. Their conversation had ended the same way as many from their past. While Dr. Elliott was fully expectant of all her subordinates to bow a knee and speak to her with the utmost regard, she rarely returned the slightest of courtesies. Any meeting with the school principal that was separate from the occasional faculty meeting was not a good thing. She did not believe in compliments but rather heralded herself as a firm believer in constructive criticism. “Constructive,” however, consisted of a series of insults towards a teacher’s teaching style or method that supposedly made Dr. Elliott or the school look bad.

Dr. Elliott had done this to Elias before. She had even fired him, twice, or at least she had tried. On observing Elias’ classroom on various occasions each year, she had been appalled at the sight of students lounging in bean-bag chairs reading novels instead of sitting upright in their desks. She despised his incorporation of music in the classroom in whatever form it came. She also could not comprehend why he chose to allow some students to draw pictures instead of writing book reports. These were just a few of his quirks that Dr. Elliott hid behind when recommending his dismissal to the Board. In reality, the Board didn’t need reasons for a Principal in their system to fire a teacher; they would usually just trust their judgment. However, when it came time for each Board meeting, Elias would sit, pink slip in hand, surrounded by literally hundreds of parents, blood-thirsty at his defense.

The fact was that Elias’ students loved him and as a result their parents had his back. Students found comfort in a teacher and an example who helped them to discover

and express themselves by any means possible. Elias truly loved his job but he loved his students more.

Dr. Elliott was also at another disadvantage. Despite being highly respected in education by officials in the city system, the State, and the entire South East, she was old. She had been principal at Cloudland since its inception. Therefore, nearly every parent who had grown up in Carter County had known her when they were students at CHS and were quite familiar with her cold and callous nature. They loathed her. So the unofficial coalition for the security of Mr. Hughes' job was formed. As long as he had the parents behind him, he would continue doing what he loved, and these little meetings for instructional scrutiny, couldn't hold him down. At least that's what he thought.

"Don't let her get to ya Mr. H," one student said, sitting up from his beanbag chair in the corner of the room. "We've got your back."

"I appreciate it," Elias said. "It's probably nothing."

"You want me to take care of her for you?" another student joked, "I know a guy, who knows a guy, if you know what I mean."

"Really guys, I appreciate the humor and the love," he continued. "But, she probably just wants to chat about the school play next month. She probably wants to make sure I've got all of my ducks in a row."

"If it's not a big deal Mr. Hughes," one girl said. "Then why are you shaking?"

Elias looked at the hairs on his wrist, which were standing straight up.

"It's nothing guys, really," he said. "Let's go to lunch."

As students put down their projects and tried to beat each other out the door, Elias stood still, staring, thinking.

“It really is nothing,” he said to himself. Something else scared him much more.

II. Bane

12:45. On the dot.

Elias sat hovering over a yellow notepad on his rickety-black, metal teacher's desk. His focus had nearly left the room, when he was startled by the deafening tone of the bell. He jolted upwards, nearly drawing a jagged line through the face on the page. The end of sixth period was usually welcome. Sixth period began twenty minutes after the end of lunch time and the students would come to class hyped up on their daily dose of sugar and less than willing to spend this part of their day actually learning.

"Your poems must be on my desk before you leave!" He blurted out. "We'll be starting pantoums on Monday."

As students cluttered around his desk, all trying to avoid being the last to leave their poems in his box, Elias tried catching his breath. His heart still raced from the sudden sound of the bell, which had interrupted a daydream of dark artistry on his notepad.

"What is that?" a voice said from over Elias' shoulder.

Julia, the T.A., had been grading papers at an adjacent desk and couldn't help but notice the drawing that Mr. Hughes had begun after giving the students their assignment for the day.

"It's so morbid looking."

Still tense from the bell, Elias scrambled to collect students' papers and began placing them in a pile over his drawing.

“Oh, it’s nothing, just doodles.”

“See you tomorrow,” one student said.

“Later Mister H,” said another.

“Bye guys.”

As students trickled out the door, Elias straightened the pile on his desk. As he tried to gather his thoughts for his meeting with Dr. Elliott, he noticed a small corner of his yellow notepaper jutting out from beneath his newly-formed stack of poems. A dark-cloaked figure, drawn in blue and black ink smiled up at him.

“It’s nothing,” he repeated in his head, trying to convince himself.

A familiar fear from childhood began to burn through his bloodstream. Quivering at the sight, he knew better. He gathered himself and made his way across the room and out into the hall. As he strolled down the crowded hallway, Elias calmly wove in between passing and standing students taking in unwanted breaths of overused aftershave and pubescent body sprays. The occasional student would acknowledge his passing with a “Hey Mr. H,” or “What’s up Mr. Hughes?” Elias would smile, nod, or return a few words of courtesy as he went, giving the occasional high five to an athlete or student similar in height. He was nearly oblivious to the length of his trip, which just so happened to be one of the longest distances a student or teacher could travel on campus. Though Dr. Elliott had not been successful in removing Elias from the Cloudland High School faculty list, she had seemed triumphant in moving his classroom further and further from the main hallway each year. She had capped off her efforts after the previous school year, in moving Elias’ classroom to the old art hallway, rarely used anymore other than for storage. The seemingly deserted last wing of the school had all but been condemned due

to its failure to meet fire code. He liked it though, for a few reasons. First, and foremost was that the less of his superior's face that he had to see the better. Among other reasons, he loved the fact that by virtually abandoning the art hallway of the school, Dr. Elliott had not enforced her hideous attempts at interior decoration near his classroom. Elias tried his best, but could never seem to ignore the teal green color that Dr. Elliott had ordered painted on all walls of the main building. He had speculated that in an attempt to use the school colors of hunter green and white, that she had mixed them together. Whatever the reason, he humored himself by imagining a "remodeling" project which would no-doubt send Dr. Elliott over the edge but would make the school layout a little more like his classroom and a little less dreary.

As the remaining students funneled their way into their 7th period classrooms and late stragglers raced to beat the bell, Elias stopped at the last drinking fountain before the office hallway. He peered into the mirror on the wall above the fountain, making a last attempt to straighten his tie and look as professional as needed. Pushing the rusted knob on the drinking fountain and waiting a few seconds to get some cold water, he stared at his image in the mirror. It was being contorted by scraped glass, years of chap-stick graffiti, and any other unwanted physical attention that careless students seemed to give. Just then, Elias felt the ground shake. Not tremendously, not enough to lose his balance, but a faint quiver, enough he noticed, to make ripples in the water that splashed atop the drinking fountain. The shaking feeling, just like the drawing on his desk, were vaguely and hauntingly familiar. He returned his gaze to the mirror, only to find the image of the morbid face in his drawing smiling back at him. Only, the contortions made from the tarnished glass made the face more real this time. Startled, he began splashing water from

the fountain on his face. Taking a few deep breaths, and realizing that his fears had gotten the best of him, he used the cuff of his sleeve to wipe the water from his face. He relaxed, stepped to the side, and took another look back at the mirror. The face was gone but Elias immediately noticed a tattered sticker in the top corner of the mirror: “No Fear,” it read. “Yeah,” he thought to himself. “Easier said than done.”

He made his way around the corner and up the stairs to the main foyer. He walked past the school mascot, a giant bronze statue of a Highland warrior, supposedly pointing towards the enemy as his clan prepared for battle. Ironically enough, the finely sculpted index finger of the Scottish war hero pointed straight to the main office.

The enemy indeed, he thought as he pushed through the door.

Elias made his way to one of four relatively un-cushioned seats that sat against the wall adjacent to Dr. Elliott’s office. Anxious students, like inmates awaiting sentencing, already occupied two of the seats. On the one side was Dontavius St. Paul, a favorite of Mr. Hughes who greeted Elias with a pound of the knuckles as he sat. Dontavius, though quiet and respectful around Mr. Hughes, was a local gang leader and had had his share of run-ins with authority figures in the past. On the other side was Elizabeth Merkley, who although a good student, often tested the dress code with short skirts. The three sat in silence for a moment, each looking in different directions to avoid conversation. Elias had sat in the middle of the students, making the accommodations that much more cramped and awkward.

He peered across the room and over the green countertop to Ms. Hastings, the secretary and school bookkeeper who was counting stacks of quarters from lunch. Her shoulder length black hair was graying, and Elias thought of how long she had been in

direct servitude of Dr. Elliott. Though able to hold her own, Ms. Hastings had a much kinder nature than her boss. She always greeted Elias with a smile when he walked in and asked about his day. Today had been different though. He knew that even though she was lost in the thought of counting coins, Ms. Hastings knew why Dr. Elliott had called him in, and she wouldn't be able to look him in the eye to tell him whatever it was. He switched his gaze to the pictures behind Ms. Hastings on the wall. A faded copper sign read: "School Administrators: Past and Present." There were three pictures: Two dusty black and white images of bald Caucasian men in their late sixties, each sitting in a different arm-chair; each had been the principal of Cloudland when it went by its former name of The Roan Mountain School; and the third image, which had probably been shot when color film was first introduced, was Dr. Elliott. Elias was not surprised in noticing, that in comparison to the other photos on the wall, its condition appeared to be immaculate and even recently dusted.

Dr. Elliott's door swung open and a frustrated lower classman, a baseball player named Dylan Hendrix walked out, head lowered, looking as if he had just lost all his dignity. Maybe he had.

"If you want to play baseball for this school ever again Mr. Hendrix," Dr. Elliott's voice rattled out from inside the office, "You'll have to earn it!" She continued, "And the future is not looking bright for you young man, not at all."

Elias watched as Dylan made his way over to Ms. Hastings, who had already prepared a note for him to get back to class. She handed him the note and he headed out the door.

“Always has to have the last word,” Elias said.

Dr. Elliott spoke up from inside her office: “Ms. Hastings, will you hold my calls for the rest of the day? And will you call the parents of Mr. St. Paul and Ms. Merkley to come pick them up? I will have to speak with them next week. Notify the parents that their children have been suspended. Thank you. Mr. Hughes, step into my office.”

Elizabeth Merkley pulled the purple streak in her blond bangs away from her eyes and peered up at Elias as he arose. “Good luck Mr. Hughes,” she said. Elias thanked her and made his way through the door labeled “Principal” and shut it behind him.

The walls in the office, like those of the hallway were mind-boggling. Apricot. Not enough red to spark excitement and not enough white to be peaceful--pure torture for anyone with the slightest eye for interior design. Elias kept his head down as he entered the room. He did so not in fear of the dragon he soon would encounter, but because he could hardly bear to look at his surroundings. Old picture frames dotted the walls, some filled with pictures of the principal, others with awards and diplomas. The overwhelming smell of recently sprayed cucumber melon mixed with burnt coffee was almost too much to bear. Dr. Elliott stood at a small table in the back of the room, pouring herself the last of her daily Folgers brew.

“Some of these athletes need to learn that they can no longer get these despicable grades and behave the way they do in class if they want to represent our school,” Dr. Elliott said, preceding a sip from her lipstick-stained mug.

There was perhaps one thing in their troubled history on which Elias and Dr. Elliott could actually see eye to eye. Elias held all of his students to a high standard, but especially student athletes. He shared Dr. Elliott’s philosophy that the term “student

athlete” denoted that one must be a student before he or she is an athlete and thus maintain good grades and behavior while participating in sports. Still, Elias did not agree with Dr. Elliott’s method of belittling students in order for them to see things her way. Nevertheless, Elias played along and allowed Dr. Elliott to attempt to build on common ground before his own belittling session would begin.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve brought you in here today Elias,” Dr. Elliott turned and spoke.

“I have a few theories.” Elias said.

“Well, I’ll get straight to the point Mr. Hughes,” Dr. Elliott continued. “The Board has recommended the introduction of more test prep courses in our school.”

“I’m familiar with the recommendation,” Elias said. “What does this have to do with me?”

“You know by now Mr. Hughes, spending for our school is minimal.”

He wished she would get to the point.

“Since we don’t have the money to hire more teachers or create more units, this means that we will have to cut some, if not all of the electives to make room.” Dr. Elliott’s wrinkled cheeks lifted, forming a faint grin that should not have existed. For what principal in their right mind would be happy at the thought of losing units?

Elias’ mind raced through a variety of conclusions before arriving at one. Dr. Elliott’s smile got larger upon realization that Elias understood what this meant. Of the already diminished amount of electives taught at Cloudland High School, Elias taught half. The only classes Dr. Elliott could never remove would be Band and Choir. That left Creative Writing, Journalism, and Drama. Even though Elias didn’t teach the drama

class, its demise would inevitably lead to no more plays. Dr. Elliott had seemingly found a loophole that would sink Elias' career by removing the courses he taught.

“Should you decide to stay at Cloudland through this transition, Mr. Hughes, and I would not blame you for wanting to resign, you would keep your Twelfth Grade English courses and the rest of your classes would be Test Prep.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, Elias, and I hope the school play goes well.”

Elias turned and briskly walked out the door and into the main office. Ms. Hastings only had time to offer half of a condolence before Elias had made it past her and out of the main office door. His strides picked up speed as he made his way down the hallway towards the last wing. Each classroom, filled with clusters of chatter, whisked by in a whirlwind of sound countered by his racing emotions. Fear, mixed with worry and sadness, soon turned to anger and Elias knew he had to get out of there.

As he turned the corner on the last hallway, a brief vibration caused him to stagger and almost lose his balance. The padlocks on the students' lockers swayed slightly as a brief flash of shadow shot across the floor. He turned just in time to watch a charcoal figure without definite form move and seemingly disappear into the floorboards. Though the event had startled him, Elias was familiar to what therapists had convinced him were “hallucinations.” Moments of extreme stress and fear in his past would lead to moments like these: moments where reality and a dark world in his mind seemed to become intertwined. As stressed as he was with his new predicament, he knew the images, the shadows, and even the seismic activities he had been noticing were all

related. One thing was for sure: Normally, Elias would spend his planning period grading papers. Today, he was going home early.

III. High Woods Impenetrable

Across the Atlantic Ocean, on the southeastern portion of the African continent, the black of evening faded out the brilliant, colorful blooms native to one of Africa's most ancient habitats. Hundreds of species of flora and fauna, some unknown to human research, slept in a dark and eerie silence. The Impenetrable Forest, known for its dense canopy, seemed dark to most during the day and near impossible to navigate at night.

Across the base of a dark green hillside, the dew from an afternoon shower trickled down leaves and twisted along vines to the valley below. A thick breeze emerged between two hovering ridges and swallowed the slope in its passing. Riding on the back of the trade wind, five cloaked figures blended into the backdrop, slowly descending the slippery surface. The hunched beings crept without sound, disturbing only the sleeping mist, which they pierced as they floated down the hillside. Draped in black cloaks, the creatures hovered in militaristic unison. Halfway through their descent, the leader, who appeared much larger and more peremptory than the rest, raised a drab and deformed hand to halt his companions. A string of beads made from chunks of rounded bone fell from his wrist into the sleeve of his robe. The other figures slowed to a stop, keeping their eyes beneath the ridges of their hoods to avoid eye shine from the moon's reflection.

The surrounding primeval Ugandan forest, which bordered the Great Rift Valley, was home to many animals. The most ancient of these creatures, having survived the last Ice Age, were wise in their age and well prepared for unwelcome dangers.

The encroaching mercenaries knew they weren't welcome. Part human, part beast, their keen senses of smell and hearing made them acutely aware of their

surroundings. Even in sheer silence the beings could detect a resistance was mounting which increased the urgency in the hunt.

Their prey had found a sanctuary here. The dwindling number of African mountain gorillas had come here to escape the clutches of man. One ape in particular was referred to by the natives as Ambrosios. He was known by many as the protector of a dark secret found within the heart of the forest. No human knew how old Ambrosios was. To some he was a ghost, to others a great animal spirit. To the many hunters who had sought his hide, he was immortal.

The leader of the hunt cared nothing for the rumors; nor did he fear any danger. Tilting his head toward the moon, he took in a breath of the night air. Smelling the proximity of their prey, baby Bwindi mountain gorillas, he motioned for the others to branch out in a semi-circle to surround them. The ringleader revealed a thick, yet shortened spear from underneath his robe. The blade and shaft, made of sharpened bone, were more than enough to eliminate a helpless infant gorilla. The others raised similar weapons and resumed their descent. The leader knew that the infant gorillas were the only hope for the survival of the forest's secret. He also knew that by hunting them, Ambrosios would be forced to emerge.

The four small infants quietly snored under the branch of a short brown mahogany tree. Bundled together for warmth in their sleep, two of the gorillas sucked their thumbs while the others rolled around in their makeshift bed.

The assassins had been hunting them for days, following the scent of their dung and the trail left by their mother who had already left to find the location of their next nest. The mother knew they were being hunted, but she reasoned that humans and any

other creatures large enough to hunt her young would only be successful during the day. Anxious to find them a refuge, she left them alone, but it would only be moments before her return.

The leader knew that those who had sent him were getting impatient and that this small window of time might just be their only opportunity before they themselves were hunted. The hillside began to level into a valley as the cloaked beings raced, weapons in hand, towards their prey. Creatures on the ground scurried in all directions to avoid being squashed underfoot in the onslaught. The attackers began breaking through shrubbery and cutting through vines, knowing the forthcoming sounds would rouse the sleeping apes and possibly any other creatures that could protect them. If they weren't swift, the babies would awaken and escape. The leader caught a glimpse of an infant gorilla's eye, which had faintly opened just in time to see him raise his spear and aim its ashen blade toward its head. A booming roar followed by a high-pitched scream shot through the night sky behind him.

"Ambrosios," the creature whispered in a low, raspy voice, the blade still raised in hand.

The others in the hunt halted their run and turned, hovering towards their commander and forming a protective arch. Their spears now pointed out into the night towards the direction of the sound. One of the creatures knelt to the ground, feeling the soil for vibrations, trying to sense the size of the force about to come. The loud roar came again, followed by low howls in every direction. East, west, and....down.

"Sempersius," the kneeling creature said to his captain, his voice trembling, "they know we're here."

The figures closed in towards each other, keeping their leader in the center, pointing their weapons outward and at the ground. The roots from the Brown Mahogany started to buckle and pop in the earth around them, bursting in short ripples from the ground. The kneeling hunter began to move from the group, taking steps to avoid his capture. Just as he gained his feet, the ground beneath him burst open sending him off balance and crashing downward. Similar holes burst open around the group casting out shockwaves and knocking all of them down but their leader.

“Weaklings!” he shouted. “Hold your ground!”

The howling and bursting suddenly stopped. There was silence. Only the faintest wisps of night air sounded as short gusts traveled over neighboring branches. The hunters scrambled to regain their footing as their leader began to laugh. His low raspy laughter changed slowly into a loud high-pitched squeal. Sempersius turned back towards the baby gorillas; all but one had fled. It whined, plugging its ears from the noise and looking in all directions for its mother. The large figure leapt through the air and crashed upon the infant. As he raised the baby by the hairs of its neck, it squirmed in failed attempts to get away. The ruthless giant let out two more strains of high-pitched laughter and stopped. He peered into the frantic eyes of his victim.

“You’re nothing special...pathetic really. I don’t know why Ambrosios tries to protect you. A worthless species.”

He raised his spear again and pressed it towards the thumping chest of the infant.

“And to think, we almost came back empty handed.”

Suddenly the ground popped beneath him. This time, the ripples overpowered his footing, and he started to fall. A massive shape swung from a branch above and grabbed the infant from his hands, swinging off into the night.

“No!” the cloaked figure yelled.

Crumbling downward, the leader screamed as he grasped for anything on ground level. Holding on to a protruding root he shouted at his invisible listeners: “You can’t protect them forever! We’re never going to stop! One day soon, there will be too many, and as your world is swallowed up, you will be the first to be forgotten!”

The leader latched onto the thick root that jutted out of the wall of dirt. As he began to climb toward the surface, another hunched creature, similar in form, crawled up his back from below. It began pounding its ape-like fists upon his hand, which was all that was holding him up. The creature ripped the hood from the hunter’s head, revealing a tattered, colorless face. Grabbing the hood of the cloak in its hand, the hunched creature whispered in the hunter’s ear: “No, old friend, it is you that will be forgotten.” And with a final thud of his fist, the ape-like creature loosened the hunter’s grasp and pulled him kicking and screaming into the hole. Similar holes opened up all around the mahogany tree, and more hunched creatures leapt out upon the fleeing hunters, pulling them into the depths of the earth. The ground shook and the roots again rippled, filling the holes with dirt. The hunt was over.

Dust from the tattered ground rose into the night sky, and the forest could sleep once again. A gray, bulky figure perched upon a thick distant limb and peered out of the darkness. As the moonlight caught a quick glimpse of his dark brown eyes, he gave two short thuds on his chest with his fists and breathed another ancient sigh of relief.

IV. Homeward Returning

The Southern highway curved around the belly of an Appalachian mountainside. Elias's beat-up black Studebaker wove around curves and coasted the stretch of road that lay between the high school and the small mountain community he called home. The drive was a long one, but it gave him time to contemplate the changes he would need to make in his immediate future if he were to keep his sanity. The scenery made this vehicular meditation possible. Log chapels and cabins sporadically dotted the elevated landscape while an abandoned general store and rusted gas pumps added to the nostalgic country scenery.

As vivid as the setting was, Elias's eyes were fixed upon the middle of the road as he drove. His mind wandered back and forth between the seismic activity in the hallway and the comments made by Dr. Elliott. He also considered the dashing black figure and the hauntingly familiar images from his dreams. It was nearly too much for one man to handle. As he struggled to grip the steering wheel, he applied more pressure on the squeaky gas pedal, hoping to get home faster. A cube-shaped pendant dangled and twisted from the rear-view mirror as he sped. Small photos of him and his wife Jade, holding their daughter Alexa, spun in the corner of his eye, giving Elias a brief smile and a glimmer of hope. As the sun danced off the reflection in the spinning images, Elias thought he saw a tree briefly within the prism. The image sparkled into view and disappeared just as quickly. He winced at the sight then shrugged it off.

As he made the third to last bend before his turn, his foot left the gas when he peered out over the ridge. Acres and acres of red and yellow maple, the trees that had surrounded his home for decades, were being clear-cut. Elias felt his stomach begin to churn as he surveyed the hideous progress that had been made by loggers in just a few hours. He remembered having seen a few logging trucks and bush hogs on the way to work that morning, but he had assumed that someone had purchased a small tract of land and was clearing it out to build a home. His realization that local landowners had sold out to lumber companies sickened him. As far as he could look in one direction, loggers had left hundreds of stumps and nothing else. Tears swelled in his eyes as he realized the size of the devastation. Leaving the occasional tree to bend and break in misery, the loggers had shown no mercy on the landscape. Especially haunting to Elias was how the earth appeared to bleed, as it had been drenched in the vibrant red autumn leaves.

Elias's father and grandfather had fought with their neighbors for years about keeping their lands intact. Citizens of Foggy Hollow, historically, had kept the area looking relatively the same. They did so to preserve its natural beauty and simple, country feel. They didn't mind the occasional newcomer, but they discouraged new ideas and change. Elias didn't always see eye-to-eye with his late father, but he now agreed with his philosophies about their town. His father, being a pastor, had preached from the pulpit that the time would soon come when the townspeople would lust after riches and slowly destroy what their ancestors had built. As the congregation of the church began to feel more and more like they were being attacked, the pews got more and more vacant. As the sermons became more about fire and brimstone than nature and kindness, many people switched churches or just stopped going. Elias remembered one sermon, which

came just months before his father died. In it, he prophesied that the grounds would open up and that demons from Hell would emerge to drag the sinners down. Elias had never been one to judge or condemn others, but he couldn't imagine a more fitting punishment for the massacre he had just witnessed.

As Elias's truck pattered closer to home and again began to pick up speed, he felt over-protective of the wilderness he now realized he had taken for granted. He said a silent prayer that the animals, which had made a home in that northern hardwood forest, had found the time to escape and weren't among the dead in the trodden forest graveyard.

After another stretch of road, he made a left turn onto a dirt path that headed up into the hills. He passed a cowering wooden mailbox with the name *Hughes* faintly visible on the side. The driveway consisted of two dirt paths, a car's-width apart, separated by grass and weeds that scraped at the bottom of the truck as he drove. Two makeshift bridges enabled him to pass over one of the winding creeks that twisted through his property. Surrounded by trees on either side, Elias sighed, knowing he would never sell his family's land. After another hundred yards of twisting thicket, the drive passed over a tiny hill, and the landscape opened up. The trees diverged into an expanse of pastureland, slightly browned from the current season. Rolling hills on the left side crept upward and onward into the lower Appalachian mountain range. On the right, a wall of sky-high yellow birch bordered stretching fields. All of this made for a brilliant fortress of scenery that Elias came home to each day. As his family farmhouse appeared in the distance, he glanced over at a worn footpath that disappeared into the woods. The family cemetery lay just beyond the first line of trees and was slightly more visible than

usual due to the lack of leaves. It was a special place to Elias and his family. Normally, in passing, he would smile in reverence to the deceased. Today was different.

Elias slowed the truck to a stop. The engine coughed, making the only distinct noise as he slipped into a musing. Day turned to night as the image of a young boy running for his life flashed out before him. The boy tripped and stumbled as he made his way over the rugged soil and through the high grass. He turned to the woods in fear of what might be chasing the child. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck as he peered into a now blackened wood. He glanced back and forth at the boy who seemed to be running in slow motion, holding his bleeding arm. He stared through the trees at the tipping Confederate tombstones. A mist started to form around the plot. He tried blinking to awaken from his stupor. A tall dark figure emerged on the footpath, its eyes glowing in the moonlight. He couldn't make out the form of the creature as it moved towards the boy. Elias began pleading with the boy to move faster, but his motion stalled as the being crept towards him. He scrambled to do something, feeling helpless at the sight. The sounds of metal scraping began to emerge all around him. He tried ignoring the sounds so he could imagine a way to help the boy. A loud smack erupted and woke Elias from his phantasm. Struggling to breath, he turned to his left to roll down the window. As he began cranking the wheel at the base of the door, he turned to the lowering glass and was startled to see a beast staring right back at him.

V. With Man, as with His Friend

The beast's name was Galileo, an Akita that Elias had adopted from a shelter in Knoxville five years prior. The massive dog had heard his owner coming from a mile away and had previously begun the race with others to meet the truck halfway. An English bulldog, a French bulldog, a black lab, and a pug all surrounded the bigger dog, scraping at the Studebaker's driver-side door to try and get in. Galileo stood nearly as tall as Elias on his hind legs, which was over six feet. His paws muddied up the lowering window and his long slurping tongue flapped around trying to catch Elias on the face. He was overjoyed to see his little friends. He swung the door open and began running around in the dirt. The dogs barked and chased him, enjoying the fun and grateful for his return home. Galileo jumped up on Elias' side, causing him to lose his balance and fall over. The dogs jumped at the chance move, encircling him to lick and jump on his face. Elias laughed hard and rolled around with them. He managed to gain his feet, allowed Galileo to jump up in the cab, and had the others get in the bed of the truck. The two bulldogs and the pug: Cornelius, Petunia, and Magellan, he lifted himself and placed in the truck bed. Sarah, the lab, had been hit by a car and left for dead, but the Hughes' had rehabbed her enough after finding her, that she was able to jump into the truck bed herself.

He slowly drove the rest of the way to the house with Galileo, perched like a human, in the passenger seat the whole way. As they pulled up in the yard, he noticed that something was a little off. The screen door sat propped open and everything else seemed oddly...still. Normally at this time of day, when he would get home, his three year old daughter, Alexa, would come running out the door or from the yard to greet him.

Today, however, there was nothing. He peered around the side of the house and saw that Jade's truck was parked in its usual spot under the weeping willow. He got out of the truck and cautiously approached the house. As he did so, a dark feeling swam over him. Sarah and Galileo had made their way to his side, sniffing at the ground, also sensing something different. The smaller dogs whined and barked, wanting to attempt the jump from the bed. Elias stepped onto the porch and peeked his head in the door. It was rather dark in the house for the middle of the day. Children's books were strewn across the living room. One book served as a platform for figures made from play dough. He felt a moment of calmness knowing that his daughter had been near.

"Hello?" Elias said, listening for sounds throughout the house. No answer.

"Hello?"

"Jade...honey?"

"Lexa?"

His right foot caused the porch to creak as he stepped forward. The dogs both barked a little, startled by the sound. Just then, Elias heard a faint familiar sound. Galileo turned and ran around the porch and the side of the house with Sarah in close chase. Elias followed the two, hoping his mind wasn't playing tricks on him. As he made his way around the house, he heard the sound again and, this time, saw the source. Alexa, in a white flower dress, was giggling as she lay halfway out of a tire swing. The faint wind was carrying the swing in a swaying motion. Her red curls hung past her face and graced the ground as she swung. She giggled at the motion while the passing breeze tickled her bare feet. Elias' brief moment of euphoria turned to question when he realized that Jade

was nowhere in sight. As the swing made a slight turn in movement, Alexa glanced up to see Elias approaching. Her rosy cheeks lit up with her smile at her immediate realization.

“Daddy!” she yelled, as she hurriedly crawled out of the swing. Alexa made her way to her feet, picked up the ends of her dress, and ran through the moist dirt to Elias’ embrace.

“Missed you!” she said, squeezing his neck as he lifted her up.

“I missed you, too, sweetheart,” Elias responded, parting her hair from her face and kissing her forehead. “Where’s your mother?”

“I don’t know. She walked over by the trees, behind the barn. She told me to stay. I wanted to go with her. She told me to stay with Mr. Swing Swing, so I stayed!”

“Good girl! Let’s go see what she’s doing.”

Elias set Alexa down and they began walking down another footpath towards the barn. She held on to Elias’ index finger and used her other hand to hold up her dress. The two made their way around the faded brown side of a two-story barn that had been constructed long before Elias was born. They were soon caught up to, not only by Sarah and Galileo, but also by Petunia, Cornelius, and Magellan, whom had all made their jump when they could no longer stand the excitement. They each had a slight hobble in their steps, but they would soon walk it off. As Elias turned the corner, he saw Jade, standing at the edge of the forest, staring into its depths. She looked as though she might be talking to someone. Though her eyes were closed, she seemed very focused on whatever was being said. Fearing that someone may have actually been in the woods talking to her, Elias stopped and started walking the other way. He knelt down and began to whisper in Alexa’s ear.

“Lexa-baby, I need you to go back and be with Mr. Swing Swing for a bit while I talk to Momma, okay?”

“Sure, Daddy!”

All of the dogs but one followed Alexa back to the yard. The little ones were excited to have someone closer to their size to play with, and they hurried along her side. Sarah hesitated but followed the others slowly. Elias kept Galileo by his side, knowing full well that the dog had chased down and tackled eight-point bucks, which he thought were trespassers on their property. He turned back to Jade to try to gain a better understanding of the situation. Who was she talking to and why? What were they doing on his property? Elias looked as hard as he could into the woods beyond his wife, but he couldn’t see anything. He slowly approached Jade to avoid startling her or whomever she was talking to. Galileo stopped in his tracks and started to growl. The growl was followed by a loud bark, which sent him off running towards the woods. Jade, startled, looked wide-eyed towards Elias and moved out of the way just in time for Galileo to fly by and disappear into the forest. Elias moved towards Jade, still cautious.

“Are you okay, honey? Is everything alright? Who were you talking to?”

“Eli, you scared me half to death. Who? What? I wasn’t talking to anybody. I was...singing.”

“Singing?”

“Yeah, singing.”

“Sweetheart,” Elias approached, “you have an angelic Celtic voice. Why would you be all the way over here and not singing to Alexa, who by the way, you left alone where you couldn’t see her?”

Jade stared downward.

“When Lexa and I were driving to the farmers market this morning, we saw the trees being cut down. To see the stumps just clear-cut, it killed me.”

“I know,” Elias said with a sigh.

“Growing up in Scotland, Mum and Dad taught us to sing songs to the trees when we wanted to apologize to nature. The music was supposed to be our prayer, to calm the anger of the spirits and the gods,” Jade said. “When Alexa and I returned home, I felt compelled to do so again.”

“Spirits...? Gods?” Elias said, “Since when did my wife become a pagan?”

“I’m not a pagan!” Jade retorted. “I was a Christian long before I met you. But I believe in the traditions of my ancestors, I believe in the ancient bond between humans and nature, and I believe we are responsible for protecting it.”

“Protecting it from...”

“Is it not obvious?” Jade yelled, “What did you see happening down the street on your way home?” Elias nodded. He realized that he, too, had a sense of protection and love for nature, a feeling that had been swelling since the sight on the highway.

“My Father believed something more, though...”

“What?” Elias asked, now standing right beside her.

“I think that, like your father, Elias, my father allowed his philosophies to get the best of him,” Jade said. “He believed that we should protect the trees, specifically, and not from humans, but from something much more sinister.” Elias thought real hard and then almost laughed in his contemplation.

“What could possibly harm the trees that wasn’t human?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but sometimes as a girl, I would notice my Father was missing.”

“Missing?”

“I would take one of the sheep dogs and go out looking for him. I always found him in the same place, standing in the Caledonian forest. He would be leaning against a tree waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Elias asked, placing his hand on Jade’s shoulder. Jade had started trembling.

“I don’t know, but I’ve never seen him look so frightened.”

Jade pulled Elias’s arm around her

“My father was a big man, Elias,” Jade said, nestling into Elias’s warmth, “nothing ever scared him.”

“Except for that. Let’s go cook some dinner,” Elias said, trying to lighten the mood. “I’m starving.”

“Okay, Alexa picked out some nice zucchini for you today.”

The two walked arm in arm back towards the house, Jade resting her head on Elias’ shoulder. Elias whistled for Galileo who could immediately be heard running through the leaves in the woods to his master. Elias glanced back at the woods to which Jade had been staring.

“I’ve got a lot to tell you about, honey.”

He wanted to convince himself that each of the events of the last few hours were in no way related.

...

A small fire crackled from inside an antique fire stove that sat in the corner of the living room. The Hughes family had retired to their nightly ritual of story-time, a hobby that often ended well past Alexa's bedtime. Elias and Jade had simultaneously devised this hobby for their family prior to her birth when they were discussing how they would raise their forthcoming child. When Lexa was just beginning to show in Jade's belly, Elias began reading her stories. He and Jade would trade off being the reader, each with their own unique voice and way of expressing the stories' events. When Lexa was old enough to speak, Elias began acting out some of the stories while Jade would read. Simple stories usually used for the sake of time, like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs*, were enough to make Lexa laugh. Elias would get on all fours sometimes, acting out each of the characters in full form.

Alexa had been spoiled with her Daddy giving her a bit more of his peach cobbler crust than he was usually willing to spare. The doziness was setting in, but Jade read on—each line having as much strength as the one before. *The Rainbow Goblins*, one of Elias's favorite stories, was common for an evening like this. An approaching storm could be smelled in the breeze that drifted through the screen door. Sarah and Galileo laid across the top step of the porch, enjoying the night air that brushed across their fur. Petunia, Cornelius, and Magellan, each with their own preference, sprawled out on the hardwood floor in different sections of the room. Alexa nestled her back into her mother's chest, while resting her toes between Jade's knees as they both laid on a green chaise.

Elias, happily stuffed from Jade's cooking, sat slouched in an old, red hickory chair with his hand over his belly. His mind was swirling with the words of the story, the events of the day, and the chopping flames in the stove.

As her imagination grew, Alexa would come up with questions regarding the plot of the story, each more complex than the last. Occasionally she would ask those questions that neither Jade nor Elias wanted to answer.

"So...did the goblins die Mommy?" Alexa asked.

Jade and Elias would often change some of the words to the stories they would read to Alexa. Elias would have to get really creative when reading some of his original fairy tales, which were often morbid in detail. In the case of *The Rainbow Goblins*, even though they loved the story, the ending was slightly graphic for a three-year-old. But even though Jade had changed the story to make it so that the goblins were not killed in the end, her daughter was very perceptive. Jade shot a quick glance to Elias for back up, but he wasn't even on the same level. The orange, dancing light of flame reflected off his pupils as he sat in deep thought. Thinking she was on her own, Jade racked her brain for a good answer. Alexa took her mother's hesitation as another opportunity.

"Did the roots of the trees and flowers really listen to the goblins talking? Did they want to hurt the goblins for trying to get the rainbow?" Alexa added.

"Well..."

"Yes!" Elias blurted out.

Alexa turned to her dad with sudden energy, waiting, and wanting the explanation that would follow.

"The trees are always listening,"

Jade smiled.

“They were angry with the goblins for wanting to hurt their friend,” Elias continued. “So they captured them with all the colors, and they took them underground.”

Jade’s eyes got wide. Her jaw dropped at the can of imaginary worms that Elias had just opened. She feared they would never get to the end of this one.

“So they didn’t die, Daddy?”

“No...they didn’t die, they just went somewhere where they could learn to be grateful.”

“Grateful for what?”

“They were greedy,” Jade added.

“Yeah...” Elias continued. “They had so many wonderful things: beautiful flowers, animals, colors, and they had rainbows—but they decided to give all of that away because they were greedy—they always wanted more. So the trees, the animals, and the flowers took that away and sent them to live below.”

Content with her father’s response, Alexa turned over and curled up to Jade in order to fall asleep. Only temporarily satisfied with Elias’s rescue mission, Jade pulled a blanket off the back of the chaise and draped it around Alexa. Elias came over and picked up Alexa, resting her head on his shoulder. He turned and walked towards the stairs trying, unsuccessfully, not to wake Petunia, who was lying at the base of the stairs leading to the second floor. Jade remained in the chaise and motioned for Petunia to keep her company.

Elias made his way up the stairs and turned the corner to Alexa’s bedroom, pushing the door open with his back. The remaining moonlight was enough for him to

see his way around the coloring books that were strewn across the floor. Gently resting her on her bed, he pulled the blanket down to cover her feet. Leaning over, he brushed a few red locks from her cheek and gave her a kiss. Walking out of the room, he flipped a switch, which enabled a galaxy of stars to begin rotating on the ceiling.

“May they watch over and protect you,” Elias said as he closed the door.

Elias came down the stairs into the living room, where a stack of students’ papers rested on the arm of his lounge chair, ready to be graded. Petunia had taken Alexa’s place, receiving the usual, spoiled rub behind the ears. Jade rested with her eyes closed and her head on the back of the chaise. It had started to rain, and the bigger dogs had moved closer to the door. They would stay there all night unless the winds got extreme enough for Elias to bring them in. No matter the weather, Galileo would always be the most reluctant to come in. His protective instincts were always on high alert, and there was always something about autumn evenings around their home that kept him on edge. Galileo, it seemed, even though he would sometimes rest his head on his paws, never shut his eyes or let his guard down for a moment. Elias felt bad for him, but it was comforting to know that Galileo would help keep his family safe.

Elias stretched out in the red chair and yawned. The squeak at the end of his breath awakened Magellan, who let out a quick bark in startled response. The sound didn’t even faze Cornelius, however, who was out-cold with his jowls flopping as he snored.

“So...” Jade kept her eyes closed.

Elias could sense the urge to punish in her voice.

“You’ve decided that three is a good age for teaching our daughter about Hell?”

“I didn’t mean for it to come to that... and you should be thanking me for saving your butt.”

Jade shot up, startling Petunia, who jumped off her lap.

“Thanking you?” she shouted.

“Thanks to you, while you’re at work tomorrow, I’m going to be scrambling to avoid teaching Alexa Bible stories. Not that I don’t want her to learn those things, but I was hoping she would be a little older. She asks so many questions and... you know this stuff a lot better than I do.”

“I do?” Elias responded.

“Yes, you do. It’s been engrained in you because of your father.”

Elias walked over to the screen door and rested his arm on the top of the frame. Faint bursts of lightning lit up distant skies as he peered through the metal mesh of the screen. Draped in her blanket, Jade made her way over to Elias, stopping to run her fingers along his back and through his hair.

“I know you were just trying to help her understand,” Jade said. “But you need to remember just how perceptive Alexa is. Her imagination is probably running wild with her dreams as we speak.”

“I guess I did get a little carried away.” Elias responded. “I’m sorry.”

Jade grabbed Elias’s arm and pulled it around her, snuggling into his chest. The two stared out at the encroaching storm together. A slight wind blew through the screen, giving Jade a brisk chill.

“Let’s go to bed,” she said. “It’s getting cold. Close the door and let’s go upstairs.” Jade unwrapped herself from his grasp and began walking towards the stairs with the blanket in tow.

Elias remained at the door, fixated on the path that led around a short bend toward the cemetery. Each burst of lightning illuminated the edges of the distant tombstones, some bent, some leaning in the soil. The trunks of the maples, which had become increasingly colorless due to the season, seemed abnormally thick in circumference. Elias refocused his eyes and stared with intent into the woods. Another flash of light illuminated six pairs of eyes that stood at man’s height, each against a tree, staring back at Elias. The sight startled Elias but he immediately reached for the door handle and swung open the screen. Galileo had also seen the figures and was already in full sprint of the hunt off the porch stairs.

“Galileo!” Elias yelled. “Get back here boy!”

Elias knew that Galileo would have no problem dismantling any creature that stood in his way. He also knew however, that he had seen a host of creatures standing by the trees and he feared that when Galileo jumped on but one, that the others would seize him or even kill him. Elias leapt off the front porch and ran towards the path his Akita had just followed. He moved in a slightly different direction, dodging and ducking under branches and leaping over fallen tree trunks. Jade had turned, hearing Elias throw open the door and came running out to the porch to see what was happening.

“Elias?” she shouted worriedly. “What’s happening?”

Elias stopped in his tracks. Suddenly worried for Jade’s safety, he turned towards her and urgently motioned for her to get inside. The darkness prevented Jade from seeing

Elias so she started down the steps and on to the path herself. Noticing her obliviousness, Elias began racing towards her. The rain began to beat down making sound, sight, and communication difficult. Elias ran out into the clearing, coming to within yards of Jade when he heard a loud yelp.

“Galileo!” Elias and Jade both screamed.

Elias looked towards the cemetery and then back at Jade.

“Get in the house now!” he pointed and yelled. “Lock the door and don’t come out.”

Jade looked at Elias in fear: both from the situation and because Elias had never yelled at her. She hesitantly turned and moved towards the house, stopping suddenly to look back..”

“But what’s hap...”

“Just go!” Elias snapped back.

He watched her run inside the house and shut the door. When he was convinced that she had shut both doors and locked them, he turned towards the woods. By now, the rain was falling fast and angled in his face. He walked slowly and then began running towards the trees. His fear of the creatures that lay beyond him dissipated as he sought to rescue Galileo. He broke off a hanging branch as he moved to use it as a possible weapon. Familiar instincts came over him as he moved into the night. He had the sudden speed of a beast and the wet of the rain seemed to have no effect as it dampened his clothes. A quick bolt of lightning in the distance created enough light for him to see the cemetery nearly twenty yards away. Though his heart was beating frantically through his chest, he felt relaxed. A hunt was about to begin. The creatures had disappeared into the

darkness with the last sound that came from Galileo. Sensing a possible attack from any side, Elias leapt into the area, frantically scanning in all directions for the dark beings and for his dog. The wooded cemetery was empty. The rain began denting the soil as it pounded the earth. Elias moved around the tombstones, kicking through mud and crunching forest twigs. He came to a stop, gathering a breath before calling out: “Galileo? Where are you boy?” When no response came, Elias began to tremble. The shaking in his limbs caused him to buckle at the knees and drop to the ground. But he wasn’t scared. A fire that had been faintly burning inside of him for nearly two decades suddenly burst to light inside of him. The moment was almost too much. The glowing eyes that had stared him in the face just moments earlier, were twinkles compared to the red rage that was building inside Elias’s skull. Reborn, he turned his head toward the sky and smiled as if taunting the gods to try and strike him with their thunder.

A short whimper, about seventy yards away, caught his immediate attention. His recently acquired instincts though still somewhat foreign, compelled Elias to turn in the direction of the sound and begin running. Though the elements of the storm were both blinding and deafening, he moved like he was invincible, leaping over fallen trees and breaking through hanging branches that ripped through his skin like shards of glass. The brisk pains didn’t faze him. As he approached a clearing from where the sound came, he slowed to a stop. Gray vapor shot out his nostrils and rolled behind his face as his breaths became more violent. Twenty feet in front of him, stood three hooded beings. Steam flowed out of the darkness that hid their faces. The hovering beings stood in triangular formation, forming a defensive stance. The two farthest from Elias held staffs across their chests, preparing themselves and their leader for what may come next. Though the

creatures stood nearly a foot taller and peered down at him with malicious intent, Elias couldn't help but smile. He had located his prey. The hunted had become the hunter.

"It seems as though you haven't forgotten much in the time you've been away Elias. Though your size, I must admit, is slightly more intimidating." The creature who stood at point took one step forward as he spoke, holding a large black sack in his hand, made from the same material as his cloak. The dark bag, which resembled a large duffel bag, twitched as the figure held it up. Elias could hear a smile in the speaker's voice.

Elias continued to breathe ferociously, paying closer attention to his now stronger senses of smell, sound, and discernment. The creatures smelled like rotting flesh, a scent which almost consumed Elias as he stood outnumbered in their path. Another smell that he was picking up came from the bag the leader was holding. Realizing the contents of the bag and ignoring the cynicism of the intruder, he raised the stick that he had grabbed earlier in the woods and stabbed it into the earth. The two creatures in the rear took steps backward, unsure of his next move. The leader dropped the bag in response. The bulk inside the sack hit the ground with a thud, causing a short whimper from inside. Recognizing the sound in the bag, Elias's human impulse returned.

"What have you done to my dog? he yelled.

"The beast had to be stopped," the brute responded. "He chased one of my men into the ground."

Elias stared at the bag as the body inside went limp.

"You humans place so much value in the meaningless species, all the while destroying the creatures that have protected you for centuries. I shouldn't complain. You are paving the way for our return, as was prophesied."

Elias struggled to put meaning to his words, while battling back tears that welled at the sight in front of him. Though everything that was happening seemed hauntingly familiar, like from a dream, he couldn't put any of it together. Still, he played along. "I don't know why you've returned, but you need to leave before I make you regret showing your faces in these woods."

The creatures standing in the back of the group stepped forward in confidence, recognizing a weakness in their foe as Elias spoke. In unison, the beings brandished their staffs revealing spiked ends of bone sharp enough to easily tear through skin. "Gentlemen," the leader said, "It seems as though Elias doesn't remember everything after all." The two chuckled in deep raspy tones. "He should know after all, that we can't reveal our faces..." The head of the group let out his own small snicker, while revealing a mace, topped with a spiked skull. He flicked a switch at the base of the shaft, causing the skull to fall to the ground, attached to the weapon by a chain of pointy linked bones. The rain slowed in its motion as the group broke into a semi-circle to surround Elias. The middleman lifted his weapon causing the skull to sway like a pendulum. Elias knew he only had a moment to decide what to do next. Sensing somehow that Galileo might still be alive, he lunged for the bag, hoping in an instant to tear it open and free him. He barreled into the front man, causing a domino effect as the creatures fell over each other in surprise. Elias clawed at the warm, moist coffin that held his dog. As he tore the top open, the smell of rotten flesh shot out like a bullet, knocking Elias backward. He watched in awe as a soup of bone and skin folded out of the bag and on to the ground. Terrified, Elias looked up just in time to see a spiked skull fly towards him. The brunt of the weapon hit him square between the eyes. As his world began to spin around him, a

dark raspy voice whispered in Elias's ear: "We didn't come for you anyway." A split second of anguish ripped at Elias's core before his body went limp.

VI. As When the Sun New Risen

The Southern Appalachian Highlands had always been famous for their sunrises. Especially following an evening of storms. As the sun dipped over the highest cliffs and added crimson to the backdrop, the morning warmth had evening puddles evaporating. Plumes of white and gray floated slowly towards the sky, stopping just above the trees to linger in their canopies.

From what felt like a dark hole inside his skin, Elias could hear the air pumping from his lungs and out of his nostrils to the world outside. He wasn't familiar with out of body experiences, but he couldn't discern if he was entirely himself or a spirit on the verge of returning to bodily form. As feeling slowly returned to his limbs, pain found its way to a knot behind his face. He squinted in the sunlight that shone through his closed eyelids piercing his eyeballs. Raising one eyelid before having the strength to raise the other, Elias peered into the morning, trying to convince himself that he was in fact alive.

The silhouette of a bird, large in size with a massive wingspan, circled into the fog above him. Two more birds followed, trailed by two more, each gliding in the mountain air. The circular motion of the birds could only mean one thing, Elias didn't have much time before he would become their breakfast. The birds must have smelled his blood in the night, waiting for the warmth of day to start their meal. Fog rose on around him, temporarily adding to his blindness but also throwing off the birds.

As more strength returned, first in his hands, then his feet, Elias lifted himself up. He started backing himself through leaves and dirt, oblivious to half a dozen life-size holes that littered the ground around him. Through the vapor, Elias could see the birds

continuing to gain in number in preparation for their swoop. Running his fingers along the ground as he backpedaled, Elias grabbed hold of a stick to ward off any who would dive at him. Feeling the texture of his weapon, he quickly realized the stick was in fact a femur. Startled by this realization, Elias threw the bone through the air just in time to feel the ground break beneath him. Elias had retreated directly towards an open grave, causing the ground around it to break even wider with his weight. As he fell through the earth, Elias grabbed for anything in sight to stop his fall. Roots from within the earth jutted out of the dirt walls, catching on Elias's clothing and keeping him from falling. Elias peered beneath him as creeping insects scattered out of the hole, some falling into the darkness. The grave looked deep. He didn't know how far the hole dropped but he didn't want to find out. He had placed a firm hand on the ground above but it was slipping. Either he could drop into an endless abyss, probably never seeing the light of day again, or he could allow himself to be devoured by scavenger birds, waiting for his first moment of weakness. He had found his hell.

As if sensing that they might lose their prey, two of the birds torpedoed straight down through a cylinder of cloud smoke towards the grave. Startled at the sight, Elias lost his remaining grip and plummeted into the darkness. As his body nearly disappeared from view, one of the birds swooped in and caught his left shoulder with its talon. As if planning for the weight of the kill, several birds swooped down and latched on to the meat in Elias's back. He could only feel bits of the sharp pains that came from claws grappling through flesh. In addition, he found a hint of comfort in knowing how he would die. Moreover, the attack of the large bird could give him the opportunity to escape. Four birds hung onto his body, flapping their massive wings to lift him upward.

As the birds struggled, the largest of the four let out a piercing cry. Similar cries echoed from above. But these were not the cries of vultures or buzzards. Elias recognized the sounds immediately, having heard them up close as a child. Holding his life in their claws, bald eagles raised Elias from the hole and set him upon the humid surface. Blood seeped from his shoulders into the fabric of his shirt. Again, Elias brushed what pain there was aside. The creatures he had seen circling in the clouds were not preparing for a feast, but a rescue. Elias now had the strength to open both of his eyes wide. In doing so, he stared in wide wonder at the hundreds of bald eagles that perched in hanging limbs around him. Like everything else familiar that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, the eagles had saved him from certain death.

As the four birds that had hoisted him from his grave made their way to nearby perches, Elias had flashbacks of childhood and adolescence. His life had been riddled with near-death experiences, each surrounded if not prevented by bald eagles. One event that immediately came to mind was the sudden death of Elias's father. Feeling that he had no one to turn to, his father's death once led Elias to believe that ending his own life had been his only option. As a child, he couldn't comprehend the selfishness of what his actions would entail. Therefore, merely hours after the funeral, he crept back into the woods, to pay his last respects by taking his own life. He remembered how the freshly shoveled dirt felt as he squeezed it through his fingers. Angry with his father for leaving, angry with God for making him leave, he grabbed masses of dirt at a time and tossed them from the grave. He was determined to make his father see the damage he had caused by leaving him all alone. It was as if Elias hoped to raise his father from the dead just so he could watch Elias die instead of him. Returning to the present, he trembled in

remembrance of what he saw when he opened that casket that night. An abrasion on his arm, a scar that stretched across nearly a foot of his curving skin, ached as he remembered. As more memories flashed through his mind, one most recent burst into view: a spiked skull and the sound of a raspy voice.

“Jade!” He shouted, “Alexa!” Startling the eagles into flight, Elias began running in a full sprint. He didn’t immediately know where he was running and he didn’t care. He knew these forests better than anyone and knew it would only be moments before he would be able to pinpoint his own location. The attack in the night had left him slightly dazed and he stumbled slightly as he ran. As if sensing the need to help him yet again, the eagles flew in formation to lead Elias on a more straight and narrow path. He watched the eagles zip overhead as he ran, following their path into a thicket. He immediately recognized the patch of trees as being the same that he had fled through but hours earlier. Realizing that his house was only fifty yards away, he made a beeline through the shrubbery and out into the clearing near his driveway in order to follow an easier path. As the roof of his home came into view, the eagles had resumed a similar pattern of flight, circling above the home. He ignored the formation, refusing to jump to any conclusion, good or bad. Elias welcomed a swift breeze, which pushed against his back as he ran. As he came to within twenty yards of the front door however, he stopped suddenly, almost falling forward. The screen door that he had watched Jade shut and lock that night bounced and smacked against the front door in the breeze. A gaping hole in the bottom half had been ripped through the mesh and continued through broken glass in the lower half of the front door. Elias’s chest sank. He knew he must try to find them.

He made it to the house, leapt from the ground to the rug on the porch and nearly slid into the door. He got right up to the screen and listened for any signs of life. He suddenly realized that not only was there no sense of sound or movement, but that none of the dogs had come running when he approached the house, not even one. This haunting thought doubled his fears of what could come. Noticing a couple of chewed up tennis balls on the swaying porch swing, Elias walked and pulled his aluminum baseball bat out from beneath the pillows. On Saturday mornings, he would hit balls into the woods; he would put the bat on the swing as he talked to Alexa and waited for the dogs to go fetch. He knew he may need some kind of a weapon when he entered the house. He crept towards the screen door again, pulling it open with one finger and gently pushing the shattered front door open with his other hand. As he stepped inside, the smell of rotten flesh nearly knocked him back outside. Raising the collar of his shirt over his nose he looked at the mess that had been made of his living room. Glass littered nearly the entire floor, the chaise had been overturned and blankets strewn all over. Perhaps most startling was the claw marks that had ripped through the upholstery of the antique sofa. Even more horrifying however were the smears of blood that followed. He had to keep from throwing up inside of his shirt. He feared two things so much it almost killed him. Coals from the evening fire hissed in their dying moments, revealing to Elias that if anything still lived in this house, it didn't have much longer. Squeezing the leather of the bat handle, he turned towards the stairs, stepping over a fallen table and making his way up. Stopping with each creak of wood under his feet he looked upward as he climbed. At the top of the stairs, the hallway was empty besides some scratches on the walls, which ended at Alexa's room. Each step made Elias's heart beat faster. "Jade?" He whispered,

sensing something near. “Alexa?” Nothing. He tapped Alexa’s bedroom door open with his foot. When nothing jumped out in response, Elias swung into the room with bat in hand. The sight brought him to his knees.

VII. Solitary Flight

Yusef Mahmoud clutched the straps of his seat belt as the C-17 Globemaster III soared above the Hindu Kush mountains towards Pakistan. The slightest jolts of turbulence created beads of nervous sweat near his temples. As a teenager, he had been nicknamed the mountain goat, not only for the thickness of his beard, but also for his survival skills on the neighboring cliffs. He could scale walls of rock hundreds of feet in the air with no climbing gear in order to place explosives. Though the fear of heights on land had eluded him thus far, his first time flying was another matter. As the flying beast of metal made its way miles above and beyond his homeland, Yusef struggled to avoid drawing attention to his fear. Packed like a sardine between one hundred plus U.S. soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division, who were on a long awaited trip home, Yusef had been granted a passage to America.

Having worked specifically with the 10th Mountain Division for the years that they had been in his country, Yusef had earned the respect and trust of the U.S. military and specifically the officers in the 10th Mountain Division. In one particularly recent operation, four U.S. troops had been kidnapped by rebels who demanded a ridiculous ransom and threatened torture for refusal. The search for the soldiers lasted months. The military received various messages and even videos which claimed the soldiers had either been killed or badly injured. Stress mounted on division officers as their intel suggested they had come close to rescuing the hostages numerous times. In a meeting with Yusef and his cousins, officers presented the most recent video footage and asked for the help of their family. Almost immediately, Yusef and two of his cousins in the room, recognized

an initiatory tattoo on the arm of a gunman in the film. Less than three days later, the troops zeroed in on not only the location of the soldiers, but Yusef had personally designed an intercept mission that would disable the captors and provide a large enough window for escape. In the end, it was his unique knowledge of tunnel systems that led to a near-perfect rescue mission, and enabled the four soldiers to eventually board the same C-17 he was now flying on, so they could return to their families. Yusef was promptly given an award of service and an honorary enlistment for bravery. Out of necessity and gratitude the U.S. government, upon hearing about the rescue mission, requested that Yusef come to America to meet with military strategists. Considering recent events, he knew the timing couldn't have been better.

One of the rescued soldiers, who caught a piece of shrapnel in his shoulder during the rescue, leaned into Yusef from the left. In a sharp southern accent, the lieutenant laughed as he whispered. "I'm pretty sure that if I can last four months with a gun to my head, not knowing if Georgia has won a single game, you can make it through this flight. By the way, thanks again." The soldier patted Yusef on his new hat, a military helmet, which barely covered his new hairdo. Yusef returned an awkward smile and nod of the head, raising his hand to adjust his helmet, brushing over the double sword insignia and then feeling the side of his face. Stubble reminded him of his beard and shag that had both been removed prior to boarding the flight. Where he was going, he would need to look as American as possible. Peering over his knees at the metal crate on the floor, Yusef noted the silence of his heelers, which had both been allowed to travel as a courtesy to their master. Both content with their situation, the two habitually rested their chins in their paws and returned reassuring glances towards their owner. The reactions of

his friends enabled Yusef to calm his nerves. When they were around he always felt safe. When they were calm, he knew he had nothing to fear. Taking a few deep breaths, he unzipped a pocket on his mountain jacket and retrieved two folded packs of paper. One sheet, which was topped with official U.S. military letterhead, detailed his itinerary: arrival at Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina; transfer to Washington D.C.; two days of meetings with U.S. officials to discuss tunnel systems and advanced methods of desert mountain irrigation systems; two days of sight-seeing; return transfer to Charleston; return flight to Pakistan; transfer to Afghanistan. He focused on the third entry: “two days of sightseeing.” Unfolding the second packet, he turned slightly to keep the contents out of sight. His eyes scanned across a familiar style of map. Interpreting the numbers and lines on a typographical map was something he was used to. It was some of the words, labeled in English that he struggled with. The title read *Traversing the Appalachian Trail*. He wouldn’t have enough time to travel the entire trail on foot, but he would use the mountains, as he always had, to help him disappear. He hated betraying the trust of his friends, but he had to get to Tennessee.

VIII. From Mortal or Immortal Minds

Ridges of grey and brown stones lined the belly of the Cliffs of Moher. The rib cage etched in stone resembled scars left by ancient waves tirelessly seeking to climb the lurking walls. Jagged towers of rock waded in the sea-green waves, which bounced against one another before crashing into the foot of the towering cliffs. Through a small cavity in the rock a distant light was burning. Past many miles of rock and soil, through twisting tunnels built by water and wind, lay a fortress set in stone. Less than a handful of mortals knew of its existence, yet its walls and ceiling had been created like the piecing of a puzzle with the tombs of the primal dead. A myriad of sarcophagi, some bearing crowns and others weapons of war, lined a dimly-lit chamber, peering at the occupants below.

Seated at a long, rounded table made of stone, a number of hooded individuals sat in contemplation of unfolding events. The faintest air that traveled past the cliffs beyond entered in wisps through cracks in the stone and plucked at the tiny flames of candles dotting the corners of the room. The faint movement of candlelight danced across the walls and up to the dome-shaped ceiling above. The moments of brief illumination revealed a canvas of stars etched in stone in the primeval rotunda. Perhaps more interesting than the architecture and design of the surroundings was the circular device in the center of the table. Made from platinum ore and basalt and slightly elevated at the center, was a massive mechanism, resembling a circular calendar of stars. Over three feet in diameter, the arrangement consisted of seven metallic circles. Each circle had etchings and symbols along its outer edge, with a ring of basalt separating it from the next circle

running towards the middle. The largest circle, which made up the base of the device, was wider than the rest because it held the faces of various creatures intricately carved between the lines. By some phenomenal force, and at predestined times, the circles would rotate like gears in a clock. Every other disc moved clockwise while the circles in between moved in reverse. Each disc's rotation was distinct from the others, as they each moved according to their own time. The base circle had not moved in many, many years. The other rings, which had clearly moved quite recently, formed a twisting puzzle that pointed to ancient answers when aligned at certain times. The bulk of the shape, like the dome above, was littered with stars carved into the ore. All of the markings on the wheel aligned in some way with the tip and center of elevation in the middle. The tip itself, which glowed brighter than the rest of the centerpiece, pointed straight up to the tip of the dome in the ceiling above.

In the corner of the room, a wooden door creaked open. Wearing a muddied apron and brown farming boots, a white-haired Irishman slowly entered with two bowls of hazelnuts. After making his way down a trio of stone stairs, the man humbly approached the rear of the table. Reaching over the shoulder of one of the table's occupants, the man placed both bowls in front of one of the hooded figures.

"Thank you, Samuel," the recipient said.

Before the old man could respond, the figure turned in his seat and reached out his hand to place on the servant's shoulder. The old man's posture straightened and his muscles relaxed. A new, younger smile lifted his wrinkled face and greyish eyes. It was as if being touched by any of the beings at the table added another year to one's life.

“Aye sir, and thank you,” Samuel responded. His tone then shifted from one of servitude to that of long-time acquaintance and friendship. “If it wasn’t for your love of hazelnuts, Bestafanus, the trees that keep my cottage shaded from the coastal sun would only serve one purpose.

Pulling the hood from his face, Bestafanus let his long white hair drop down to the front of his robe. His face was much older than Samuel’s, but it had been that way for centuries.

“There are some things that never get old, Samuel,” Bestafanus replied. “No matter how many times you try them.” Short bits of laughter echoed his response from around the table. “Irish hazelnuts, straight from the tree are one of the few things man has not yet tampered with,” he continued, “I am indeed grateful that you and your sweet wife see fit to hold on to those creatures for me; I know they can’t be easy to keep trimmed.”

“Like any other tree, its autumn colors give me something to look forward to each year,” Samuel responded. “And as I am in the autumn of my life, the trees help me to imagine something much more beautiful. It’s hard to picture distant shores more beautiful than these. I just hope, God willing, the Lord takes both my sweet Annabelle and me together, I cannot sail alone.”

The mood around the table became dolorous as the occupants, for perhaps the millionth time, remembered that they might never die. They had been chosen in the beginning to live forever. Each passing autumn was just a reminder that their fate was sealed on earth, as long as the earth remained.

“That will be all, Samuel,” one of the figures said, in a stern female voice.”

Samuel realized his mistake, nodded, and quickly made his way out.

“That man, like so many on this earth, is utterly useless,” the woman said.

“That ‘man’ is my friend, old woman,” Bestafanus replied, crushing a hazelnut in his grasp. “You know he didn’t seek to offend anyone with his words. You could try to be a little more courteous.” His grasp on the nut remained firm as he thought of the callous nature of the woman.

“That man hasn’t ‘sought’ to do much of anything spectacular in his minuscule life,” she responded. “His sole duty on this earth has been to bear, protect, and continue his lineage; and despite being married to the same woman for over sixty years, he couldn’t manage the latter.”

Gasps filled the room as the others listened. The hazelnut in Bestafanus’s hand turned to powder as he crushed it in anger.

“How dare you speak of the lineage in a such a tone, Nialda,” he shouted. His words reverberated throughout the stone room. The woman shifted back slightly at his accusation, but kept a slight smile in her sly defense.

“It is quite simple, Bestafanus,” Nialda responded. “While I do not seek to disrespect the sacred Lineage of Shepherds, I must remind you and everyone here that Samuel is the last of his kind. We have been meeting here for centuries under the care and watch of one mortal family. In each family, one held the keys to protecting the knowledge of our existence. I’m giving Samuel perhaps a decade, if that. Bestafanus’s ability to heal can only affect one man for so long.” Bestafanus reluctantly nodded in agreement. He knew that he could not grant immortality, nor would he want to.

Another at the table, Presefnod, extended an old hand and rested his palm upon the stone surface of the table. All who touched the table, including Bestafanus and Nialda, felt immediate peace, as if the blood in their veins had been cooled. “Let us get to the task at hand,” said Presefnod, “there is another lineage, perhaps of greater importance that is being threatened as we speak. Immediate action is needed.” The others knew the truth behind his words; this was the reason they had met in the first place.

Bestafanus arose from his chair with a fresh handful of hazelnuts and began to pace the room. He stopped at a sarcophagus resting on the wall farthest from the exit. Peeling the shells off a couple of nuts, he stared into the stone eyes of the dead. He remembered the man in the tomb; he remembered all the dead in the room. They had died doing his job. After brushing a cobweb from the sword and buckler, he traced the edges of the symbol on the warrior’s shield. The emblem held the branches of a massive tree, extending in all directions. The thick, round trunk stood firm with its hands upon the ground. Next to the tree, a sword, with a Celtic cross in the pommel of the hilt, was stuck in the earth as a warning. The crest didn’t end there; the roots of the tree extended all the way to the bottom point of the shield. As Bestafanus ran his fingers down the many twists and tangles of root, he could only think one thing: whatever lived beneath the roots in his world was alive and well and he didn’t know how much longer he could protect this world from it.

The others at the table removed the hoods from their heads and settled themselves in preparation for their briefing. Oblivious to the empty seats at the heads of the table, which had grown dusty and unkempt, the group exchanged glances and smiles, having not seen each other in this fashion for many months. Their immortality was not visible

when in the presence of each other. While Nialda had long, shiny black hair, her face, like the others', was worn from extensive age. The whites of their eyes were shot with the red of age and sacrifice. *The Ten Immortals*, as they were called, were of varying races that had been born in the earliest years of man.

Presefnod, whose skin was like mocha and soot, had been one of the earliest members of the San tribe of southern and eastern Africa. Though soft-spoken, humble, and passive in action, the short man was quite eager to report that tragedy had been averted in the Impenetrable Forest.

"Ambrosios was granted help from the naremf's yet again. Without them, the infants would have been destroyed." "The local tribesmen have grown weary of attacks from the Unseen and choose rather to hide their faces in the night than protect the species that has protected them for centuries. My brothers and sisters, we cannot expect the ground to fall from beneath our enemies every time we are attacked. The naremf's can only save us so many times and their numbers cannot be many."

"What about the girl, Junia?" Bestafanus interrupted, staring back at the table, "Is she safe?"

"Safe in her ignorance, old friend, and I intend to keep it that way. The girl is still young, and while she has attained many of the skills that she will need to join us, I have yet to reveal her destiny to her."

"The 'girl' you speak of is now a woman," Bestafanus pushed, "surely she has dreams like the others; surely her childhood has not been cleared from her memory."

"You may be right," Presefnod responded, "But for now, the forces which come to steal our treasures in the night, seem to be as ignorant of Junia's purpose as she is, I

don't think they know she exists. If that fact can keep her safe for that much longer, then I will take it."

All at the table and Bestafanus agreed on that point.

"What about Elias?" Nialda questioned, reacquiring her cynical tone. "If he is truly the one who will unite the lines, why do we not have him secured in a vault somewhere?"

The group at the table was in agreement with her questioning.

Bestafanus took a step closer to the table. Staring at the crest of a sun on the back of one of the empty seats, he responded, "If I know my brother, he's probably watching over Elias as we speak."

IX. To Hide

Tears of anger, fear, and despair welled in Elias's eyes as multiple scenarios scrambled through his mind. Unlike the scene downstairs, everything in Alexa's bedroom had remained the way he left it when he had put her to bed hours before. Even the night-light continued to move across the ceiling, though the stars, it seemed, had failed as sentinels. Alexa, the pride of Elias's life, was missing from the bed where he had left her. An imprint of her tiny frame still lay in the sheets where she had slept. Elias dared not move from where he knelt in the doorway, fearing he might begin his own path of rage and destruction towards anyone or anything that might have harmed his family. Tears streamed down his face as he began to gently sway back and forth. He had reacted similarly throughout his life in moments of despair. It was his body's mechanism for solidifying his soul when darkness prevailed in the moment.

Tightening his grip around the bat, Elias slowly rose to his feet. Flashes of memory pierced his skull in broken, blinding segments. He struggled to piece it all together: the swinging skull, the massive-earthly holes, animal instincts, and the fear of falling. The images lit fire to his head in a jigsaw of chaos and uncertainty. Struggling to distinguish between visions and reality, Elias almost missed the draft of air that passed behind his neck. The wisp of cool breeze passed through the hair over his ears and returned him to a state of normalcy.

Stepping back into the hallway, Elias gazed down the long corridor to the master bedroom. Its wooden door swayed slightly and creaked from brief wafts of air. Elias knew Jade would open the windows every morning to catch her favorite scents of

autumn. Somehow though, Elias knew that as he began creeping down the hall, that Jade was not responsible for the draft. As he moved with the most possible stealth, a faint beating sound came from the room beyond. Stopping to interpret the sounds, Elias cursed the age of the house as the wood creaked beneath his feet. Fearing what might be on the other side of the swaying door, he raised his bat in anticipation. Reaching the frame of the door, he peered through the small opening to get a glimpse at what might be inside. His eye caught the glare off the right side of Jade's standing oval mirror in the corner of the room. Also moving slightly with the wind, the mirror offered a partial swaying purview of the room. Through the reflection, he saw papers and books strewn across the floor, in addition to a chair that been knocked over. As sunlight fell into the room, he was blinded slightly by prismatic lights that reflected off the glass. Falling back to rub his eyes, he accidentally leaned into the door, pushing it open. Cursing himself again, Elias prepared for possible retaliation from the other side of the door . . . Nothing came. Bat raised, he stepped into the room, just as a bunch of papers fluttered across the room with the wind. Stopping right beneath his feet, one of the pages was a recent example of his own artwork. The same grisly face, mostly covered by a hanging hood, smiled upward. Instead of fear however, the image elicited anger, causing a brief reaction of rage. He kicked the door the rest of the way open, ready it seemed, for anything that would be behind it.

The door swung across the wooden floor and bounced off the adjoining wall. Elias stopped short of swinging full circle with the bat as he realized nothing had been hiding behind the door. And though there was no gruesome sight to behold, the left bedroom window was broken and glass dusted the floor beneath it. As Elias cautiously

approached the scene, unavoidably crunching shards as he stepped, the next draft brought a very distinct smell...of blood. Elias covered his mouth, as he noted that the glass had ripped through someone or something's flesh as it had gone out...or through the window. Carefully, he stuck his head through the shattered opening and peered at the yard below. More blood littered the ground, followed by dragging marks and bloody prints that led into the woods. Elias traced the path of blood as far his eyes could see until it disappeared. His eyes lit up as he spotted a trio of eagles that circled the sky in the distance.

“My God...please...”

Elias turned and ran for the door. Sliding across the papers on the floor, he flung himself across the glass-ridden threshold and into the hallway. He made it to the staircase in about three lunging steps when he heard it again: the faint beating sound. Stopping dead in his tracks, Elias peered back at the bedroom. The sound repeated ever so faintly, yet more rapidly. As he stopped to listen, the sound stopped. As he took a step towards the room, the sounds came again. This time, they seemed to come from all around him. But yet, where were they coming from? As he got closer to the bedroom, the beats, which sounded like muffled popping sounds, became more frequent. When he entered the bedroom again, the sounds stopped. The thought of his family possibly lying in an open grave out in the woods was terrifying. Yet, a tiny fire of curiosity was lit inside him as he considered the source of these sounds. The flutter of pages, turned Elias's attention to one of the books that lay on the floor. Bending over to pick it up, Elias noticed the image on the cover. Angels in vast numbers fell from the sky in an interpretation of *Paradise Lost* by Gustave Doré.

Elias shook some glass from the cover of the book and set it on the bed. He thought of the angels and demons he had encountered in the past twenty-four hours and he pondered how they might be related. *Paradise Lost* was one many books that had been spread across the floor. *The Inferno*, *The Aeneid*, and others were all favorites that Elias had collected since college. Some were early editions he had found while studying in Europe.

Elias stopped to consider all of the events that had transpired. He closed his eyes as memories, dreams, and fears began circling like scavenger birds. One after the other, images began clicking into view. Large creatures moving through the darkness, something hunting him or his family, holes that became tunnels which went on for miles.

Frantically, he analyzed each scene, picked at his brain for some memory, something Jade may have said, something that happened at work, or anything that might point to a reason for what was happening.

Staring into space, Elias mapped out more scenarios in his mind: the broken screen and the furniture tossed around; Alexa's room, left untouched; the broken window and the remaining blood and glass; the fallen chair and books. He pictured a vicious struggle and squirmed at the thought of the hooded creatures attacking his wife or his child; and Galileo, his faithful companion had been lost in it all.

As more sunlight beamed in through the window, the unexpected warmth of peace filled the room. Elias realized at that moment that one thing had been oddly present most of the time: silence. Aside from the faint beating sound that Elias had followed back into the room, there were no sounds. None of the dogs were barking. What had happened to them? Another beam of light reflected off a picture frame on the wall. Elias looked at

the antique picture behind the glass. An ancestor in confederate drab posed for his military portrait. Musket in hand, the soldier looked overwhelmingly proud to be serving or more importantly, protecting.

Then it dawned on him. Could it be possible? Elias realized that instead of cursing his home earlier, he should have been grateful that the home had in fact been in the family since the Civil War. Many of the men in Elias's ancestry were not only Confederate soldiers, but also masons and skilled builders. Upon realization that Union troops would eventually make their way near the Hughes family's land, Elias's great, great grandfather, built passages in the walls of the home and soundproofed certain corridors so that family and pets could hide and not be heard upon search of the home. One such passage had been built into a wall in Elias's bedroom where currently stood his bookshelf.

As Elias peered over at the shelf, which was another example of family civil-war antiquity, the disarray of books made him smile. Normally, the scene would have angered him. A streaking mark on the wooden floor near the base of the shelf indicated that the shelf had in fact been moved recently. Regardless of the epiphany, he approached with caution. Reaching behind the shelf, his fingers found groove marks that enabled one to easily move the shelf aside in haste. Slowly, he slid the shelf to the right. A draft of muggy air pounded him in the face. Crouching down to enter the passage, Elias choked up his grip on the bat, holding it more like a lantern than a weapon. Upon entering, Elias immediately located a small notch that had been carved into the wall. A series of these marks had been placed in patterns to help the families navigate the corridors in the dark. Each groove ran under his fingers as he moved along the wall. The passageway had been

home to many childhood memories of hide and seek, and a unique Hughes-version of capture-the-flag. He had also used the chamber to play pranks on his father, who already believed their house was haunted.

As Elias turned a corner, he came to a dead end, one that he knew too well. The first corridor had purposely been closed off. Had somebody somehow found the entrance to the passageway, and made their way through, they would have concluded that it was merely a room for storage, like an attic. A plank in the floor however, covered a latch that when loosed, would enable the end wall to slide open on a pulley system. Someone had moved the plank recently. Knowing the latch had no-doubt weathered with age, he hesitantly and firmly pulled it up, trying to avoid any sound. To his dismay, the pulley system whined with its activation. Having been revealed, Elias took aim as the wall rolled aside. Again, he peered through the opening as another draft wet his skin. This time, he could feel he was not alone.

X. The Trepidation Talked

Elias stopped to listen in the silent darkness. A few feet in front of him, there was a very slight growling sound. Then, to his left, another growl, this one slightly deeper, churned in unison with the first. Finally, a third growl made Elias realize that he was surrounded.

“Shhh!” a voice whispered.

Elias found the strength to breathe a sigh of relief, which broke through the dank, humid air. Though faint and nearly inaudible, the whisper was more than recognizable. In her admirable desire to silence the hounds, Alexa had unintentionally given up their location. Luckily for her, the visitor in the dark was her Dad.

“Lexa?” Elias whispered, “Jade?”

The surrounding growls turned to pants of excitement as the bodyguards in the room encircled a familiar sound. Since the humidity had masked his scent, the dogs couldn’t identify their master, and had continued their defensive stance.

A flick of skin against metal and a light popped on in the corner. Through the stream of light and floating particles, Elias immediately recognized Jade, who was cradling Alexa, and who now shone a flashlight right in his face.

The shine dazed Elias, but only briefly. He fell over in excitement, crawling through the onslaught of licking dogs to reach his wife and daughter. The three exchanged hugs and kisses in the excitement. The dogs stumbled over legs and crawled in between crevices, all trying to get in on the action.

“Thank God you’re all safe. Thank God.”

“You can thank your dog, he saved all of us.”

Elias looked around, noticing that all of the dogs were present except for one. Short-term memories of sadness and the gruesome scene in the bag entered his mind.

Galileo, he thought, *I couldn’t save him*.

Jade’s words brought Elias back to the moment. “He saved all of us.”

Elias thought of the hole in the screen, the smears of blood, and the broken glass. He panicked, checking Alexa and Jade for cuts and wounds on their hands or their faces. He looked at the other dogs: Petunia, Sarah, Magellan, and Cornelius. Magellan had a slight cut on his face, while Sarah had a gash in her leg, but there was nothing else.

“What happened?” Elias asked. “Galileo was killed in the woods, so... Thoughts raced through his mind as he spoke. He remembered running through the trees; the anger he felt at the loss of his friend; the creatures in black raiment who had encircled him in the woods; the weapon made of bones that came swinging towards him. It was all a blur. But the bag, the bag that fell open on the ground. It was Galileo. It had to have been.

“How did he save you?”

“Galileo is alive, at least he was until a few moments ago.”

Elias was dumbfounded. “But how?”

Jade took a deep breath and began to tell her story.

When Elias had disappeared into the trees, She had panicked.

She remembered her father disappearing...she wouldn’t let it happen again.

She ran into the house, grabbed the poker and put her face to the mesh of the screen door. She breathed in the smell of fresh rain through the thin braided metal and stared into the dark, scanning the blackened woods for signs of life. Elias was gone and Galileo's scream was still fresh on her mind. Elias had yelled for her to get inside, just like her father once had. Instead, just like back in Scotland, she stepped out of the house and walked to the edge of the forest.

Squinting down the gray path, the faint outlines of maples crisscrossed with the darkness. The rain had turned to a constant patter, while thunder from over the hills vibrated the ground at her feet. Briefly, Jade thought her ears caught the sounds of voices in the distance. The rushed whispers traveled through the branches like ghosts and then disappeared. She stepped towards the woods and almost immediately wished she hadn't. Everything except for her breathing seemed to slow down until ceasing. The rain, the thunder, and all the natural elements all for a moment, were postponed.

She couldn't feel the rain hitting her face, nor the crunch of leaves at her feet. For a moment, she felt a complete disconnect from the natural world. Then, after what appeared at first as a black plume twisting through the trees towards her, everything returned all at once. An isolated string of lightning cut its way through the ash black night and illuminated three hooded beings that had been lurking in the shadows, moving to surround her.

Jade remained frozen, but only for a moment, she was remembering. She had seen creatures like this before. She knew what they were capable of. She lifted the poker and pointed it in their direction, but only two of them stopped. Seeing that the largest of them wasn't fazed, she turned her heels into the dirt and ran towards the house. She leapt up the

stairs, tripped on the top step and crashed down at the base of the door. She grabbed the handle and pulled open the door just as the same large creature crashed on top of her. She rolled over and jabbed the poker straight up. The beast cried out and fell back.

The smaller dogs were now a herd of a frantic mess, barking, jumping, and scratching at the door and windows. Jade pulled the door open and crawled through. The beast came back down, grabbing at her leg an outstretched boney, meaty hand. The dogs pounced. Sarah, with teeth extended lunged at its arm. One after the other the dogs leapt and latched on to whatever piece of the creature they could sink their teeth into. The other hooded creatures emerged on the wooden steps and Jade knew there was no time. She clutched the poker firm in her hand, ramming it straight through the opening in the face of the hood. The creature let out a shrill cry so loud that Jade immediately dropped the poker to cover her ears. The dogs dropped their grips and scurried backwards, and the hooded beings, all of them backed off and into the woods.

With her hands over her ears, Jade swung her legs around and kicked the screen door shut, fastening the floor lock with her feet. She jumped up and swung the main door shut. As she struggled to lock the deadbolt, a sudden jolt knocked her back. The creature she had just stabbed had leapt back onto the porch and was coming back for the door. This time it pressed a dark and bloodied face against the glass. Two wide eyes stared Jade down as flaring nostrils steamed up the glass. A small orange circle above its mouth gaped as embers left from Jade's poker burned inside the creature's face.

The same deformed and boney hand began beating and scratching at the door trying to get in. Jade could see into the creature's eyes, they weren't eyes of anger or of the hunt, they were of necessity and madness, as if it feared something were behind it.

Just then, a familiar sound shot out from behind the creature, a sound that was very familiar to those inside the house. A dog was barking, and the barking was combined with angry growls; the sound got louder and faster until a sharp thud knocked the creature forward. Jade fell back as the creature's face went through the screen and hit the glass of the door, shattering it. The teeth of a massive beast emerged around the creature's neck and the two crashed through the door and in the house. Jade scrambled to get out of the way and ordered the dogs upstairs.

Galileo ripped through the flesh on the beast's neck before it gained enough strength to push him off. The hooded beast stood up, brandished a boney staff from inside its robe and struck Galileo across the face. He whimpered just briefly before again starting to growl, blood dripping from his mouth. He backed up into the stairs, defining the line the creature would have to cross if it sought to continue. The other dogs scurried up the stairs in fear, and Jade followed. It was all they could do to be safe. She dreaded leaving Galileo behind, but her motherly instincts had kicked in and she had to make sure Alexa was safe.

"The rest is a bit of a blur," Jade said.

"How did you and Alexa get here?"

"Like for you... I'm...I'm trying to piece it all together."

"Please try!"

"Have you ever had a dream where you were controlling what was happening with your mind, but the actions were taking place from a distance?"

"Of course."

“I remember going into Alexa’s room and getting her out of bed. I remember going to our room, to the passage, and getting everyone inside. But even though I was doing these things with my mind, I had no control over my arms and legs, and I seemed to be moving at impossible speed. It was as if my motherly instincts made me into an entirely different creature altogether. I could smell things. I could hear things. The rooms swarmed around me in optimized views. I felt animal. Then there were voices.”

“Voices?” Elias responded. “Whose voices?”

“I don’t know, one was an older man’s voice, another a dark raspy voice, and the third, well, Galileo... When he barked, it was as if I could hear someone speaking in his place, I could hear his language.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Forget it! You can see why it’s all a blur!”

“Just finish the story, what happened to Galileo?”

“I don’t know. There was some yelling, fast footsteps, crashing, more of that obnoxious squealing sound, and then what sounded like the window breaking. The dogs and Lexa and I have been hiding in here ever since. I don’t know how many hours it’s been.”

Elias stared forward and pondered the events. It all seemed like a Grimm’s fairytale, but yet everything seemed so familiar, and his actions in the woods, felt like instinct. He traced the scar that went up his forearm; something he often did in times of anger or fear.

“I think we’re okay now. Are you guys okay?”

“I think so. Thankfully, Lexa slept through most of this.”

He grabbed the side her face, kissing her forehead, and hooking a sweaty branch of hair away from her eyes. Lexa was still swarmed by the furry ones, who had not let their guard down the whole night. She struggled to giggle as Petunia and Cornelius licked her face from chin to hair.

“What was all of that Daddy?” she managed to get out.

“I don’t know sweetie, but now that I know you guys are safe, I’m going to go look for Galileo okay?”

Alexa nodded and grasped at Elias’ thumb. Jade also grabbed at Elias, with her grip focused on his arm.

“Be safe.”

XI. Of Guardians Bright

Elias made his way through the wreckage of the living room and out what was left of the front door scene. The morning sun was both welcome and cutting. The yellow-white rays shot into his eyes, causing the knock on his head to pulsate. But the simplicities of daylight: a clear and visible path, a humid respite from the rain, and the simple touch of warmth upon his shoulders brought Elias comfort.

With his bat still in hand, Elias sidestepped off the front porch and into the expanse of yard. The occasional eagle still perched in random solitary trees, while others circled in the distance. This side of the property was much less wooded, but rather began with a slight incline of grass and dirt, leading towards a small Appalachian hillside. This part of Tennessee was not only famous for its forested peaks, but also for its emerald rolling hills which often looked sunburnt this time of year.

Elias paced through rusted fallen branches, leaves, and shrubbery, kicking away the occasional briar that stuck up towards him. Giant eagles, some looking young and others more rugged with age peered down from the occasional birch limb as he passed. He felt a sense of urgency in wanting to know Galileo's true fate, but he found comfort in knowing the bag of flesh that fell out before him was not his dog.

Galileo must have attacked them with force, chasing one or more into the woods. He was probably struck with a staff or weapon, but kept moving. Like a hunter when killing a deer, he would inflict a fatal first-blow and follow his prey to its death. Galileo likely chased the creatures deep into the forest, weakening those he chased, and then dragging them down by the neck. He smiled at the thought of his dog's bravery. But what

was in the bag? Perhaps the leader thought fit to display a fallen comrade, mocking his weakness? Perhaps the body bag was for a different creature entirely? Elias' keen imagination was running wild with possibilities. He often cursed his mind for the many images it conjured; it was both his biggest weakness and his biggest strength.

Nearly two hundred yards in front of him, as he surfaced the top of a small incline, a small valley opened at the base of the nearest hill. The ground was split by a snaking creek bed that was only wet after floods. Stumbling over rocks that he had likely skipped across the water as a child, Elias dug the bat into the earth to gain better footing. The shadow of a passing bird moved across his face and sent his attention straight ahead. A figure, more definite in form, stood directly beneath the spinning procession. Robed like the others, but not in black, the being's humanoid features were exemplified by locks of snow-white hair that hung out the hood's opening and flowed with the breeze. Brandishing a stick of his own, the man stood firm in his place: his right hand holding his staff in the ground, his left to his side, his fingers swaying to strokes on the ears of a beast.

Elias didn't know whether to stop, yell, or approach in stealth. His awkwardness in walking upon the rocks made the decision for him. Stumbling again, he inadvertently kicked a small stone through the air, which shattered against a boulder in the rock bed. The brief and yet distant lapse in judgment was enough to alert the man of Elias' arrival. Picking up the tail of his robe, which draped the soil at his feet, the man darted towards the woods, which Jade had been singing to the day before. Elias marveled at how fast the man moved, having noticed his hair in the wind. He wasn't anything like the creatures in the night. His raiment was a muddied white and wrinkled. A sash, which dangled from a

knot at the middle, looked like thick twine, yet it sparkled with the sun as the man ran. Before long, his figure mystically disappeared into the woods, his frame seemingly blending into the morning fog that still crept along the landscape.

Elias stood still; torn between chasing the man and discovering the source of the spiraling eagles. Again, his lack of decision, decided for him. The hunter, which had once been at the cloaked figure's side, was now in a healthy gallop in Elias' direction. Instead of freezing though, Elias took five steps forward, knelt to the ground, placed his bat firmly into the ground, and braced for impact. Galileo's thick-boned girth hit Elias head on. The hit was different though; usually the dog had enough power to lay Elias out flat on his back, nearly drowning him in the slaps of dog saliva across his face. Though the moisture from tongue ensued, Elias could feel weakness and fatigue in Galileo's frame. Still, overjoyed at his friend being alive, and rather fatigued himself, he rolled around in the dirt with the giant akita. Eventually both lay flat panting for air.

“Good boy!” Elias repeated over and over, “Good boy!”

The blood in the fur around Galileo's mouth was evidence he had been hunting, but what? Had he single-handedly dismantled an entire army of their attackers in the night? Something told Elias that the hooded figure who disappeared into the woods, somehow also deserved credit. The mere thought of the man, brought peace to Elias' mind. This surprised him. His mind continued to play strange games with him, but these games he could put aside. Contrary to his most recent visions and stirrings, these thoughts brought him peace.

Elias rose to his feet and signaled for Galileo to move back in the direction from which he came. The eagles were scarce now, but a few older and more ancient-looking

birds remained. The two or three birds that still circled, spread out and found perches as he came upon the scene, one he knew all too well. It was another hole, like the others from that morning. This hole was much larger in size, as if something very large had emerged, or made a big fuss about going down. The pride in Galileo's eyes made Elias believe it was the latter. Petting Galileo behind the ears, he repeated: "Good boy."

Elias's mind again began to swirl. Like the storyboard for a film, a magic hand in his mind placed images into sections in a canvas on his brain. The hooded creatures and their mangled bodies of blood, torn flesh, and bone; his seemingly natural ability to hunt, and his bear-like skills that ensued; the ancient weapons carved of bone; the animals around him, both dog and eagle, that acted as guardians, and seemed to speak a familiar language of understanding; the attack on Jade and the leader's cryptic words; the hooded man who moved with the stealth that Elias lacked; and the holes, probably dozens of them. How did they get here? What had come out of them? Or perhaps more importantly, where did the creatures go?

Elias peered over the edge of the gaping hole. Beyond the foot or two of visible dirt walls and roots, there was nothing, darkness. He had peered into a hole like this once before. Though rectangular in shape and much smaller, the hole that Elias had found seventeen years ago spoke to him the same way. As he stood and looked straight down, he could feel the slightest of vibrations. Not as strong as those in the school, but still obvious in presence. Galileo backed cautiously away from the hole, rearing his head like a horse afraid to proceed. For the first time he could remember, Elias could sense fear in his friend. Though he had attacked their enemies without second thought, Galileo could sense that something much more sinister dwelt beneath the surface. Elias felt it too.

The vibrations that moved beneath his feet picked up a certain rhythm. The movements in the ground matched the beating of his heart. As he stared as far into the depths as he could, the black of the hole sank into his mind. Everything around him, including the light of the sun, disappeared as Elias drifted off into the moment. The beat of his heart moved faster and deeper, shaking his very frame. The more beats there were, the louder they became. These were no longer heartbeats, but the beat of a drum on to battle. An army marched in the darkness. A silver haze carried their movements as they marched down across black sands of a craggy hillside. Though human in flesh their eyes were empty of souls and marched blindly. They moved forward as one but minus beating hearts of their own. Sharp cries in the night behind them led the march in one direction: East. Behind the walls of tattered bodies, both shielded and armed, troupes of horses carrying knights, followed closely behind. These were no ordinary knights. Their armor had been to battle before, robbed and looted from the graves of the dead. Stained with the blood of men more gallant than they; men who fought for a purpose of their own; men who fought for freedom. These soul-less minions were slaves of a voice in the darkness, marching to enslave even more. Their horses, ribcages showing, chomped at their bits, teeth extending. The breeds varied in size and shape, with larger species carrying the meatier warriors, and others that had been bred with spikes protruding from their skulls. In some distant land the dead were marching to war. A sharp cry from behind the legion stopped the group in their tracks. As Elias peered at the scene from a distance in the dream, the attention was suddenly turned to him. A path began to clear in the center of the crowd, beginning at the back. The warriors obediently moved aside as a large stallion trotted into view. The rider though mysterious from a distance, was familiar in the dark

hood that draped his body. As the man emerged and separated himself from the crowd, his steed puffed black steam as the reigns were shifted in Elias' direction. The short trot of the beast picked up speed as the rider honed in on his target. As in all dreams, the dreamer couldn't move. Elias couldn't feel his body, nor could he brandish a weapon to defend himself. Though many ideas for contraptions and deterrents flashed through his mind, all he could do was stare. The horse picked up speed as his master kicked into its gut. From the drape around his arm, the faceless being brandished a morning star made from a human skull. The weapon dropped from his waist on a chain that he began swing around in the air. The harder he kicked, the harder the beast galloped; and the faster the skull spun through the air. Elias didn't know how this was going to end. He tried blinking to save himself.

Wake up! He thought, *Wake up!*

From within walking distance, the horse stopped, and bucked its front legs into the air. The enemy held on securely, still twirling the chain, and preparing for an accurate release. But another sound stopped him. The horse plopped down and backed away. The warrior screamed in anger, wanting to continue the fight. The horse bucked and pulled back refusing to go forward. The army broke into disarray, staying in line but shrinking from this new and strange sound. Elias struggled to put his ear to it; realizing from the stares of the warriors, that whatever it was came from behind him. As physicality drifted into the dream, Elias swore he could feel a cool breeze fly over his shoulders. The air traveled towards the enemy, sending them backwards into the dark. Their broken tattered bodies flailed as they struggled to avoid the storm. The black sands stirred up and pushed them back to whence they came. The hooded being came back into view for a brief

moment. A human chin emerged from depth of the hood. A crooked smile lifted in Elias' direction. The horse bucked one more time, shook its reins, and pulled off again into the darkness.

More feeling returned as he felt a sharp tug at his side. The blacks and darkness evaporated into the sunlight of the Southern morning. Elias felt the grip on his bat return, realizing he would have had a weapon if he needed it. Although he bet the boney mace would have hurt a lot more. A sharp tug came again as reality came back in full strength.

“Daddy! What are you looking at?”

Elias didn't know how long Alexa had been standing there, but the realization of that fact, shocked him. Realizing her proximity to the hole, he yanked her up by her arm, and swung her legs around his waste. He turned around to find Jade, still weak from the morning light, but walking up from behind.

Despite her obvious shock at the pits all around her, and despite her lack of knowing how they formed, Jade immediately shifted into story mode to protect her daughter from the truth.

“Looks like you made quite a mess out here Daddy,” Jade said. “Digging for civil war artifacts again were we?”

Not wanting to ruin story time again, Elias complied with the ruse.

“Yeah...appears I got a little carried away this time.”

Elias looked at Alexa, whose eyes were still wide with bewilderment. He wasn't going to take the chance that his imagination had been passed down to her. He swung around, and headed back with his family towards the house.

With the comforting feeling of his family's safety came a certain sense of normalcy. The growls from his stomach reminded him that it was Saturday morning and he was hungry. After breakfast and for the next few days he'd do a lot of shoveling. A lot.

As he walked back towards the house, he stared into the depths of the trees. He felt safe knowing someone was watching; but as he held his daughter close, he wondered if his guardians would be enough.

XII. From the High Neighboring Hills, A Stranger

By the beginning of the following week, most of the holes had been completely filled. But this wasn't Elias' doing. Following another big storm on that Sunday, he planned to take advantage of the earth's softness and begin shoveling. To his bewilderment, the holes had almost all been completely filled by some other source. There were cracks in the dirt where roots had seemingly popped out of the ground, rotated, and then sewn themselves back asunder. With the help of his wife, he was able to clean up their home, and by Friday of that next week, their home was back to normal.

One unique advantage to living in the Cherokee National Forest, aside from the obvious, spectacular views and scenery, was that most of Elias' neighbors, however many miles away they lived, were skilled craftsmen. He and the other townspeople would exchange goods with one another for small fees and with a historic trust of respect. Therefore, he had no difficulty finding furniture to replace that which was damaged in the assault of his living room; as well as the window frames, mesh, and glass that had all been broken in the entry way.

Similar to other Southern mountain people, whose histories and economies had been racked with the effects of Prohibition, the townsfolk of Rune Mountain had to find other means of sustaining their existence. Word of mouth eventually allowed the local artisans to share with the local tourism industry in being the foundation of the area's economy.

People would come from all over the world to see the scenery, specifically to hike the mountains in the fall and view the often blood-red rhododendrons in the summers.

Visitors would sift through items in the antique stores, purchase trinkets of local craftsmanship, and build a piece of Cloudland, Tennessee inside their hearts. Something though, was a bit haunting about the small community. The historic district had a mere handful of buildings to call it home. Few, if any of the structures had been given much thought for repairs or restoration. It was as if the townspeople were content with nature receiving the town back from whence it came. One prime example was the Cloudland Hotel, once built atop Roan Mountain itself. The mountain retreat, at one time, boasted of being the highest retreat east of the Rocky Mountains. It was said that people from all over the world traveled to visit this hilltop oasis. But just like the buildings in town, it was soon forgotten and sold. All that remained of the building was a landmark posting its name, and rocks from the foundation. Still however, people could find the luxury of elevated solitude, by hiking to the grounds where the hotel stood, and peering across the expanse of distant smoky mountains.

Elias had never paid much attention to the deterioration of things man-made, but rather the man-made cancer of the landscape. Despite his popularity at the high school, the local logging companies were less than impressed with his qualms over redistricting at the city council. Moves to make individual tracts of land city property rather than personal property would give the companies the edge on acquiring forests for squander.

He and a handful of other local people would be at every meeting, as long as they were open to the public, flooding the ears of city officials with guilt trips for selling out to the big guys. Unfortunately for Elias, small town financing was becoming a big problem in his neck of the woods, and the budget committee often had nowhere else to turn. So,

like other areas in the Appalachians, where communities were giving in to the rape of mountaintop mining, Elias' people and many others now bowed down to the loggers.

But as far as the city was concerned, Elias liked the nostalgic feeling that lingered with the deterioration of the buildings. He felt if restoration companies put their hands on the structures in this quaint little town, eventually nothing original would be left from its history.

Things for Elias were about back to normal. He couldn't stop thinking about all the crazy happenings during the week; but surprisingly their effect on him wasn't the same. They gave him a certain sense of energy that allowed him to focus on his classes and give a lot of attention to the approaching school play. During his planning period on Friday, he made his way to the local hardware store to pick up some touch-up paint for the backdrop of the set. Normally a teacher would get a purchase order from the owner, Al. He would then hand over the items from his store and put it on the school's tab. This total for the items was usually close to nothing. The school and local businesses had an understanding that worked on the basis of supporting the kids in the community. If it hadn't been for his father being close friends with Al, Elias may have been out of luck. The funds on the school's tab had conveniently not been provided for the Arts Program; another one of Dr. Elliott's sly tactics in ridding her school of Mr. Hughes. He had another advantage though, besides just old acquaintances. Many of the older folks, like Al were getting too old to move around like they used to. He would supplant this problem by doing painting jobs and artwork for some of the originals in the community. Al was happy to give Elias what he needed, knowing he kept his home looking classy on its outer, aging walls.

Al licked a finger to simplify the separation of two small paper bags. He shook them open and began stacking Elias's order neatly inside.

"Looks like a bit more than just a touch-up from what you've got here Elias," the old man said, with barely enough saliva to speak. "This looks like enough for two or three coats."

Elias grinned at the old man's canniness while peering out the window and across the street.

The u-shaped beams that made up the back of a logging truck pervaded any view he would normally have of his quaint town. Though the crackle of rolled up paper bags signaled that his purchase was complete, Elias drifted into thought like always. He measured the circumference of the logs that were cradled between the beams. He imagined the lifespan of the trees, the ages of civilization they had witnessed, and beauty their foliage had likely created. He then imagined the twenty packs of diapers or the hundred pounds of toilet paper that each tree might create. Not only were the trees being wasted, they were being used to hold human waste. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Elias's unique attachment to nature had been a curse. He felt an innate sense of longing, mourning, and pain for the suffering of the earth and all of its inhabitants. He often felt that trees and animals were speaking to him without actually speaking. He could sense a constant plea for help.

So as he peered out at the truck, which rumbled while idling, he failed to notice anything but the trees or what was left of them. He certainly failed to notice Al, who could certainly have fallen asleep standing if given the chance. He also failed to notice an

occupant of the truck, who emerged, stepping down from the passenger side of the cab. Two dogs also jumped down from the cab, one surveying the surroundings, the other keeping watch of their master as he offered money to the driver. This exchange of communication caught his eye as the obscurity of the situation piqued his curiosity. From what he could deduce through the pane of tempered glass and window paint, a driver had picked up a homeless man and his dogs, giving him a ride into town. He figured that like many homeless wanderers and hitchhikers, the man had dressed in military attire to give the appearance of a war veteran. His two dogs, potentially his only companions, would then only add to the appeal of his waning situation. People in these parts, with their love for the military and knack for Southern hospitality would have no hesitations towards helping a man like this.

The communication between the passenger and the driver forced Elias to look more closely. The wad of dollar bills that the soldier offered the driver in recompense surely proved he wasn't homeless. The apparent health of the dogs and the seeming cleanliness of the man's uniform suggested that his situation wasn't dire. Elias blindly thanked Al for the paint, fondled around for the sack, and upon grabbing it, made his way for the door, keeping his gaze on the situation across the street. As he made his way out the door onto a small cobblestone walkway, a small antique bell chimed overhead as the store's door shut behind him.

The driver of the truck, who had a long grey beard and was decked out in denim overalls, now leaned over the seat running his finger across a map. The soldier listened and observed intently as the driver gave him some sort of local directions and instructions. The information pleased the soldier who responded with a short bow and an

extension of his hand. The bow only prolonged Elias's curiosity. The need for directions and the odd manner of the soldier's respect proved he was not from around the area. Or did it?

When the soldier removed his cap to shake the driver's hand, the color of his hair and the shade of the skin on his neck stuck out. His hair was a dusty black and his skin a tan shade of brown. Elias hesitantly came to a conclusion on the ethnicity of the man. This was the Cherokee National forest, and although rare in this part of Tennessee, many near, full-blood Cherokee Indians lived in outer-lying areas and especially in North Carolina. Elias was under the impression though, that due to a history with the U.S. military, most current Native Americans elected not to join. He was willing to accept a different scenario in this case and simply have appreciation for where and how this man had served.

He approached the Studebaker, reaching through the window of the passenger side and placing the bag on the floor. Continuing to catch glances of the man and his dogs, he made his way around the hood of the truck to the driver's side.

After shaking the driver's hand, and placing the map in his side pocket, the soldier shut the truck's door and motioned for the dogs to move around to the back. They obeyed and moved in unison as the man gave one last bow to the driver and walked after the dogs. He made his way around the trailer, running his fingers along the cracked bark of logs as he passed.

Elias sensed something familiar in the man's actions. He could feel that the soldier was also frustrated or even sad that the trees had been cut down. He wasn't simply

touching the trees; as something one would do while walking by, he was paying his respects; wishing somehow, like Elias, that man could find another form of subsistence.

The truck rumbled and shook as the driver revved the engine and kicked it into gear. Two silver exhaust pipes, which ran up the front sides of the cab, belched grimy plumes of smoke, and the truck started to roll. He was glad to see the truck leave, but he knew that just as soon as one was gone, another would come dragging in. He stared through slats of space between logs, trying to catch a glimpse of the man that had just walked by. He figured the truck driver had probably convinced him to go into the café and get some coffee or pecan pie.

As the third and final bed of logs rolled out of view, the grey pollution briefly distorted Elias's view of the scene across the street. The air cleared to reveal the soldier and his dogs looking right back at him. Startled, he made a very noticeable attempt to look the other way and hopefully to him, appear as though he had not been searching through the smoke to see the newcomer. He reached inside the driver-side window, pretending to fumble for something on the seat that wasn't there. Thoughts racing with embarrassment, he prayed that the man had been oblivious to his stares and that their brief moment of caught glances had been mere split-second coincidence.

Hearing the crackle of pebbles under boots, and the faint, yet more numerous patterns of paws on asphalt, Elias's heart began to race and he hoped even more that the sounds weren't heading in his direction. Glancing up at the rear-view mirror, Elias's heart hammered as he realized the group was heading his way.

As if to find a weapon for his defense, Elias popped open the glove compartment and fumbled through its contents. Not really sure of what he was hoping to find in the

less-than-organized glove box, he knew that something inside would surely protect him in the moments to come.

Just as the man and his dogs reached the bed of the truck, Elias's fingers ran across cold steel. He backed up and out from the window just in time for the soldier's arrival. Sliding the metal object into his back pocket, and continuing his act, Elias appeared startled at the soldier's arrival. What really did catch him off guard was his immediate realization of his cultural miscalculation. The man who he had seen get out of the logging truck just moments before, was not Native American, he was Middle Eastern.

"Excuse me," the man said, "I was hoping you might be able to help me find a church."

Still bewildered, Elias came up with the worst, possible answer.

"Don't you mean a mosque?" Elias said jokingly, with a smile that lasted about two seconds. Elias couldn't believe what he had just heard come out of his own mouth. He cursed himself for the slight of bigotry that had just emerged.

The man stood silent. One of the dogs, growled faintly for him.

"I am so sorry, that was a stupid thing to say." He hesitantly made eye contact with the man, hoping to find the slightest smile that could save him.

It didn't come. Rather than looking angry however, the man merely seemed anxious. He politely repeated his request.

"I was hoping you could help me find a church," he repeated. "An old acquaintance of mine used to live by it. It has been years since I have seen him."

Elias could feel a sense of urgency from the man, and wondered if he would be able to help him. There were a lot of churches in the area, many with different versions of the same name; finding the church could be tricky. But more so he wanted to make up for his blunder and retrieve any dignity he had left. He began questioning the man.

“Do you know the name of the church?” Elias asked. The man shook his head.

“Do you know what type of church it was?” Elias continued.

“Christian,” the man replied.

This fact didn’t help much either.

Though there was likely to be a church on just about every road and every corner of each road in the county, they all claimed to be Christian, but belonged to different denominations. Elias asked the man if he could elaborate. The soldier looked confused.

Elias attempted to fill in the blanks.

“Was it a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Latter-Day Saint, Catholic...”

Elias relayed a long list of Christian churches from the area. The other man remained silent. It was clear that he did not remember the name of the church. Elias was only making matters worse by reciting this list from memory, which would get both of them nowhere.

About fifteen names into his list, Elias shifted directions.

“Maybe you don’t remember the type of church. What about the name of the specific church? There’s First Baptist, Calvary Baptist, Bethel Baptist, Sacred Light Baptist, Canaan Baptist, First Methodist, Second Methodist...”

Elias finally caught on to the man’s frustration when the soldier’s gaze drifted off.

“I’m sorry, I’m not helping at all,” Elias said. The soldier returned a faint smile of agreement from the right corner of his mouth.

“Do you remember anything about the Church?” The man continued to stare off, but his focus shifted towards Elias’s question.

“You see, I have never actually been to this church. I only know how it looks because of how it was described to me many years ago. We agreed that should we survive that horrid night and should we need to meet again, I could find my friend if I found his church. To be honest, I don’t know if he escaped. I only barely survived myself. I can still feel the heat on my face...”

Elias felt a slight chill on his neck as he listened to the man’s story. He tried to consider all that the Arab had just said. What was he doing in Tennessee? Where was this mysterious church? Who was his friend and what had they escaped from?

It had to have been something very frightening. Elias noticed an obvious fear in whites of the man’s eyes.

Though all that stood behind Elias were old empty buildings next to Al’s hardware store, his middle-eastern visitor stared in their direction, creating memories in his mind. Settling on what must have been the climax of his memory, the man closed his eyes and bowed his head. Elias watched as the man lippled a few silent words to himself, then again looked in his direction. He ran his finger down a scar, which ran over his eye. The gesture clearly had its meaning in the man’s story.

“Are you hungry?” Elias asked.

Before the man could answer, Elias had begun walking towards him and motioning for them to turn towards the café.

“Let me get you some food across the way and you can tell me about this church.” Elias motioned for the man to come with him to the café over by where the man had just exited the truck.

Reluctantly, the man nodded and turned to walk with him.

“I am not hungry,” the man said, “but I could use some water and hopefully some food for my little friends.”

“I might be able to help with the dogs,” Elias responded, “I have a few of my own. We’ll just stop in and get you a drink.”

The two men walked back across the road towards an old diner. The two heelers followed behind their owner, still hesitant to trust Elias. As they approached the building, the Arab noticed the pictures of American soldiers in commemorative plaques on the walls. Elias glanced again at the man’s camo and noticed he didn’t have any decorations or even a name badge. He wondered again where he had come from and why he was there. Elias reached for the metal door handle on the glass door of the diner. As he pulled the door open, a trio of small bells signaled the staff of their entrance. The soldier signaled for his dogs to sit, stay, and not move. They slowly complied, showing their discomfort in their surroundings. The man gave them another look, this time with more intent. This time he pointed and uttered a couple words in Arabic. The dogs sat promptly and still. Nodding and turning away, the man made his way past Elias, who was holding the door.

As the men entered the diner, the smell of burnt coffee and old ashtrays was almost overwhelming. The dozen or so patrons of the diner each took a glance at the newcomers. Most, knowing Elias, gave him a nod. The rest, traveling truck drivers,

returned their gazes forward and sipped their coffee or cut into their slices of pecan pie. Many of the folks took second and third glances at Elias's new friend. Some of the much older patrons went as far as sizing him from head to toe. They didn't care anything about his attire, looked past his possibility of anything heroic. The color of his skin made them uncomfortable. Elias returned nods to a few of his more-well known admirers and shared smiles with others. He completely ignored the daggers that his friend was getting. That is until one of his neighbors got up, slammed down his coffee and walked out. Trying to ignore the obvious awkwardness, Elias turned to a pear-shaped woman in a floral dress, who was standing at the welcome podium. She too was staring at the man in the military getup.

“Hey Ann, you mind if we just take booth number one?”

Still fixed on the newcomer, the woman blankly nodded, holding up two menus.

“Those won't be necessary, we'll just have some coffee and pie.”

The two men made their way around the podium and sat down in the first booth on the right. The stares continued to come, with some people being as blatantly obvious as rising from their booth to peer over the top.

Elias tried to humor his new acquaintance in the situation.

“Seems the folks are pretty impressed with your camo, can't keep their eyes off ya, or so it seems.” He put extra emphasis on the last half of his sentence, hoping the people in the restaurant would return to their business. His words seemed to be the only sound in the room besides a couple rickety ceiling fans and the overhead vent from the grill. To his appreciation though, the on-lookers slowly returned to their conversations and fixed their gazes elsewhere.

Un-amused by the situation and feeling uncomfortable, the newcomer spoke quietly.

“It is pretty clear these people do not care about my attire. I can sense a mixture of anger and fear because of what I am wearing beneath this uniform.”

He sank his head and lowered his chin as if to better mask what he was going to say next.

“It is only skin,” he continued, “I can promise them. I do not have a bomb strapped to my chest.”

“My reason for coming here is of the most importance. My world... our world depends on it. You may think of me as a radical. My cause is way beyond yours or anyone’s understanding.”

A bit of the same concern began to swim in Elias’s mind. Maybe he shouldn’t have offered to help this man. Regardless, he still felt a sense of safety knowing the chances of small-town Rune Mountain being a terrorist target were slim-to-none. Elias calmed his nerves and listened intently to the man’s next words.

“So, what’s your story? Elias asked.

Before the man could say a word, their waitress stepped into view, balancing a stainless steel coffee pitcher in one hand and two plates of pecan pie in the other. She set their plates down, making sure to give Elias a more proper placement, while wary of how she approached the Arab. Her hand trembled just slightly as she poured his coffee, while his slight bow in appreciation only made things worse. She produced an awkward smile and quickly walked away.

“Seems these people are as uncomfortable as I am, though for very different reasons.”

Elias swiveled his fork into his slice of pie and nodded. Directing the food towards the left side of his mouth, he began to chew.

“My name is Yusef Mahmoud. I come from the Farkhar region of Northeast Afghanistan. I come from a long line of pistachio farmers. We have grown the orchards for centuries on our lands and have lived and died by the fruit. Recently, the bad habits of warlords and other individuals have led to erosion, deforestation, and the loss of access to good well water for the trees. I learned strategies of war at a young age. Many tactics I acquired came from studying farming, while many came from watching interaction between U.S. forces and Al Qaeda. When we formed a common interest in preventing warlords from crossing into certain territories, your government hired me or should I say provided me with resources necessary in preventing enemy progress. I was brought to the states this week to be both rewarded for my services but also to strategize with officials at the Pentagon and advance the U.S. military’s strategies in tunnel systems.” Elias’s food sat in his cheek as he stared across the table at the man. He spoke around the food.

“I thought you were looking for a church.”

“I am. If you can’t tell, I’m a bit of a ways from Washington D.C. The U.S. government has been great, don’t get me wrong, they gave me these nice clothes, but there are much more pressing matters. I really need to find that church.”

Now Elias really was worried what his motives were. He was supposed to be in D.C. helping the government. He was an Afghan war strategist in borrowed clothing

looking for a church, he had said he was a radical but insisted there was no bomb strapped to his chest. He figured he should just help the man and figure out the rest later.

“Tell me about the reason you’ve come here, and maybe I can help you find this church. As you can tell from what I said before, there are a lot of churches in the area, and I want to help you find the right one.”

The man skimmed his fork over the pecans that covered the top of his slice. Completely aware of Elias’s scheme, he played along.

“Ah yes, the church, it was white, I remember that.”

Elias stopped mid-chew, and looked right at the man. He picked up his small beige mug and took a sip, using the burnt liquid to clear his mouth.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” he said, “you’re continuing along the path of most resistance. Pretty much every church is either made of red brick or is very plainly white.”

“Alright then,” the man said, “I will tell you what I remember most.”

The man unbuttoned the top button of his khaki green dress shirt and twisted his neck around to let his neckline breathe.

“The most memorable part of the church’s description was a stained glass window.”

Elias returned the mug to his mouth, allowing the coffee to sit on the edge of his lips as the man continued his description. It didn’t matter that the heat was nearly burning his skin. He could almost sense what was coming next.

“The panes of yellow and red shot up from the ground,” he continued, “a man in a white robe with head raised and arms outstretched. It was...a baptism.”

“Of fire...” Elias interrupted.

“How did you...”

Before the man could finish his sentence, Elias had placed his mug back on the table and was out of his seat. He threw a twenty-dollar bill on the table. The Arab looked up in shock at Elias’s sudden decision.

“I hate to tell you sir,” Elias said, looking down at the man, “but the church you’re looking for was destroyed years ago. Placing his hand on the man’s shoulder, Elias smiled and began to walk away. “Sorry.”

“Wait!” the man shouted.

But Elias had already made his way around the podium, slapping his hand to the glass of the front door. The small round bells clanked hard against the glass as he flung it open and quickly walked out.

The sudden shift in behavior had come suddenly, and though Elias felt the slightest amount of shame for leaving his new acquaintance sitting in the diner, he had to leave. The subject of the church had struck a nerve like a lot of things had lately. Not only did Elias know exactly which church the man had been talking about, the church itself had a specifically disheartening place in his memory. The church belonged to his father, and Elias was the one who destroyed it.

XIII. Phantasms & Dreams

Elias had made it less than half a mile down the highway before the guilt really hit him hard. He had many things to feel guilty for, but some were permanently framed in his mind. He remembered the church and what he had done.

He found the first spot where he could pull off the road and did so. With his hands still on the steering wheel, he pressed his head against the wheel and started to sob. The faint sound of twisting metal caused Elias to look up and see the trinket, which hung from the rear view mirror. He remembered how the sun had often reflected off its edges while it would dangle and bounce as he drove.

Elias watched how it was spinning now; spinning like the tire swing in the yard. He imagined winding up Alexa in the swing and allowing her to twist as the trinket did, unraveling in the air. He imagined her screaming with laughter as the spinning sensation and the air tickled her freckled face. The brief thought brought the edge of a smile through the tears. As the charm unraveled and spun around again, Elias again caught a glimpse of a tree. He squinted at what he thought was an optical illusion. The tree with branches that sparkled with the sun, was unique in that its roots were long and shot straight down. The moment put Elias in a trance. As the edges of the triangular pendant spun, the smiling faces of his family blurred and all he could see was the tree. As the sparkles lit up his eyes, the image of the tree caught fire in his mind. In his daze, Elias could feel the air change as he drifted off into another place. The tree suddenly became larger than life.

A vision, again, of childhood became so real.

Standing alone in a section of forest not far from his home, Elias leaned against the bark of a large maple tree. He could feel the lines and ridges of the trunk run and crisscross under the palm of his hand. The branches of the tree hung over him as if guardians in a dark time. Dark clouds covered the sunlight. A slight rain hit the leaves above.

Faceless family members and old acquaintances encircled an opening in the Tennessee soil. Elias could hear faint cries as the interim pastor mumbled a few last words and signaled for two men to lower the casket to its final resting place. Like in many dreams, he watched the scene from a short distance. This dream, though, like the others, was sensory and real. The sound of dirt hitting wood was raw as were the words of the eulogy. His Father had been his whole life. And though his Mother had not been entirely missing from his life, she too lay in the earth; only a few feet from where the procession stood.

Wearing a tuxedo, which was too large for a ten year old, Elias used the extra length of the sleeves to wipe his tears and help hide his face. He was both sad and angry. Sad at the loss, angry at his father for giving up. Elias believed he had died of a broken heart-a heart that had never fully healed when they lost his mother. He had only been three when she collapsed from an aneurism and died.

He could feel a sharpness of pain in his heart that spread through his chest into a spot behind his skull. The elements of the vision became more and more blurred as his anger grew. He could feel his hands breaking through the bark of the tree as he did all he could to stay calm. Through the blur of faceless beings that stood in reverence of the deceased, he made out a visage of one man, who also stood a ways off. The man also

appeared angry, but for different reasons. Putting his full weight into a tree, the longhaired and scruffy-bearded man tipped a tall, clear bottle towards his mouth. The last of a swirling brown drink emptied partly onto the man's face and partly onto his neck and shirt. The man had worn a tweed blazer over a red and black plaid, flannel shirt as his only sign of respect. When the last of the liquor made its way into the man's mouth, he became angry, wanting more. He chucked the bottle off into the woods. Elias could read the curse words. He could feel the man's frustration, knowing he too could have had much more from his Father, but now he was gone.

The man stood up, brushing bark and dirt from his jacket. He took a few wobbly steps forward, enough to peer through the crowd and at the casket being lowered to the ground. Making a strange sign with three fingers on his right hand, he lipped some words and bowed his head. When he lifted his eyes, he looked right at Elias. For a brief moment, Elias felt like the drunkenness was an act. The man looked at him with the most sincere eyes Elias had ever seen. He could feel the man saying it would be all right. He knew though, as he watched the stranger walk away, kissing his mother's tombstone as he passed, that forces beyond either of their control were at play.

Almost as soon as the man disappeared, a heavier rain had the crowd fumbling for umbrellas and disappearing into whatever sections of the woods they came from. Before long, Elias stood alone next to a mound of freshly packed dirt, being washed away in a deluge. The harder the rain hit the earth, the heavier the dream felt. The Elias of old could feel the weight of histories being placed on tiny shoulders, but the Elias of the moment just wanted his father back. As thunder popped in the distance, he turned his attention straight to the ground and began to dig. With the fierceness of a future self, Elias knelt in

the mud and began clawing at the ground. That night the rain was on his side. The storm turned the fresh grave of a family cemetery into a mud box. He flung away globs of mud with his sleeves. As fists in dreams struck wood, the spot on the back of his head stung. He got back up, grabbed a pallbearer's shovel and began stabbing at the edge of the pine box. As rainwater flowed into the cracks of cheap pinewood, Elias in his fury snapped a hinge. He put his cold, wet fingers under the lid and pulled. He immediately turned his head in fear, and he kept it turned, until he heard the water. It rushed through without stopping and crashed down through a hole in the empty casket.

He had been given the wrath of the gods to get his father back and he was gone. Either the earth had swallowed him, or he had been taken by the some of the creatures from his sermons. The muddy waters that had surrounded him now flowed into an opening in the ground. Elias turned to watch pieces of the earth fall away and get pulled down into the hole as his eyes struck red. A red light reflected off the falling waters at his feet.

Elias could feel the dream starting to blur. He could feel it slipping away. He pleaded with his younger self to stop because he could feel himself moving backwards and away from the scene while the boy stayed. He gave the boy one more plea to stop. But he knew he couldn't change time. He couldn't change what he'd done. He couldn't change what he'd become. He would watch him jump, knowing he would follow that red light to the depths of Hell. He would find his father and the creatures that took his body. We would be a witness to the true histories of gods, angels, and demons of this worlds. And he would barely escape with his life.

With that thought, the boy in the scene seemed to drift away like the parting of dark storm clouds and Elias was left alone again with a cemetery and the trees. The forest was empty but Elias could feel it watching him. Though most would feel scared of being watched, Elias had felt the forest watching over him his entire life.

What scared him was the thought of being alone, forever. Remnants of his parents' lied at different depths at either side of him. His father's spirit, he felt, still walked and talked, preached in these woods.

Years had passed in the dream. He was in a tux again but this one was try and he filled it in well. He had just come from his high school graduation. He stumbled as he walked, like in a lot of dreams, but this was more beyond his control. The world spun. He held his own bottle. A clear liquid splashed against its walls. The opening was stuffed with cloth. A white structure stood beyond the trees in the distance.

He would be going to college soon, he'd be studying abroad, in Scotland. He had accomplished a lot and yet he was angry. Angry they couldn't be there for him; angry his father's religion hadn't comforted him people told him his own visions of Hell were crazy. Angry his aunt and uncle hadn't had the insurance or time to cover trips to Knoxville for therapy. He was angry that had been alone though everything.

Wobbling through the woods, he made it to the forest's edge. A tall, leaning white steeple with a small bell enclosure rose above a decrepit church with walls that had otherwise been swallowed up by vibrant green and winding Kudzu that draped over most of the windows and doors. The interim pastor had left the church in disrepair. Months after the funeral, he had packed up and moved out of state. The gates were chained and

like most other symbols in Elias's life, the Earth swallowed up the church's body and he was left to visit in the forest.

He parted some dangling green arms of kudzu from the side of the building to reveal the outstretched arms of a robed man. Flames shot up from the ground in stained red glass.

Elias stood back from himself now. He watched an eighteen-year-old version of himself ponder the story in the glass. The teenager then pulled a lighter from his pocket and backed up.

"No!" Elias shouted

The boy didn't hear. Elias knew he wouldn't. He watched his former self, Molotov cocktail in hand, toss the flaming bottle through the glass into the chapel. Actual orange flames shot up behind the glass ones as the boy watched. It didn't take long before the entire structure was engulfed and a giant plume of smoke billowed into the Tennessee sky. The boy was baptizing himself in fire; shedding the skin of a former life to leave it behind.

Elias could feel the warmth of the flames on his face. The smell of smoke was all around him until the faded scent of an expired musty air freshener and the cab of his truck came back to him. The air conditioner coughed and buzzed reminding Elias that he was in a truck. The picture of his family spun back into view one more time and he was back. A church had just burned to the ground in his memory but he had more important things to worry about like reality, and the fact that he had just left a man, who probably had nothing, sitting in a diner full of potentially hateful hillbillies.

What have I done? he thought.

Peeling his hands from the steering wheel he wiped the sticky tears from his face. He shook the trance from his eyes and mind. Oblivious to how much time had passed since he pulled off the road, he began adjusting the rear view mirror so he could prevent a collision if he flipped a U-turn on the highway. The pendant swayed slightly as he tweaked the mirror. The image of the tree was now gone. Flipping the truck into drive, Elias cranked the wheel to the left. As the engine popped and the truck began to move, Elias was startled by a tap on the glass of the driver side window. Out of instinct, he slammed on the brakes and looked over to his left. His heart nearly dropped when he saw the Arab soldier staring right back through the glass. Jumping in his seat from the scare, Elias had to breath hard and fast to catch up with the situation. The man gave two more taps on the glass as Elias cut the engine. Wiping his face and turning back to the man, Elias raced through many possibilities of what could happen next. He came to one conclusion quickly. He at least owed the man an apology for inviting him to eat and then leaving him behind.

Elias pulled on the rusty handle of the driver side window, cranking it slowly to roll the window down and reveal a decent amount of his red-with-embarrassment face. The man waited for Elias to get the window down. His face was also a shade of red. He appeared to have just run quite a distance and was breathing heavily.

“Look Sir, I’m really sorry for leaving you back there, I don’t know what came over me.”

The man nodded his head and took another moment to catch his breath.

“Are you Elias Hughes?” the man asked.

The question really had Elias worried. How did he know his name?

Smiling, the man clasped his hands and whispered a prayer towards the sky.

Returning his gaze towards Elias, the man calmed himself again.

“My name is Yusef Mahmoud, I have come here to find you.”

XIV. Secrets of Another World

Samuel crossed over a row of crooked stones that had been embedded in the land of the Aran Islands for ages. The path snaked up a slight incline towards the cottage he had lived in for the good part of a century. The ferry ride from Doolin had been particularly taxing and the slapping gusts of cold had caused his joints to ache more than usual. The healing powers from Bestafanus's touch had only lasted him a couple of days. In the past, it had lasted him weeks. He wondered if he would still be alive if it wasn't for his old friend. He truly believed that all of life was a gift, yet he wondered how many of his years he had existed solely for the sake of fulfilling his duties of lineage. He also contemplated if certain circumstances in this and other worlds were having an effect on the powers of immortality. He wondered if the earth's oldest and most powerful guardians were also losing their strength.

Blasphemy, he thought, countering that notion.

The skin on his fists was nearly as weathered as the makeshift rope handles of the wooden buckets he had been carrying. He was grateful the buckets were not as heavy as they had been for the ride towards the cliffs. A few days before, the nuts had taken up the bulk of the burden. Now, the only weight he carried came from the pull of wet wood.

A skinny funnel of grey smoke twisted through the air in front of him. A chimney fashioned from ancient stones and mortar coughed out rhythmic plumes, signaling to Samuel that dinner was almost ready. He could smell the Irish herbs, likely boiling in a fresh pot of Annabelle's stew. Upon closer inspection, Samuel could make out the snowy whites of Annabelle's hair as she swayed to the motions of a porch chair and knitting set.

Likely another sweater, he thought.

He loved the sweaters that she made--a tradition of the women on the Aran Islands. He was wearing one now, slightly greyed in wool from the natural, dirty color of their sheep. The Aran Island sweater was a way for the people of the islands to join in the Irish tradition of using powerful symbols. The sweaters and their symbols acted as identifiers for people and clans. The one Samuel had today was specifically sewn to identify him and his lineage--The Shepherd. Unique patterns in the wool, symbols shot up the chest line of the jumper, with small hooks turning to either side.

A sly grin appeared on Annabelle's face as he approached. She didn't need to look and see his arrival, nor did she need to acknowledge his presence. Even though he had been gone for nearly a week, she knew he had arrived, just like she knew when to place the kettle over the fire.

Samuel smiled too; still in love with the way even the slightest of grins on his wife's wrinkled face could warm his old chest on cold and dreary days. He revered every day with her, knowing full well that any could be his last on this earth.

Setting the buckets down at the base of the porch, Samuel knelt down in front of the chair and looked into Annabelle's eyes. Though not immortal, Annabelle had her own healing capabilities; consisting of mere glances, smiles, or simple touches. Setting her knitting materials to the side, Annabelle allowed Samuel to rest his head in her lap. She continued to rock ever so slightly, allowing all angst to slowly slip from Samuel's mind. Her calloused hands moved waves through his white locks and down the back of his neck. He was home.

Annabelle traced the creases in his skin, searching for any knots or points of tension. She focused on the top of his right shoulder. Samuel let out a slight moan of approval. “You always know the right spots,” he said with a smile.

“It’s my job Sam, has been for over sixty years.”

Somehow those words allowed him to relax even more. His head sank deeper into her lap and he began to close his eyes. “How could a lowly sheep herder like me have landed such a beautiful bride? That’s what I want to know.”

Annabelle’s fist rolled firmly into a knot on his shoulder, showing her appreciation for the comment.

He knew her hands had lost most of their strength over the years. He also knew that with every bend of finger or clench of fist came pain. This made each stroke of her hand have meaning of its own. Despite this understanding, when Annabelle’s hand suddenly stopped moving, Samuel was slightly annoyed. He felt the job hadn’t been done. He rolled around a bit, signaling for her to keep going. But she didn’t.

Clasping what must have been a nerve, between her right index and middle finger, she pinched him. Opening his eyes, Samuel turned to look up at Annabelle. Her warm smile was now flat and hardened. She peered out towards the bay. He sat up, looking worriedly at Annabelle. Noticing something fearful in her eyes, he also turned to look.

Through the thick fog and just beyond the horizon of the inclined path, he could make out the frames of three beings walking slowly towards them. Samuel and Annabelle had many friends on the island, but to visit at dinnertime was neither common, nor polite. The only other people who knew where they lived had been sitting at a stone table, which Samuel attended to days before. He knew that if anyone was going to show up at this

time, they were either bringing news or they were unwelcome. Looking back at Annabelle, he could sense in her eyes that it was the latter.

Samuel stood up and moved down the stairs and toward the side and rear of the cottage. Wooden posts leaned and crisscrossed, holding up other posts that made up Samuel's sheep fencing. Muddied ewes and lambs scurried in all directions as Samuel lifted a fashioned latch and let himself in. The only real weapon he had, aside from a Celtic battle sword that hung above the mantle in his home, was a rusting axe that was wedged face down in a stump. Kicking away shards of kindling that were strewn about, he reached for the base of the axe just in time to hear Annabelle scream.

Samuel pulled the axe free and hurried towards the front of the home. The visitors were now in full view only fifty yards away.

Two dark-skinned hulks walked on either side of a shorter, Arabian woman. All three had hooded clothing of their own; both to hide their faces from the weather, and also to conceal their identities. The hoods served their purpose for the two men, veiling all but their dark brown eyes and foreheads. Aside from those two features, all that could be seen of the two giants was their muscles, which were thick and outlined in their clothing.

The woman was more familiar. Oily-black locks of hair fell across her face, only slightly hiding a crooked smile. Both features, combined with the arrogance in her step, were unmistakable features to her identity. Samuel knew this woman well.

One of her large companions had an axe of his own, which dwarfed Samuel's in size. Double-edged, with a spike in between, the blade dragged along the stones, causing sparks to spurt outward.

The intimidation tactic didn't frighten Samuel. Despite his age and the weakening of his limbs and joints, Samuel was built like an ox. Rarely was he scared of anything that appeared to be human. He gripped the handle of his axe with enough strength to crack the wood. He approached the situation with a smile of his own, signaling to the group that he would be happy to engage in a defense of his wife and property. Annabelle tightened her grip on a knitting needle she had picked off the ground. She feared the intentions of anyone who approached her home without invitation.

"Alright, you can stop right there Nialda," Samuel said.

Annabelle eyes widened at the revelation of the woman's identity.

"Though I hold your position most sacred," Samuel continued, "I can sense your intentions are not pure, and you need to leave."

The two veiled men looked at each other. Creases in their veils, indicated they were either smiling or silently laughing at the old man. The woman brushed the black hair from her face, revealing a leering smile, and stared back in silence. She seemed to actually consider what Samuel had just said; but only momentarily. Raising her right hand, she signaled for her axe-wielding companion to proceed. Nodding, the behemoth placed the axe in his left hand and first approached Annabelle.

Samuel quickly stepped forwards.

"If you take another step towards her, you will soon regret it."

The man turned to his equally-large counterpart and nodded.

Reaching to his side, the second man revealed a thin, curled blade and also stepped forward. The three men stared each other down, awaiting the others' first move.

Impatient and confident that her group outnumbered the intended victims, Nialda broke the deadlock. Stepping between the two men, she approached Annabelle.

Samuel suddenly seemed unsure of what to do next. He knew he could not harm Nialda physically, but maybe delay her in some way.

“I know enough about your laws, Nialda, to know that you cannot take the life of a human, unless they threaten the life of another. We have done you no harm. You will be cursed for this.”

“I am already cursed,” she replied, “you don’t understand that immortality is no gift unless it serves a purpose. I have been a slave to your kind for thousands of years; watching over you and keeping the ones who have a purpose-alive.”

“And for what?” she asked, “Your race has done nothing to this earth but make it weaker; taking everything for yourselves and giving nothing back. People have forgotten their purpose. Where they came from means nothing; where they are going is based on fables and fairy tales; they only care about the here and now.”

“A large force is looming, Samuel,” Nialda continued, “they want what you humans have always taken for granted: physical, human bodies; fresh water and clean air; a sun, moon, and stars; the ability to have purpose and progress. They gave it up years ago, and now they want it back. And your humans...well...they are united in nothing. You will not survive. They are the Unseen, Samuel, and they already come like thieves in the night; taking the hearts of children and preying on those looking for whatever they can find besides a god, that will make them happy. They have already done so much to destroy the lineages; to break down the defenses of your world; there is no stopping them. I have come to eliminate you, as a token to them of my new and undeniable support.”

Annabelle and Samuel moved together, clasping hands.

“As I said before, you and your pathetic wife have served no purpose other than to love each other. There are many lineages Samuel, some more important than others. Each lineage serves a purpose in this world. Your distinct duty in this life was to have posterity, so they could continue to keep the secret of the immortals safe, and always make sure that we had a safe place to meet. And what did you do? You fell in love with a woman who was barren. Though I’m sure it would have been quite simple for them to eliminate you, I am simply saving them the trip.”

Annabelle looked into Samuel’s eyes as tears began to well. His grip on the axe loosened at his side as the history of Nialda’s words set in for perhaps the hundredth time. Annabelle put her lips up to his ears. Touching Samuel’s face, she whispered all that she could.

“If your only purpose in this life was to love me, that would be enough to send you to the white skies,” she whispered, “you have done what mattered with perfection.”

Nialda frowned.

Turning back towards the intruders, Annabelle approached Nialda. Samuel was suddenly too weak to stop her.

Feeble, yet strong-willed, Annabelle walked right up to Nialda with her needle still in hand. With tears streaming down her face, Annabelle looked Nialda right in the eyes and raised the needle to her chest.

The two large men moved in to strike but Nialda held up her arm. Confused, but obedient, they stepped back.

“Let her speak, however she wishes,” Nialda said.

Annabelle sized up the two men like sheep ready to be cut, then returned her gaze to Nialda.

Pressing the point into the center of Nialda’s chest, she placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I know you can feel that,” Annabelle said, moving the needle inwards. “Though you may not know physical pain, it can’t be pleasant knowing you will never love as I have.” Annabelle kept her gaze fixed, staring Nialda between the eyes. “I think you have already joined forces with The Unseen. They would never admit it, but like you, they also long for something else they once knew, love.”

Stepping back, Annabelle placed the needle in Nialda’s hand. Walking back to Samuel, she put his arm around her and held him close.

“I could die now, knowing I have lived forever with the one I love.”

Nialda clutched the needle tight. It bent in two in her palm.

“Well now that we have your permission...” Nialda’s face shook as her anger built an empty smile. Again, raising an arm, the woman signaled her mercenaries to proceed.

Grunting in obedience, the men moved upon the old couple. For once, the two did not move. Samuel stood still but lost his balance as the quicker of the two brutes kicked his axe out from under his hand. Samuel groaned in reluctance as they were forced to their knees, Annabelle also whimpered slightly as her knees hit stone.

Holding Samuel down with a dark-skinned arm, the servant signaled for his brother to do the execution. Obliging, the second man came around the side and lifted his

axe to Samuel's neck. Getting his mark, the man positioned himself to strike. A faint orange light from the Atlantic sunset glistened off the warm, curved edge of the blade. Samuel could feel the odd sensation of warm steel on his neck. Clasp hands with Annabelle and with heads bowed, they both began to pray.

"In nomine Patris..." Samuel declared.

Clutching Samuel's hand tight, Annabelle moved her head next to his, hoping the massive blow would be big enough to take them both.

"Et Filii..." Samuel continued.

Nialda laughed as her servant raised his blade. "When will you learn that your gods can't intervene in..."

A loud creak from the wooden door of the cottage cut her off.

Stepping out and onto the porch while wiping the remnants of stew and bread from his beard, Bestafanus rested most of his weight on the hilt of a Celtic battle sword.

Annabelle looked up at their friend. "Et Spiritu Sancti," she spoke through her tears.

Content with continuing, the executioner looked once at his brother, once at his master, and finally back at his target. Raising the axe again, he was stopped a second time. This time, Bestafanus spoke in Arabic.

"There is a good chance that I can have the hilt of this sword through your belly before you can bring that blade down. Shall we see?"

The man's hesitation and lack of concentration was enough time and motivation for Samuel to put his shoulder into the man's knee and push. Losing his balance the man

came down with the axe, taking off a chunk of Samuel's shoulder instead, but also two of his brother's fingers.

Samuel and the brother both wailed in agony at their fresh wounds. Wide-eyed and furious, the executioner raised his axe for a second blow. Annabelle screamed and leapt on top of Samuel to cover him from the strike. As he raised his axe for a third time, the rusted tip of a sword found the edge of his throat.

To the man's surprise, Bestafanus had taken advantage of the brief moment necessary to kill him; but he didn't. He stood however, about five feet away and with an arm extended, effortlessly holding the tip of a sword to his throat.

Forcing the man to think faster, Bestafanus twisted the blade enough for him to choke and lose his breath. Dropping the axe, the brute staggered back.

Bestafanus, as usual, found mercy in all situations.

Though Nialda had been making it very difficult for him lately, he was not going to lose it. Pointing the sword at the eight-fingered man, he motioned for his brother to help him and leave.

Holding his throat and coughing, the shamed man complied. As the two hobbled away, Nialda could only look down and shake her head.

Bestafanus dropped the sword and moved towards his friends. Pulling Annabelle up, he dusted some of the mud off her back. "Glad you could make it in time," she smiled, "I was thinking there wouldn't be any stew left for Sam."

Bestafanus placed a warm hand under Samuel's shoulder and lifted him up. At first, Samuel yelled at the pain as he was helped up, but in moments, the pain began to disappear. "How did you know... to be here?" he asked.

“After our conversation in the chamber, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to eavesdrop on Nialda and her little toys,” Bestafanus replied, “something in particular haunted me about her tone with you that day.”

“Once I realized that they might follow you, I made sure to get on an earlier ferry here. Nialda may have been foolish enough to commit this treasonous act, but I knew she wouldn’t have done it in public.”

Trying to make humor out of the situation, Bestafanus smiled. “Between the hazelnuts and Annabelle’s cooking, I figured I couldn’t go wrong.” Helping Samuel to walk, he and Annabelle began guiding him to the porch.

The click of a hammer on a revolver stopped them in their tracks. Nialda stood a good distance from the group but close enough for a clear, critical shot.

“I had the boys bring the other weapons because they felt more real. They could cause more pain if we decided to take things slow,” she smiled. “But as much as I have hated how weapons have changed over the years, this choice will serve my purpose for today. Depending on how many bullets I decide to fire Bestafanus, with how fast they do their job, you won’t be able to save them both.

Bestafanus pushed the both of them behind him, knowing she was right. For the first time that Nialda could remember, she saw fear in Bestafanus’s eyes. This feeling rejuvenated her. Keeping the gun raised, she moved towards the group.

Bestafanus backpedaled, continuing to push the others back.

“I will never understand why you would give up your life on this Earth for a cause that will be your end. Why you would accept a sacred duty and then defile it. But you

have chosen your fate. Either you will break the covenant now, or you will be voted and cast out.”

“You’re right, I have sealed my fate.”

Taking three steps forward, Nialda pulled the trigger. Six times.

She continued pulling the trigger, hoping in her blackened mind, that the extra clicks meant something. Almost immediately her wrists and joints felt something she had not felt in thousands of years, physical pain.

Bestafanus was taken back, not by the effects of the bullets piercing his skin, but by the choice that Nialda had inevitably made. He felt pain for her, knowing what she had given up.

Looking at the empty holes in his chest and his legs, he couldn’t comprehend why she would still fire the gun. Then he considered the amount of shots and the proximity of the shooter. His body could take the hits, but it was no shield.

He turned in time to feel their bodies slump to the ground.

“My friends!” he shouted, “What have I done!”

Lowering the gun, Nialda’s eyes began to water. “You can’t save them all,” she muttered, and she hobbled off into the fog.

Bestafanus tore the top off his robe and placed it on the ground under their heads. He knew he could not save them both. Annabelle was all but gone. The majority of the bullets that went all through Bestafanus’s body had hit her. Bestafanus did what he could to ease the pain.

With blood sputtering from his mouth, Samuel said only what he could. “The sword Bestafanus... get the sword.” Bestafanus wanted to argue. He didn’t understand

why the sword would matter right now, but he didn't have time. Setting their heads upon the cloth of the robe, he got up and rushed to the sword. Grabbing it, he rushed back to his friends. Placing the sword between them, he clasped his hand over theirs.

"The hilt," Samuel said, with another spill of blood, "inside the hilt."

"No!" Annabelle shot up. Her strained words, also bloodied, were enough to knock her back down. Clearly, they had a secret she would rather die than reveal.

Lifting the sword, Bestafanus examined the hilt. The leather handle twisted into a steel pommel with the insignia of a Celtic cross intertwined with a shepherd's hook. Grabbing the end, he twisted, and the pommel came free.

A rolled up set of papers stuck out from the inside. Pulling them out, Bestafanus quickly unrolled them and read the faded writing on top. A man's name, followed by a location, was all he could make out. Jesse MacLean, Talladale, Loch Maree, Scotland.

Bestafanus quickly ran through the thoughts of what it would mean. Annabelle's grip started to loosen, as did Samuel's. "Protect him," they both said. And with that, Annabelle was gone. Bestafanus cursed and began sobbing. He shifted his focus towards Samuel. Holding his head, he leaned in close, sobbing.

"Protect who?" he demanded, "Protect who?"

Samuel's eyes fell back as his head gave dead weight into Bestafanus's hands. With his last breath, he muttered two words: "Our son."

XV. Into the Heart of Eve

The chamomile had steeped in the hot milk of his mug for the past ten minutes. The occasional sip while staring into the crackling fire was almost enough to ease the stress that had carried him there. Yusef could relax a bit, for the time being. The tag on the end of the tea bag swayed like a pendulum; reminding him that the clock was ticking, and that they would have to move soon.

Elias lifted his own mug to his lips and took a sip. He had brought the Arab home on a whim after the man had tracked him down on the road. The two had shared basic introductions and discussed a possible common history. It appeared as though they may have been childhood friends...sort of.

Jade stood at the entrance to the kitchen, leaning on the wooden frame of the entryway. She was grateful that Alexa had willingly gone to bed early. Like her inquisitive little daughter, she had many questions of her own. Was this new man sitting in her living room somehow related to the events that had surrounded her home? Was he somehow related to the night terrors that Elias had been experiencing?

Stepping into the room, Jade reached for the cast-iron poker, which rested against a tile surface on the outer edge of the fireplace. She tapped at the kindling, sending sparks circling upwards. Kneeling down to take a closer look at the reds of the coals, Jade turned slightly towards the men in the room. "So, Mr. Mahmoud, would you be kind enough to explain to me how you know my husband and how it is you came to find us here?"

Yusef set his mug on the coffee table in front of him. Wiping the sweat from his palms on his legs, just above the knees, he stared past Jade into the fire.

“Do you believe in God...Mrs. Hughes?” Yusef asked.

“I do,” Jade said.

“Do you believe in the powers of good versus evil, angels and demons, and heaven versus hell?” he continued.

“Yes,” she responded, “but I don’t understand what that has to...”

“It has everything to do with it!” Yusef raised his voice. “I am sorry Mrs. Hughes. I had to make sure. For those things make up the very root of the story I am about to tell. If you didn’t believe...well...I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Start at the beginning,” Elias interrupted, “I have forgotten nearly everything.”

“It is clear that you have Elias, though I don’t blame you. I’ve tried to forget all that I can.”

Jade stood up and walked to the kitchen. Shortly after, she returned with the teakettle. Yusef nodded in thanks as she refilled his mug. Bringing the mug to his lips, the steam wet his nostrils and helped to clear his throat as he began his story.

“We come from two very different backgrounds, your husband and I,” Yusef said, still looking at Jade as she took a seat on the floor by Elias.

“The long history of our lineages has led us to be born and raised in different regions of the world. We have walked and lived as different men with different earthly purposes, different paths, and have witnessed different life-changing events. We also have many things in common, including where we truly come from and who we truly are. As I began to explain to you before, this is not our first meeting, and I think your husband knows that.”

Elias nodded and smiled with enough courtesy to acknowledge that he could possibly believe at least some of what Yusef was saying.

Yusef sat his mug down, rested his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands under his chin. “The history of our connection dates back thousands of years, perhaps I should start there.”

“I have studied many ancient texts, from many different religions, including mine. I have found many interesting similarities and coincidences. Many of the stories and interpretations of those stories have led me in countless directions both spiritually and philosophically. For the sake of our story, I will condense my findings to those of our people in both Christianity and Islam, and I will speak of one story in particular. There is brief mention in the Bible as well as the Qur’an of a son of Adam known as Cain.”

Jade tilted her head back and gave an upside down smile to her husband. Ironically, it had been only a couple of weeks since they had mapped out how they might explain the early chapters of Genesis to their daughter. The first professed murder known to man was not a story they had taken lightly and had actually danced around the topic after portraying the creation of the earth.

“You know this story well?” Yusef asked.

“We have our own versions of the tale,” Elias responded, “we have been forced to do so, for our daughter’s sake. As she gets older, the story will change as will her interpretations of it.” Yusef nodded with a smile.

“It is my prayer, that you may now become as little children yourselves and listen to a different version of this tale. I hope you can be open to the significance of my words

and not jump to any harsh conclusions, however imaginary my words may sound.” The couple nodded in agreement.

“Not much is known of Cain, as far as what happened to him after the death of his brother. We know he was cursed and cast out to wander east of Eden. We also know that despite his curse, that if any man should try to harm Cain that he would be avenged seven-fold. But aside from that, we know he was married, he lived in the land of Nod, he had children, and he built a city. What happened to Cain has been the source of many a myth and legend to this day.”

Elias’s imagination started running wild. He had grown accustomed to creating scenarios in his mind out of nothing; a gift that also frustrated Jade when they had arguments over jealousy. In addition, having learned an exaggerated version of the Bible via some exciting oral portrayals by his father, Elias had biblical interpretations as well as questions of his own.

“There is something else about Cain that is unknown, or perhaps speculation,” Elias said.

Yusef raised an interested eyebrow for a welcome contribution to his discussion.

“It is unclear,” Elias continued, “as to why the Lord did not accept Cain’s offering to begin with. Either the Lord had planned to provoke what would eventually become an evil fire in Cain’s heart, or He knew that Cain was inherently evil.”

Yusef smiled. “It appears you have not forgotten everything.”

“Inherently evil?” Jade interrupted, the brogue in her accent making her voice thick and rough, “but how?”

For a moment, Elias and Yusef were connected.

“There is speculation,” Yusef began.

“Pure speculation,” Elias countered, hoping to calm any thoughts that Jade might have as a result of what Elias knew Yusef was about to say.

“With the vast amounts of symbolism present in all religious texts, and specifically within the story of our first earthly parents, it has been considered that the forbidden fruit may not have been fruit at all; in the literal sense.”

Jade looked puzzled at first, but then the point of his words stuck out clearly.

“The fruit in the metaphorical sense may have represented a specific sin or turn of events. Though sin is sin in the eyes of God,” Yusef said, “to think that all mankind should suffer for a simple act of disobedience is to say...troubling. However, if the forbidden fruit was something entirely different, I am much more willing to accept the eventual result.”

Jade tightened her grip on her mug as she considered the possibilities of this implication. “Like what?”

“The devil is said to be the father of many things; darkness, lies, and contention to name a few. But what about jealousy? Yusef asked, “Is jealousy something that even the serpent could not control? After all, his jealousy and envy towards that which is good is what compels him to this very day. Suppose that in his jealousy towards Adam and Eve for their appointed status, that he used his skills of deceit to sway their union from the beginning? I will tell you that the Devil may have posed as Adam for the purpose of such an act.”

Jade looked slightly confused. “Pose as Adam?” she asked, “But how?”

“Though this story has been interpreted by many cultures and in various ways, the term *beguile* is synonymous. The word connotes deception or trickery for the purpose of doing something.”

“So many people believe that the Devil had power to easily beguile our first mother. People don’t give Eve enough credit. He must have known that in order to truly sway Eve, that she would have to think she was speaking to Adam. Then, to put his mark on the human race forever, pretending to be Adam, it is possible that he seduced Eve.”

“It has been said,” Yusef continued, “that man will naturally turn from God, because it is in him to do so, and has been from the Fall of Adam, unless he follows the Holy Spirit, and finds his way back to God. What if, in his attempt to disrupt the sacred creation of the human family, the Devil became a part of all of us? Literally.”

“That would explain how the evil in man came to be,” Elias said, “Cain may have been the literal son of the Devil; that would have given The Lord reason to deny his offering, if He saw evil in his heart.”

“I still don’t like it,” Jade said, “I’ve never liked how so much blame was placed for such a simple human choice. I think Eve deserves more credit.”

“Well then you may appreciate the next part of my story,” Yusef said, “it will explain more or less what your husband and I... what we all have in common.”

Jade took a long sip, allowing both the calm of the hot liquid and Yusef’s suggestion to comfort her.

“The next part of the story is likely something you have never heard. It may appear as fictitious and imaginary as the children’s books your little one loves. But it is what we have...for now.”

“According to a legend passed down by those in my lineage, Eve’s connection to the devil did not end there. Upon realization of what she had done, and who she had truly done it with, she became wroth and thirsted for revenge. It is possible, then, that *hell hath no fury* was manifested as Eve swore vengeance against the evil one. After reconnecting and covenanting with her true love Adam, Eve made an oath that she and members of her seed would protect the earth from evil forever.”

“Unfortunately for mankind, Eve and her offspring would have two major obstacles to face. First, was the inevitable opposition from the one who had originally deceived her. He and his bodiless minions had already sworn their own oath to tempt and torment man. The second and most troubling for Eve would be her son, Cain. He and his followers had both bodies and their own quests for revenge. As Cain would come to know his real father, their legions would become united in opposition to all that was good.

Yusef’s legend was starting to sound like familiar stories of old. Elias imagined the tales in his head. His ability to daydream was magnified by a mosaic storyboard which would flash before his eyes. The images he stirred lay in certain sections of a cerebral canvas. He added images with different strokes of possibility and erased others with a splash of new ideas.

For Jade, some pieces were coming together, but skepticism still prevailed.

“This is all very interesting, and I am liking the turn this story has taken, but there is still a bit missing,” she said. “If you believe in certain aspects of this history of the human family, what about the flood? Weren’t the descendants of Cain washed from the surface of the earth?”

“That is also speculation,” Elias said.

Jade looked confused. She was trying to understand, while also trying not to feel like everything she had learned as a child was mere tales or legends. She looked at Elias, waiting for another explanation.

“You can believe all of the stories of the Bible or any religious text for that matter,” Elias said. “God knows I believe in most; but you can’t ignore the findings of science, of the earliest existences of man, of animal, and of beings. Scriptures lack clarification on how people lived, where all of them lived, and when. Bones have been found in the earth that don’t necessarily disprove anything, but they raise questions of what exactly happened in the formation of our race.”

Seeing that Elias had helped Jade towards the right track of thinking, Yusef took Elias’s words as the ample opportunity to continue.

“In reference to the flood, Mrs. Hughes, it is not my belief that the creatures on that massive ark built by Noah were the only ones to survive.”

“According to the ancient story, Cain was a *tiller of the soil*. It has also been noted, that after Cain was expelled from the Garden of Eden, that he and his family wandered around before deciding to build a city. In living a nomadic lifestyle, they likely discovered or even created caves in the earth for shelter. Like my ancestors, Cain found ways for his people to survive underground.”

Jade's glances in Yusef's direction were becoming more trustful, but she still had many questions.

"How did they survive?" she asked. "If they no longer trusted God, how did they learn to survive?"

"That is a good question Mrs. Hughes, and I have come up with a couple possibilities," Yusef said.

"The first being the most obvious in today's world. If man wants to survive without God, he will do it - only reaching to Him in times of need, and blaming Him when everything goes wrong. I would say that in that sense, man could survive without God."

"But for the sake of this story, I doubt if mankind could survive a planetary flood, unless he had a little help."

Jade and Elias were already convinced as to what *help* Yusef was referring to.

"If the Devil went through all that work in the beginning, to make things fall apart for man, surely he wouldn't allow all of his earthly followers to just be swept from the earth in a current," Yusef said. "The devil had established a true disciple in Cain and by so doing, Cain would follow him to the depths of the earth if necessary. And Cain's people would follow him."

Jade had a grasp on just about all of it.

"The depths of the earth, eh? she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Hughes," Yusef responded. "Many cultures, authors, poets, philosophers, and even scientists have conjured up stories of an underworld. Our version of this place is a world within a world where Cain was sent to survive."

“Our version?” Jade asked, not particularly anxious for Yusef’s response.

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes,” your husband and I both traveled there when we were kids.”

Jade pushed off of her knees and stood. She stared at their guest briefly, shook her head, smiled, and then walked towards the kitchen. She turned to look at Elias, assuming he would also be in disbelief.

Elias stared forward, stroking a scar on his arm.

Jade looked back at Yusef, noting a similar scar on his face.

A silence settled on the room.

XVI. Thus to Eve Renewed

“Going back to Eve, you said that she made an oath?”

Leading Yusef with his questioning, Elias was willing to take on the death glares from his wife who clearly was upset that he had re-initiated this conversation. He had begun to remember and though Elias was treading on thin ice with this one, he felt it absolutely necessary that Jade understand everything. Jade appeared startled with frustration at first, but noticing the intent in Elias’s eyes, she returned to her seat beside him.

“This is the part that I have struggled with myself, but events in my life, especially me being here in your home today, tell me that it is true.”

“Long before we had the twelve tribes of Israel, or any major tribes for that matter, a number of creatures were chosen to be a protective force for our Earth,” Yusef said.

“Creatures?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes, “there was once a time when man and animal had much more of an understanding than what you see between your husband and his dogs. They communicated on a much more natural level. I am not saying animals could talk Mrs. Hughes, I am saying they understood each other. There was a common language, and it was understood by all.”

Staring out through the screen at the dogs that lay on the porch, Elias thought of the times that he personally had felt an immense connection to not only his dogs, but to many animals near his home.

He hadn't told Jade about the eagles, or how he actually escaped the hooded beings himself. He looked at her and hoped she recognized the protective instincts of animals just from Galileo alone. Her desire to learn more brought a smile to his face.

"How did the animals assist in protecting the earth?" she asked.

"Without going into too much detail right now, Mrs. Hughes," Yusef said, "there are many gateways to Hell, and I don't use that phrase in the figurative sense."

"Cain and his followers would find a few places where the physical veil between his subterranean world and ours was very thin," Yusef said, "animals, being particularly dangerous when territorial, were expected to guard these locations; preventing Cain's forces from coming to the surface en masse. Humans lost this knowledge—that they have relied on these animals for thousands of years. Though the few in the beginning who knew of this sacred oath, sought to protect the animals that protected them, eventually the devil convinced man to begin killing them for sport; and eventually the sacred bond between man and animal was broken."

Elias had felt something similar to that bond earlier, when saw Jade singing to the trees. *Perhaps*, he thought, her family and ancestors had known about this sacred bond. *Perhaps* the bond extended beyond humans and animals. Jade looked up at Elias and he could sense she was wondering the same thing.

Both men could tell, by the look on Jade's face, that the information and facts were really starting to click. Elias nodded for Yusef to continue, hoping they could keep this up.

"We need to understand," Yusef continued, "that when I speak of protection, I mean protection from those who had a primeval vendetta. The harm that I'm talking

about isn't just physical. We're talking about a battle between good and evil; and by evil I mean *The Evil*."

"The Devil," Jade said.

"And Cain," Elias added.

"You are both correct, but the fight with Cain is physical, while the battle with the Devil is more of a spiritual nature. Since the fight with the Devil is something that even Eve knew would be near impossible, the fight with his son is why we are here."

"By saying the fight with Cain is physical," Elias added, "you realize that you are insinuating..."

"He is still alive," Jade said, finishing his sentence.

Both men looked at Jade with worried surprise.

"One bit of legend," Jade said, "that makes everyone uneasy, but that is yet more believable than some of what I have heard from you, is that Cane is still alive. The Bible is quite specific on the fact that he would wander the earth forever; hence some theories of sightings like the Sasquatch, the abominable snowman, the boogeyman, etcetera."

"He is still alive Ms. Hughes, and though he may have wandered the surface of our world for a time, he took some fatherly advice and found a new world in the belly of the earth. Your husband has no-doubt been having a rough time lately; lack of sleep, short appetite, constant worry. Jade looked over at Elias, who was staring at the floor."

"He is just stressed from work."

Elias twisted free from her hands and got to his feet.

"Stop pretending!" he shouted.

The sudden shift in Elias's demeanor startled everyone, including the dogs on the porch. All but one shot up and turned towards the inside of the house.

Jade stared up at Elias, wide-eyed.

Elias sighed and rested his arm over the mantle.

"I'm sorry Jade, but you can stop trying to pretend that nothing is going on. I need to stop pretending. The holes in the ground, the creatures that came after you and our family, my lack of sleep and constant worry...are all related. Something that happened to me seventeen years ago is happening again."

As he said that, two short thuds were heard above signaling that a little person had woken up. Next, a wooden stair creaked with slightest pressure. Alexa, twisting her curled hands over her eyes, yawned and wobbled down the stairs. Jade looked up at Elias in frustration knowing he had just made her night a little bit longer.

Bringing the room into focus, Alexa stared first at her parents and then at the visitor who was now standing near Elias. A second, more focused glance from the girl startled her a bit. "Who...who's that?" Alexa asked.

Jade started to her feet and moved around Elias towards their guest.

But the man had made movements of his own.

Stepping towards the stairs in the utmost reverence, Yusef bowed before the newcomer. "Yusef Mahmoud," he said, "at your service." Raising his head to smile at Alexa, it was soon obvious that she was smiling too.

Attempting a bow of her own, in her white, cotton nightgown, Alexa stumbled a bit. Both men in the room made pre-emptory attempts to reach out to catch her, while both also realizing that they had overreacted. Alexa had caught herself.

Giggling slightly and in a tired young voice Alexa said, “I will call you Joe.”

Yusef’s eyes lit up with surprise. “That is what my friends call me, but I should not be surprised, there is something special about you.” The two smiled at one another and Yusef returned to his seat on the couch. Alexa began to follow but was cut off by her mother at the base of the stairs.

“You need to go back to sleep sweetheart, we have a big day tomorrow.”

“But Momma...” Alexa muttered, in another yawning voice.

“No buts! Turn your cute little buns around and head straight back to bed.”

“Something woke me up.”

“I know sweetie,” Jade turned Elias with a glare, “your father was being too loud and he’s very sorry.”

Elias approached the staircase, reached between the posts beneath the banister, and latched onto Alexas’s hand. “Daddy was being a little too loud, Lexa,” he said, hoping to gain both Alexa’s trust and Jade’s. “You need to go back to bed and get some sleep.”

Holding Elias’s hand, Alexa reached over with her other hand and pinched the skin on Elias’s wrist.

“Ouch!” Startled, Elias yanked his hand away. “Why did you do that?”

Alexa sat down and put her face up to the gap between the posts. With a small, curled finger, Alexa motioned for Elias to come back. He did, repeating his last question, “why did you pinch me?”

Alexa motioned for Elias to crouch down so she could whisper. “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

“What do you mean sweetheart?” Elias asked, whispering himself so Alexa would feel comfortable. Alexa looked very serious now. “I had a bad dream.”

Elias brushed Alexas’s hair over ears and rubbed her forehead with his thumb. “I’m sorry sweetie, “are you OK?” She nodded.

“I dreamed we were all being chased. I couldn’t see what was chasing us. You, me, and mommy were running as fast as we could. There were trees, but they were upside down.”

Elias was listening with as much intent as any parent would, for his child’s stories were aplenty. The last part of the story stood out firmly though in his mind. *The trees were upside down*. He looked at Yusef, who had been studying Alexa since her arrival. There was nothing perverse about his attention. Elias could note a sense of reverence in the way Yusef was looking. Yusef now turned to Elias and the two exchanged looks as Alexa told Elias her story.

“After we ran and couldn’t run anymore, we were surrounded. When I thought we were going to be hurt...” Alexa paused and looked at Yusef. “Joe saved us.”

Elias’s eyes lit up with the twist in her story. “Doesn’t sound like a bad dream at all,” he said, smiling.

“It was just really scary Daddy,” Alexa said, a slight quiver forming in her lips. “When I was running, sometimes you and Mommy would be right next to me. Other times, I would look around and you’d be gone.”

Despite Alexa having whispered her story to Elias across the room, Yusef had heard every word. He walked over to the stairs and reached out his hand. Jade looked confused at first but then moved to the side.

“May I?”

Elias nodded and motioned Alexa down the stairs.

Taking Alexa by the hand, Yusef guided her down the stairs and over to the fireplace. “I want to show you something.”

Yusef knelt down on the tile. Holding Alexa’s left hand up, he waited for her to position herself cross-legged on the floor. Elias and Jade approached quietly from behind.

“Miss Alexa, I would like for you to look into the fire.”

“There’s only coals Joe,” she said, looking over at Yusef disappointed.

Yusef laughed a bit at the quickness and intelligence of his young friend. He looked at her parents, who returned smiles of their own.

“OK, Miss Alexa, look into the coals.”

“That’s what I’m doing Joe.”

“OK, Miss Alexa, I want you to reach out and grab one.”

Jade’s eyes lit up. She took a step forward, but Elias stopped her. They exchanged looks. Jade looked worried. Elias knew she would be fine. “Have a little faith,” he said. Jade settled back towards him but she was still on edge. They had placed *faith* in Alexa many times with less than desired outcomes.

Alexa peered into the ashy, flickering oranges and reds. “I can’t, I’ll get burned.”

“How do you know you’ll get burned?”

Alexa stared a little harder. “Because it’s hot.”

“How do you know it’s hot?”

“I can feel it from here.”

“Very good, but how do you know that heat can hurt you?”

“Because Mommy has told me it could hurt me and I believe her.”

All of the adults in the room smiled, especially Jade, who appeared more comfortable with the situation.

“She is right, but I want to show you something.” Shifting down and crossing his own legs, Yusef began rubbing his hands together. His hands moved faster and faster until suddenly they stopped, and Yusef reached one towards the coals.

Alexa put one hand over one eye and reached out to grab Yusef with the other. “Don’t!” she yelled, “it will hurt you!” Yusef smiled and reached out to grab a coal. Feeling the heat on her hand, Alexa pulled back. The entire Hughes family watched in awe as Yusef grabbed a small chunk of coal and placed it in the palm of his hand. Moving the coal from his palm, he rotated his hand, allowing the coal to roll like a ball over his knuckles, across the joints of his fingers, eventually resting on the tip of his thumb. Finally, like popping the lid off a bottle, he flicked his thumb and the coal shot through the air. As small sparks flew in several directions, Alexa leaned back to avoid the coal, which was flying in her direction. After a brief moment of the coal being suspended in mid air, Yusef swooped in and caught the coal in his mouth. Alexa screamed, covering both eyes with her hands.

Alexa peeked between two fingers as Yusef opened his mouth to reveal that the coal was resting on his tongue. Then, with a jolt of his head and a loud grunt, he popped the coal into the back of his mouth and swallowed. The Hughes family looked on in

shock. With a loud gulp to prove that a swallow had taken place, Yusef stood up and with a fist pump to his chest, he breathed a plume of fire across the room. The blaze shot into the air above Alexa's head and successfully avoided contact with anyone in the room. The last second pyro-technics were all part of the show. After all, he had to finish the act, and he knew Alexa was peeking.

More excited than scared, Elias clapped in response. "Well done, that was incredible!" His wife and daughter were a bit subtler in their responses. After Alexa dropped her hands from her face, Yusef bowed again in her direction.

Returning to his knees near the little girl, Yusef again offered his hand. This time, Alexa was more hesitant to react.

Elias smiled at her caution. *Perhaps*, he thought, she knew that what she had just witnessed was not a dream. He saw those little eyes contemplating how both the man that stood before her and what she had just witnessed were real. Slowly, Alexa extended her hand. Immediately, she felt the extreme heat from the coal and yanked her hand back.

"Are you hurt?" Jade asked frantically, "did you get burned?"

Alexa scanned her hand, as if anticipating pain. Nothing. She shook her head.

"No....no.... but it was really hot. How did you do that Joe?"

Yusef did not wait for too much child curiosity to settle in.

"Your mommy was right Miss Alexa, fire will hurt you. Your parents are going to teach you many things in this life; things that will help you survive. They do so to keep you from feeling pain. They do so, so that one day you may be on your own and experience life for yourself; without their help, without them there to watch over you. In

your dream, you said there were moments when you were running and sometimes you could see your parents, but other times you could not?”

Alexa nodded slightly.

“That dream was about your life Miss Alexa. You will have many monsters to face in your life; some you will not be able to see, and some you will have to fight by yourself.”

Alexa’s eyes got wide with worry.

“But do not fear! You are strong, you will be just fine.”

Yusef’s warm hand on her shoulder, combined with his crescent, close-lipped smile, helped Alexa’s heart to settle.

“Like I said before,” Yusef continued, “fire will hurt you; but many things can hurt you Miss Alexa. You must learn how to use things to make you stronger. Am I saying you should learn to play with fire as I have done? Absolutely not! Playing with fire is a talent I was born with. It is a gift from Allah.”

“Who is Allah?” Alexa asked. “Is he like Santa Clause?”

The three adults looked at each other. Jade nodded, beginning a response that would support what she had asked, “Honey, Allah is...”

“He is God,” Elias cut her off.

Jade closed her eyes.

“Allah is what Joe and his family call God,” Elias finished.

Alexa looked puzzled. Elias waited for the gears to turn. Suddenly, they did.

“Oh!” Alexa popped out, “OK!”

All three adults sighed with relief.

Elias nodded for Yusef to continue.

“Your father tells me you are good with animals, Miss Alexa,” Yusef said, staring down, “is this true?”

“I guess so,” she responded.

“Maybe that is your talent,” Yusef responded, “maybe that is your gift! Everyone in this room, including your mom and dad have special gifts and talents.”

“He’s right honey. Your mommy, as you know, can sing like an angel; singing is one of her gifts or talents.”

“What about you da da? What is your gift?”

The room got silent. Elias looked towards the floor. *What is my gift?* he thought.

A sharp breeze shot through the room alerting everyone and causing the thin wood frame of the screen door to bounce and tap against the frame of the entryway. The porch dogs all reacted differently. Having felt the sharp air first hit their noses, then their ears, the smaller and younger dogs barked out of natural reaction, others growled at the unwelcome change in air. The current came twice more, each time with thicker, sharper gusts of air. The third burst sent all of the dogs either to their feet or down and off the porch.

Wind was not an anomaly to the Hughes property, nor to the surrounding mountains. The state of Tennessee had recently made a large push for wind energy turbines to be placed in many locations nearby; the spinning blades powered most small towns in Carter County. If a family had a large plot of land as the Hughes did though, and a large portion of the land was wooded, the trees would often act as blockades from mountain winds. That’s why this occurrence had everyone at attention.

“This is not normal, to feel winds this strong?” Yusef asked.

“Something’s wrong,” Jade responded.

Like her innate motherly ability to sense the happenings or pain of her child, Jade had been given an additional gift to discern when there was trouble. Elias called her *mother nature*, for her ability to sense problems either in or coming from the nature itself. Like in the instance with the trees from before, Elias could see pain in her eyes though it was not her own.

But everyone could sense the pain this time. The air, after all, was hot; hot as the skin on Yusef’s hand. Elias had felt heat like this twice before, but most memorable was in the face of a burning church.

A fire, he thought, *there must be a fire*. But there was no smell of smoke and no lights grew in the darkness outside. Elias approached the living room window and peered through the glass. The trees did not move with any of the wind they had felt. Again, he couldn’t see nor smell any sign of fire.

Then he got it; a short but faint smell of sulfur. The air had come from underground.

XVII. Embattled Ranks

Across an ebony viaduct, which ran across fresh water made black by the lack of sky, a large, greyish-black creature was being dragged across stone. Two hunched beings similar in color and fur, arms underneath the armpits of the third between them, pulled their company up and around the path of a circular stone tower. The outer rim of the ziggurat, being the quickest route to the top, wound around the structure's entirety and served as a lookout for visitors peering at the igneous gorge below.

The guards were tired. They had traveled quite a distance after their captive had been handed over near the border. Their orders upon retrieval were to bring him to the tower as soon as and by any means possible. Their ashy fists, which acted as feet, were both muddied and red from the abrasions that came from running across stone. Plus, the being they carried was much larger in size than either of them. He could have crushed either of them in one blow. But the prisoner of sorts was not resisting. He had no reason to try escaping. He had no want for anything, not even to exist. His lifeblood, which had once consisted only of a will to serve, was gone. He had failed in his mission and as a result would suffer a particular type of pain nearly indescribable: rebirth.

As the guards grunted with the weight of their task and their ascent continued, Sempersius took a congested breath and faintly opened the lids of his large, oval eyes. A dark, rocky world of basalt, granite, and obsidian shrank into the distance beneath him. Dozens of towers, similar in shape to the one he was ascending seemed to rotate and shrivel as he was pulled up the tallest of them all.

Though he had been dragged for miles, the pain in his heels had been manageable. It paled in comparison to the mental anguish that came as a result of failure.

He had been given many missions before. Just like this one. The boney beads, which twisted and jangled around his arm, were proof of his success. Each bead, bearing the face of a beast, was a token of extermination. He had carried out many missions alone, sneaking up into the earth and devastating the lives of those who relied on these creatures for survival. The African wolf, the Barbary lion, the Syrian Elephant, and the Caspian tiger among others were some he could be proud of. But the Bwindi Gorillas, he had been chasing for nearly a century. Perhaps they were the most difficult because they understood him; their species were so alike.

Sempersius was a naremf, as they called them here, part of an ape-like species unique for their size and ability to breed fear. They had lived with humans in the beginning, even existing prior to the Homo sapiens as the Gigantopithecus. Like Sempersius, many naremfes weighed close to twelve hundred pounds and had teeth that grew many inches in length. The bulk of their size rested in the hunch of the back, which joined with a hump at the back of their head. Upright, naremfes could stand over ten feet tall. But like regular apes, they usually remained hunched over and moved on all fours for the ability to both latch on to things as well as move at top speeds.

Naremfes, like humans were very intelligent, but Sempersius felt that some members of his kind had deviated from what he felt was the purpose of his species' existence, to hunt. Some, like those who had pulled him back down to this place during their last attack, and delivered him at the border, had developed other human characteristics. They claimed to have learned love, camaraderie, and faith.

Despite his anger towards them and his conviction of their betrayal, he had developed a human trait of his own--envy. He envied the fact that the others felt they had something different to live for. He would begin a new life soon. He didn't know how, where, or what species he would become, but as a naremf he was thousands of years old and he had no desire to star again as something new.

The circular path plateaued and the guards pulled Sempersius through an arched gateway into a courtyard. The grounds consisted of a thin maze of bone and petrified wood, which spread in all directions from a circular, mechanical device in the center. A dome at the center of the device pinnacled with a cone shape that pointed upwards towards the earth. The rings of platinum and basalt at the mechanism's center were scratched. The circles, which once held the faces of beasts, had been worn away with alignments of the rotations. In passing, the apparatus proved just another reminder of all Sempersius had won and what he was losing. The face of the gorilla, still in tact in the order of circles on the device had proven both his idol and his downfall. He considered the calendar's significance and wondered what the stars in the earth's atmosphere had left to say for him.

A collage of skulls, consisting of hundreds of species including humans, formed an arch at the end of the courtyard and served as the end of the road for the guards. Though satisfied and happy to release the weight of their burden, the guards were torn both because of what may happen to Sempersius, but also because he had once been their general. Showing respect the only way they knew how, they dragged him to a stone bench, lowered him to the ground, and rested his back against the bench's surface. Both then bowed their heads briefly--both to express sadness and regret, but also in respect.

The two then knuckle-walked off knowing they might never see that version of Sempersius again.

No sooner had Sempersius rested his head against the seat, than the hinges on a stone door in front of him popped and hissed as someone on the other side began to open it. The top of the building that he had just been brought to was different from the other stone structures in the valley. All the other towers were free standing, while this one stood close enough to a large granite mount, that should it ever fall backwards, it would lean into the mountain and not fall. The top of the ziggurat, beyond the courtyard, consisted of a short natural basalt bridge, which led directly into a cavity of the mountain.

Sempersius thought as the ground vibrated with the opening of the doors, that he would likely be led at knifepoint into the depths of the black stone. He was only right about one thing. As a loud thud signaled that the door was completely open, no guards or weaponry emerged. He would have to travel into the mountain, but he would walk alone.

Rising to his feet, the general grunted and sighed. It would only be a bit farther before he reached his master and his fate would be decided. Limping from the pain in his ankles, Sempersius knuckle-walked through the opening and into a large tunnel. Walls of granite lit by hanging torches stretched down the final corridor. A large shadow hung across the ceiling of the rock. He stopped briefly to observe the source of the dark shape, which stood waiting his arrival. At the end of the corridor, in front of the final door, a small woman, less than half of his size stood with hands clasped at her waist. Her long ivory-white hair wrapped around the back of her head and fell down the left side of her ashy-colored robe. The chest piece of her robe split slightly beneath the neck and the cape of the robe draped down beneath the backs of her legs. A large obsidian waist piece

wrapped her outfit together, a long jagged dagger protruding from its side; with white, baggy leggings dropping into boots that looked both obsidian and pointed for purpose. The youth in her face and the white in her hair were a unique combination, signaling both vast amounts of wisdom and a youthful ability to both speak and act. He had made it half way down the passageway before the woman made her presence clear.

“We have been expecting you general,” she said, her words bouncing off the walls of the condensed space. Sempersius continued his approach, pretending not to notice her words. Until this point he could have cared less about appearing anything like his usual, fearful demeanor. But something in her complacency irked him with a desire to stand a little taller with his limp and also take pride in the respect that came with his title.

“I hope they haven’t been waiting long,” he replied, “I would hate to inconvenience anyone.”

The woman frowned. Flipping her hair to the opposite side, she rested one hand on the hilt of her blade.

“I trust you will not make a scene Sempersius, resistance of any kind will not be tolerated.”

As he got closer, the bulk of his frame swallowed her shadow. Stepping back slightly, the woman turned towards the final entryway. Walking towards an oval-shaped crevice in the rock, the woman said, “Follow me.”

Sempersius did so, feeling the hairs on the top of his head brush along the ceiling of stone as he passed through. The cavity soon opened up to an enormous circular room.

The dome-shaped nonagon had nine, elevated granite thrones at each point. Grey columns, differing in size, stuck out from the dipping floor in seemingly random

locations, rising to and supporting the dome-shaped ceiling above. Perhaps the most bizarre sight in the room, however, was the small beings, which scurried across the floor on their bellies. Gredifers as they were called, moved with ease across the black, glassy surface. The wanderers torturously existed both with empty eye sockets and minus mouths. They scampered across the floor in constant motion, bumping into others, the columns, or the stone and then turning to move in another direction. They were a people without purpose. This was their punishment.

Men, women, and creatures of hierarchy occupied nearly all of the thrones in the room and peered down at the chaos below. One seat had been the accommodation of Sempersius himself, who now moved in its direction. The woman cut him off, stepping in between and around roving gredifers towards the seat. Turning and smiling slyly, she hoped to discourage the general. He growled.

“I have not yet received my sentence,” he grumbled, “you still call me general and that is still my seat.”

The woman intended to make herself comfortable, curling up in a corner of the seat, which dwarfed her in size. All the seats had been specially crafted to fit their occupants and this was one of the largest seats in the room.

Sempersius made his own advance, showing less respect for the gredifers; stepping on and over them in his wake. The woman cursed at him. Finalizing his approach, he took what strength he had to leap through the air and crash upon the chair. The only thing keeping him from squashing the woman was the tip of her blade, which stuck into his girth. It appeared he did care after all, at least about his dignity, but the

woman wasn't backing down. He peered down at the woman in anger as the other echelons in the room snickered and pointed at their struggle.

"It's true," a voice said from a darkened corner of the room. All in the room looked downwards in reverence and fear.

Stepping out from the shadows, a black-cloaked man was camouflaged in the darkness. Even the jagged ribbed horns, which protruded from his forehead, blended in with the darkness and the creases of the rock wall. As the flicker of torch flames bounced off of bowed faces in the room, the cloaked figure emerged between two pillars revealing both his blackened, jagged horns as well as his muscular human features. His torso, which was revealed between the front sides of his robe, was composed of solid muscle.

"Though the general has failed me for the last time, Mensendia, he is still my friend, I am in no rush to send him to his fate." His grey eyes caught the glare of the weapon-wielding woman who appeared surprised by his entrance.

"Master, " she said, using the moment to shimmy past her attacker and out of the chair. "General Sempersius is no longer worthy of your many mercies. Why must we show him any respect? Why must we wait for his sentencing?"

Sempersius wondered the same thing. But unlike the others, he had the nerve to look his old friend in the eye.

"Why wait?"

Stepping to the left, the dark man cut off Mensendia, who was making a retreat into the shadows. Reaching out to run his fingers through the whites of her hair, he grabbed a lock in his fist and pulled her into his side. Startled but somewhat excited by his action, the woman smiled up at him nervously.

“Do you not remember my little girl, when you were just like them?”

The man pointed towards the center of the room, where the gredifers had now halted, heads and necks extended in full attention. Mensendia felt around her face where her eyes and mouth had once not been.

“There is a time and a place for everything--a time for punishment and a time for reward. Do not get carried away in your reward or take for granted what you have been given. You could just as easily be back in that pit of pointlessness, wandering by the skin of your belly.” He pulled her head back, waiting for her to nod in acceptance of his words. It didn’t take long. Lifting her off the ground by her hair, he kissed her gently on the forehead, then tossed the woman off to the side.

Grateful she had not received harsher treatment, Mensendia gathered herself and disappeared into the shadows.

“Now general,” he continued, “I am sure everyone in this room is both grateful for your years of service, but also grateful you did not resist the inevitable. “ Walking around the back of the stone seat, the horned man allowed Sempersius just a brief moment to get acclimated.

“Come with me.”

The ape hesitantly arose from his seat, knowing all too well what was about to take place. Following his master, they headed towards one of the dark openings in the rock. The guide continued his lesson as they walked.

“You will be given a punishment that is both painful but also respectful of the time that you have served. Rebirth is a sentence reserved for those who have had a large impact on the history of this world.”

After passing through an opening in the stone, the darkness of tunnel opened up to a large, circular stone balcony. Granite benches lined the outer rim of the space, which hung off the lip of the mountain and stood thousands of feet up. The peak of the mountain rose above them, stabbing the lowest floor of the earth. Tredesties, winged creatures of human form circled and swayed in the skies they were confined to. Symbolizing perhaps the forced rite of passage about to commence, the creatures acted as if the subject was already dead.

Sempersius pondered how it would feel to die. He could have easily pushed his leader to the side, flown off the ledge like a tredestie himself, though no wings would slow his fall. But he knew this wasn't possible. Many before him had tried this very thing, to take their life in some way. A small portion of them crawled upon the floor of the room he had just left. For death was not possible in hell. Like the man standing next to him, Sempersius was confined to live in his body forever. Or so he assumed.

“Kneel.”

Obedying, the creature bent his hind legs and sank to the stone surface. Looking up towards the blackened atmosphere, Sempersius remembered briefly the best moments from his history. For the first time however, they did not consist of death, destruction, and battles won. He saw blue skies. He saw animals and humans walking together as friends. He saw smiles and friendship. He saw a purpose truly worth fighting for. He saw the freedom to choose.

As one hand was placed firmly on the top of his head, an ancient prayer was spoken. The speaker stretched forth his other hand to reach towards the darkness. A plea

was made for the commencement of ceremonies, that the spirits of those who seek out the living to fall upon this creature and carry his mind to a far off place.

At that moment, a heavy sense of weight fell upon Sempersius. The blue skies in his mind faded to black as his sanity violently shifted between confusion, sadness, delirium, and fear. He sank lower to the ground as the weight of his head seemed to replace his entire body.

Holding his hand firmly on Sempersius's head, the initiator made one final plea to the source of the madness, his father, to end the process by completing the rite of rebirth. And with that, all the muscle, foundation, intellect and dignity that made up Sempersius's soul, evaporated and his body crashed upon the stone surface. He still lived and breathed, like the creatures who circled in the air above him, but he had changed, remembering nothing about his life. He had become like a child.

XVIII. Founded in Reason

Jade demanded to know what was going on. Everyone at the home, the dogs included, were flustered because of the sharp hot winds that had just swamped the home. Both Yusef and Elias had gone to investigate but had found nothing. Yusef had investigated some soil that he found to be particularly warm, but that was it. They all sat on and around the porch waiting for something else to happen. The season was autumn but the air was unusually warm.

Elias sat on the porch swing with Alexa back asleep in his lap. He rocked gently, just enough to keep his daughter in a light snooze. Yusef sat on the bottom porch step amongst a plethora of dogs hoping for his attention. Jade paced back and forth across the porch, waiting for a response.

“Well?”

“When my father died, I lost all hope in everything that I believed in. I knew a lot more about the devil than a ten-year-old probably should have and I was willing to do anything, even sell my soul to bring my father back.”

Jade stopped in her tracks.

“Obviously that didn’t happen,” he continued, “But I was so angry, so afraid, and so worried about being alone. I’m sure the devil knew this and he sent his minions to prey upon my mind. I became consumed with hatred. Immediately after the funeral, I went back to his grave and began to dig. I pulled the fresh dirt up in masses. I had no one left and I didn’t care. I don’t know what I was hoping to find or what I was hoping to do. When my fists hit wood, I stopped and took a moment to consider my next move. Maybe I could beat the reasons out of my Father’s dead body; his reasons for leaving me all

alone. I cleared more mud away and reached down into the hole. Undoing the clasps on the sides of the casket, I ripped the top open and I will never forget what I saw.”

Jade covered her mouth, eying Alexa’s tiny frame. Elias caught on quickly, covering Alexa’s ears in case she was actually listening. “What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Yusef interrupted, “he saw nothing.”

Yusef’s lips began to quiver as both Jade and Elias looked over at him.

“I had lost someone close to me on the very same day, half way across the world.”

“Elias, me, and five others, all with everything invested in one person, lost that person on the same day. We all did the same thing. We all went back for them, hoping to somehow punish them for what they had done or bring them back from the dead. We all found the same thing. Nothing.”

Elias’s own lips began to tremble as he could see the open coffin in his mind.

“It was a dark hole, the casket had been ripped open from beneath and my father’s body was gone.”

Jade was speechless.

“I felt warm air rip through me,” Elias said, “just as it did tonight. With everything that has been happening, I think we’re suppose to go back.”

“Excuse me? Go back where?”

She waited for a response from either of the men. Both were hesitant to respond. Elias gently lifted Alexas’s head, rose to his feet, and replaced her resting spot with one of the swing pillows. She nuzzled around a bit, faintly opening her eyes, but then drifted back asleep.

Elias moved to a corner of the porch and stared out.

“If you believe the story about Eve, and the devil’s plan to become a part of all of us, then you can better comprehend what happened to all of us as we stared at those empty holes.”

Yusef compared the moment to a great battle between good and evil over the agency of the affected child. Either they could simply mourn the loss of a loved one or perhaps seek them out, passing through the veils of one world to another in search, or in absolute sorrow, bend to the will of the evil one and fall as he did.

“I cannot speak for the others that I met on that day, but when I too lost my Father I had ceased in my will to live. Like Elias, my mind became the center for a great battle. I felt countless emotions. Ultimately, the decision was made for me. I believe that when the emotions became too much to bear...”

“We fell,” Elias said

“So in the battle between good and evil, you are saying that evil prevailed?” Jade asked.

“Not even close.”

Elias, Jade, and Yusef all jumped a bit with the realization that none of them had spoken those words.

A hooded man emerged on the footpath in front of the home. His approach startled all of them at first, but when the dogs remained calm, they all took note and chose not to react right away. In addition, at least two of them had seen this man before.

“Who are you?” Elias asked. He got no response as the man stepped closer.

Recognizing that this was the same man that he had seen with Galileo in the woods, he moved in front of Alexa and continued his questioning. “Why have you been hiding in these woods? Why did you run from me the other day?”

“I will ask you one more time, who are you?”

The man stopped, pulled his hood back from his face, revealing long golden brown hair, a trim beard, and a canny smile.

Elias froze. He had seen the man in the woods with his dog, but hadn’t seen his face. But he had seen it in a memory. This was the man who had shown up drunk to his Father’s funeral. Elias’s reaction of shock came from his immediate realization that the man hadn’t aged at all. He had merely cleaned up his beard and appearance.

“We meet again Elias. Though, as you can probably guess, we have met on many occasions and you just didn’t realize it.”

Puzzled, Elias took a moment to contemplate his words. His eyes widened as a slideshow began spinning wild in his mind. He recreated vivid memories and lit up all the faces for inspection. A fight at school and the random teacher who broke it up, a fiery car crash and the random man who pulled him from the scene, a friendly random tip of the hat at the grocery store.

“You’re using your gift Elias, you’re using your talent. It’s why Yusef sought you out over all the others. You have perhaps the most unique mortal mind that this world has ever known. I know you’ve often thought of it as tortuous device with what’s been conjured within the walls of your head, but it is your gift Elias that may someday save this world.”

Tears welled in Elias's eyes as he considered all he really had seen in his life without even opening his eyes.

"I'm going to ask you one last time, who are you?"

"His name is Reynia," Jade said.

Elias was shocked. He looked the man up and down, noticing his muscular features and fair appearance. Then it dawned on him.

"You were talking to someone in the trees!" Elias shouted, pointing at the man while speaking to his wife, "this guy!"

Jade appeared too ashamed to answer.

Failing to recognize just how old their visitor may have been, Elias became slightly jealous.

"So how long have you two known each other?"

"Quite a while," the man said, smiling.

This only made Elias angrier.

"Think about it Elias. You no-doubt just realized that you've known me since you were a boy. You can see I haven't changed much. Don't be so foolish as to think that I would know Jade for any other reason. I know a lot of people all over this world. I've been there for them, when times get rough."

"You're an angel," Yusef said.

"Not exactly, but I have been around for a very long time; since the very beginning."

"Eve's oath," Yusef said, smiling brightly.

Reynia nodded and began to explain.

Ten of Eve's children had been chosen in the beginning to stand as sentinels for Earth. Their task necessitated immortality. Though such an honor was perhaps the greatest that could be given in this world, a few, like Reynia came to greatly envy the mortals for their ability to die. They watched more bloodshed than minds should ever have to; they watched humans take the earth in their hands without a care for where they left it; they witnessed change and much they wish they could forget. They grew to love so many mortals like Elias's parents, only to watch them wither and die without a knowledge of what truly lay before them in their lives.

The first parents also did not take lightly the gift of mortality. They bestowed special abilities and talents upon the ten for the purpose of protecting this earth from evil. They also blessed animals and gave them similar duties. There have been special lineages and noble birthrights since the Mother Eve made it so.

But mortals always had choice. And inevitably man chose to fall. The devil would have had it no other way. He taught men to seek immortality in this life rather than the next. He knew humans lacked patience; that they would eventually kill animals for sport and chop down forests en masse. He turned lineages into systems that make men higher or better than others; he made kings of men and thus he made slaves; he made religion the cause of war instead of the preventer of it. By accepting the devil's many offers, humans gave up the souls of all mankind to come.

And then there was Cain.

The followers of the devil, his son Cain, were immortal. But even more than Reynia and his siblings, they envied humans for their mortality. They coveted, lusted, and sought after humans like buzzards seeking raw meat.

Cain was unique and perhaps the most dangerous adversary for he had a body and was immortal. Unlike his ten half siblings, he wanted to destroy the earth that his family built and like his father, he would have all humans be slaves before the end of it. He extended his own unfulfillable promise; that those who followed him could attain perfection while in this life. He controlled an army miles beneath the ground, which grew in number as the stars in the sky, or as people and creatures without belief simply died.

‘That’s why your father was taken Elias, and your father Yusef. They, like you had been born with special purpose, but they died without a belief in anything. Both the devil and Cain knew those men were special so he had to take them.’

“But they were dead,” Elias said, “he may have taken their bodies but he could not have their souls. My father was a holy man, his spirit did not go to hell.”

“Don’t be so sure Elias. Your father gave up on living the moment he realized your mother was gone. His work in the church was the only thing he knew how to do to stay alive. But again, this isn’t hell we’re talking about, hell is in the mind, this place is real. I don’t need to explain this to you Elias, you already know because you’ve been there.”

“So it is true,” Jade said.

Elias couldn’t believe his ears

“We’ve been sitting here trying to explain this to you for hours and despite everything that has happened, especially to me, you’ve been skeptical. But here comes the white wizard out of the forest and suddenly you’re a believer? Unbelievable.”

Jade sighed. She had her own story.

She remembered once when she was a child, her cousins all came to her house to play.

This wasn’t unusual, because they all lived close together. Spending the night at one of the cousin’s homes also wasn’t uncommon because Jade and her cousins were close, but when her father, aunts and uncles all ordered the children to sleep in their cousin Mary’s house, they were a bit taken off. There were nearly fifty of them, so cramming into every cranny in Mary’s house, just for one night’s sleep didn’t make sense. Jade pulled Mary and a couple of the older cousins aside and told them how her Father had been going missing at night; how they’d found him in that terrified state in the forest. To her surprise, Jade’s cousins reported similar stories about their parents. That night, six cousins spied on anxious parents and the adults loaded weapons and headed for the trees, they followed.

Jade’s uncles paced the ground anxiously, some kneeling to grab chunks of soil in their hands. One took aim at the ground but there was nothing there, at least not that the children could see. Their parents looked convinced of something terrible. Eventually the kids began to tire of waiting and returned to the house. Just as they were removing their shoes and stepping inside, a gun shot went off, followed by a faint rumble that shook the ground. A second gunshot followed by another, and soon there were too many to count. Perry, the oldest cousin, grabbed his rifle and ran. Mary and Jade followed in close chase.

They heard screams both human and beast as they ran. Then suddenly everything stopped. The night was empty of sound and all Jade could see was the grey of gun smoke drifting past a low-hanging moon. Moments later, out they came, bloodied and torn some hunched over and others with their arms over the shoulders of their brothers. Even Jade's aunts had gone into the forest and emerged with clothing and skin torn open. Perry ran to his parents who were struggling to make it because of a deep gash in his father's leg. After everyone came through the tall grass and back to the house, Jade noticed her Father was missing, Mary's dad too. They both called out but no one responded. They just looked into the woods, tears streaming down their faces. Jade took Mary's hand and to the complete opposition of their family, they raced towards the woods. But there was no need. Two men, nearly as large in stature as Jade's uncle and father, emerged from the woods carrying the two men across a knoll. Their bodies lay limp in their arms and the two girls feared the worst. Mary's father had succumbed to his injuries. Jade's father, who still had night terrors from that moment, survived. The men who carried them from the woods called themselves Bestafanus and Reynia. Like Elias, Jade had seen Reynia many times throughout my life, but not for the reasons Elias thought.

"I'm sorry," Elias said.

"I'm sorry too," Reynia said, "that we couldn't save your uncle. Do you remember your cousin Jesse?"

"My adopted cousin. Yes. He was quite a bit older than me. Why? Has something happened?"

“That’s what I am hoping to find out. My brother, the other man you met in the forest that night, has gone looking for him in what may turn out to be dire circumstances.”

“I hope he is ok.”

“As do I.”

Each of the *ten immortals*, as they were called, were assigned to labor in different regions of the world and then combined their forces as needed. Reynia’s brother Bestafanus had been busy in the British Isles and Western Europe, while Reynia was most often found in North America. Reynia had siblings who watched over the greater portions of Africa, South America, South-East Asia, and pretty much every region of the world. In each of these places, there were gateways to the world below. The ten knew this, the devil knew this, Cain knew this, the animals knew this, and the lineages who had not forgotten their duties of protection knew this. As the ten immortals could not do all of the work on our own, their lineages were given specific duties to guard these gateways but also to provide unique supports in the battle against the under-dwellers and the unseen.

There was The Lineage of Trees, The Lineage of the Beast, The Lineage of the Spirit, The Lineage of the Architect, The Lineage of the Shepherd, The Lineage of the Warrior, The Lineage of the Alchemist, The Lineage of Seas, The Lineage of The Heart, The Lineage of Dreams, and The Lineage of the Sun. Each had been called something different at one time or another, but their current names most accurately reflected their true identities. Each lineage had their own distinct purpose with abilities given to special and distinct members.

Since the world's population grew to such vast extents, some lineages were combined. To the people who simply never learned where they truly came from, this had no effect. However, for those who were not only aware of what was inside them, but who diligently prepared for the sacrifices they may one day make in this life, their special gifts and talents were greatly magnified.

“Jade, as you have probably felt your entire life, you have a protective instinct towards the land on which you live and especially...”

“The trees,” Jade said.

“That is correct. You and your ancestors come from Bestafanus and his Lineage of Trees. The Caledonian forest is one of the oldest forests in the world and it is no coincidence that so very little of it is left.”

“Yusef, you come from the Lineage of the Spirit. Your abilities to know right from wrong, good from evil, and how to navigate yourself by relying on a particular instinct make you a valuable friend to have. You no-doubt have prevented many near-death experiences for many people. My siblings have had to worry very little about you.”

“And Elias, I'm sure you know where you come from.”

“Dreams.”

“That is right. And like any talent, if not exercised, your mind will serve little purpose. While no lineage is better than the other or more important, ours Elias can be manipulated to encompass all of the major abilities and talents in some way. That is another reason why you are so special Elias. That is likely how Yusef found you. He could sense your power and knew when he was drawing near.”

“He also told me he was from Tennessee, seventeen years ago,” Yusef said, avoiding eye contact with Reynia, “But yes, I didn’t know exactly where to find him when I got here, and I did know that he was the one I should find.”

“That leaves Alexa then,” Reynia said, stepping forward.

This time, the animals did get defensive. Galileo in particular growled low and deep.

“Easy old friend, I mean no harm.”

“She’s asleep,” Elias and Jade said in unison, both also cautious of his reason for approach.”

“It is great to see you all so protective of this one. She is going to need it.”

Elias eyes widened. “So those creatures were coming for her.”

“We can’t be certain, but by combining the Lineage of Trees with the Lineage of Dreams, you have created something with a unique potential.”

The three adults on the porch turned to look at the girl.

“What is so special about the trees?”

The trees were in fact essential. For survival.

In the beginning, all of the forces for good and even the forces for evil spoke the same language. Though there were many dialects and different languages that would come from this language, there was one language and it was understood by man, animal, and the earth. Plants did not speak with tongues, but nature had a spirit and it was through this spirit that all could communicate or sense one another’s pain. The trees like the animals were given the distinct duty of guarding the gateways to this earth. They were also designed to provide oxygen for this world and to feed the world below.

Ancient trees had roots that grew as deep or deeper into the earth than they were tall. These trees stood not only as sentinels for our world, providing us with oxygen, but they fed and sustained those that lived beneath us. They allowed for them to live and breath as well. Along with the thousands of fresh, underwater rivers and lakes, the roots of trees provided them what they needed to survive. When humans rid the earth of trees in the dramatic fashion that they have, they were not only shrinking their own oxygen supply, they were strangling the world below. Autumn and winter were a difficult time for the underworld; creatures went hungry and sometimes had no other choice but to emerge in the night, eating what they could to survive.

Though strangulation may seem an appropriate way for an underworld to die. There would always be parts of hell humans couldn't live without.

When Cain deviated from the earthly plan that was set before him, he took his family and a score of creatures with him. Through these gateways and holes in the earth, they descended. There was a species of hominid that traveled with him known as the naremf. They are a species that likely existed before humans but could just as easily have them. They could speak and act just like humans and their intellect was comparable, if not greater.

Upon realization of what they had done, after years of starving in the darkness, thousands of the naremf split off and sought to return to earth. It was too late. The earth had been flooded, their homes no longer existed, and essentially they had made a pact with the devil by following Cain. In anger, many returned and fought against Cain's army. They were killed, but since they had given their souls to the Devil, their spirits were forced to wander alone in the blackness of the atmosphere. Some spirits escaped

into the grounds of the earth and took upon them the bodies of both man and animal killed in the floods. As a result, new and strange species were created. Some part human, part beast, chose to return to servitude under Cain, others joined the rebels in their ranks. The rebels, led by a massive naremf named Centrestia made their own oath to protect the earth from those they had once loved and followed. The rebels were selfless creatures, saving the Earth us on many occasions, going as far as chasing up enemies and pulling them back into the ground. They scattered the earth with massive holes both as gateways and strategies of war.

They have been in constant battle both for the roots of the trees but also for protecting the gateways to earth. When man destroys the trees, he is also weakening the last defense this earth has.

Elias knew his visions and dreams, Yusef being in his home, the attacks on his family, and all of it must be related. Reynia knew it too, but he wasn't sure how.

“You’ve got to know what all this means, Reynia, you’re immortal.”

“Immortality simply means I cannot die. I am subject to the same mental weaknesses and worldly uncertainties as you. In this case, all of the immortals know something is coming, but we’re not sure what. That’s where you come in.”

“Us?”

“Yes,” Reynia said. “Our duties and abilities are limited to the outer realm of this world. You have been to hell before and for good reason. Though you barely made it back alive, your experience there was necessary both so you could see what you were up against and also so you could begin to learn of your potential.”

“But it seems I have forgotten everything, I will be of no use. Besides, I have a family to take care of now.”

“Not so fast Elias. I saw you chase down those creatures in the woods the other day. I saw you speak to them with the fervor of the Suns. You remember a bit more than you think. You are remembering some of the things you’ve learned and you’re feeling a bit of what’s inside you. You also need to give Jade a little more credit. Her Scottish blood runs thick. She can hold her own. Besides, Galileo and the others will be around.”

“What do we need to do?” Yusef asked.

“You need to descend as you did once before and discern exactly what is happening. We know from the holes we saw that the world underneath Tennessee has not been completely overrun with Cain’s armies. You should meet up with Centrestia’s forces right away. As far as the others who joined you in the face of Cain nearly two decades ago, I’m hoping they will meet you there as well. All of the immortals have been on an errand for this purpose. Some we fear, may not be ready for this task, but others have been chomping at the bit.”

“There were seven of us...seventeen years ago,” Elias said, “I think I counted eleven lineages.”

“This is true. A couple of these lines have, how should we say, been broken. Others have cracks and are faltering even now. I told you that even immortals have weaknesses. All of us struggle with patience, and temptation, while a select few struggle with faith. Some have broken their oaths and have followed a different path entirely, while others have just given up hope and the purposes for which their lineages were created have died with that hope.”

Everyone in the discussion looked disappointed with this information. Even Reynia's eyes sank as he spoke.

"One more thing," Jade said, "you said there are or were eleven lineages," but there were only ten immortals?"

"That is also correct. One line, the Lineage of the Sun, was created many, many years after we took our oaths. Through powers beyond my understanding, this special event took place in order to change the earth for good. Not many years after the line was created however, it seemingly disappeared. It is our hope that one day the line will re-surface and bring the light of that Sun to our aid. But since that lineage did not begin with any of us, we have no way of tracking it or of knowing how or when it will return. Perhaps another story for another time."

"Jade had asked earlier, before I emerged from the woods, if in letting you fall, if the devil had won the battle between good and evil. The answer is that he probably thought so. Cain probably thought so. "

"However, I doubt they had any idea of the lengths that the naremf's would go to protect you. They probably assumed they would turn you in rather than suffer for helping you escape. I imagine that when Cain stood before the seven of you, he probably felt the weakest he had in a very long time. After meeting you, I think he probably realized that he and his father were in over their heads. That's why they ordered that each of you be killed. That's why you barely escaped."

"There is a predestined ability inside every human to fight in the battle of good against evil," Reynia continued, "but all have the ability to choose which side they will take. When many, whether it be two, seven, or a thousand are gathered in the name of

what is right, anything is possible. Some select few, including the men and women I see before me, are destined to lead this fight. You may be our last true hope.”

XIX. His Great Purpose

Elias remembered the unmistakable smell of sulfur and again got defensive.

“Where have you been hiding all this time? he asked, stepping forward to smell Reyna’s clothing. “How do we know you’re not just one of them?”

“One of what?” Reynia asked, his face still and emotionless.

“One of whatever came out of the ground and attacked my family. You reek of sulfur! Maybe it was no coincidence that you and your quote brother came out of that massacre near Jade’s home.”

Reynia grabbed Elias by the chest of his shirt and pulled his entire frame towards his. Elias tried to resist but Reynia’s grip was flawless. The smell of sulfur was almost overwhelming as Elias reacted to the approach by turning his head.

“Look into my eyes,” Reynia demanded.

“Get off me! Elias shouted back, trying to pry off the man’s grasp, “let me go!”

“Reynia pulled in harder, so his own fist was digging into his stomach.”

“Look into my eyes and you will see the truth.”

Elias opened his eyes, which were now turned back towards Jade. Both Jade and Yusef looked unfazed and nodded at Elias for him to relax and follow the instructions. Elias went somewhat limp in response and turned toward Reynia. The look of a drunken mourner was nowhere in sight. But rather, a mystical peace began to permeate through Elias’s head and into his body as he finally looked into the man’s eyes. He could see a stark sense of intent in the black of his pupils, but the blue, hazy mist that surrounded them, still left Elias with questions.

“I believe what you said,” Elias mumbled under his breath, “but none of it explains why we all just caught a draft of the smell of the underworld, nor why the smell is all over you.”

Reynia loosened his grip on Elias’s shirt.

“As part of my oath to protect you and your family Elias, I descended below for a short time,” he replied. “It’s not usually a place I like to go, being that my immortality is no longer, how should we say, intact underground. Nevertheless, I had to ascertain whether or not our foes would return, while trying to get a grasp on the size of what’s to come.”

Elias pushed off from the man and returned to Jade and Yusef. Both now had looks of astonishment as well as fear.

“Your powers are limited?” Jade asked, clearly worried about the man’s sudden sense of weakness.

“Yes.” Reynia responded. “Because of a some force that even I am unable to explain, my destiny and the statutes that uphold it are only valid when we are standing upon this ground. When beneath the earth, the noxious gases that pervade the underworld annoy my lungs as much as they do yours.”

“And the force to come?” Yusef asked, entering the conversation.

“Most of them are already here. The captain of the invisible and the fallen has never stopped fighting the longest battle in human history. But the armies of Cain, those with actual bodies that traverse the world below, they grow in numbers daily. They build structures like the ancients of your civilization, which twist towards their skies and towards the ground beneath your feet. They seek like those in Babel to climb out of their

Hell and bring it to you. And we're seeing the signs all around us. Man no longer needs to search through the deepest caves and caverns, seeking to find the center of the earth, there are holes opening up all around us, swallowing city streets, and inviting any and all without a sturdy foundation to ultimately fall."

Elias' eyes lit up as he imagined the earth both burning and sinking.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked, anxiously.

"You must go down," Reynia responded.

"I can barely tolerate the smell of your clothing, there is no way I'll be able to make it down into the earth alive. I'll suffocate. And it's not like one person can defeat an army that's thousands of years old.

"Two people," Reynia said smiling.

Elias looked at Yusef, who was now staring at the ground.

"Surely you didn't think he came all the way here for nothing," Reynia said, "and actually, there may be more depending on whether or not my siblings have been successful in tracking some of the others down. Most are not ready for a fight. Perhaps you are not ready Elias, but we don't have a whole lot of choice here. Please also remember that you won't be alone down there. I anticipate Centrestia's forces will find you rather quickly."

Elias stepped forward, tears swelling at the edges of his eyes. He realized what Reynia was implying, but he wasn't ready for the responsibility.

“There are no chosen people in these days. I’m not a legend, I’m not a god, I’m a high school teacher. Yusef is a farmer. I’m not sure what you’re expecting either of us to do. Even with a supporting army, it’s no use. We’re not military strategists.”

“Yusef is,” Reynia responded, “and I also believe he could fashion a decent mask or two to help with the air situation. Look, the depths of the earth are not completely filled with noxious gases and poisons. There will be obstacles sure, but creatures have lived there for...”

“Thousands of years,” Elias cut him off, “yeah we get it.” It’s not that we don’t understand what you want us to do, it just seems a tad...well...impossible.”

Reynia bent down and grasped a piece of tall, dead grass in his hands.

“Look,” Reynia said, pulling the reeds between his fingers, “our situation is both spiritual and physical, it is not just gases you smell, but the odor of the bodiless, walking all around us. They are scratching, biting, and striking at you this very moment. They seek hopelessly to stop events from unfolding.

“Stop what?” Elias asked.

“To stop me from convincing you of what needs to be done.”

“It is not just rumors of faceless demons and the rise of hell, there is an actual, physical army more powerful and numerous than any earthly country has to offer anticipating and preparing to be released. The spirits who dance before you now are cheering their arrival, hoping the hoard might somehow set them free”

“As you know, when they come above ground, they don’t stay very long and they only come at night. We believe the attack will come on an approaching, singular evening. Cain’s forces will cause more bloodshed in this one night than has ever occurred in the

history of all wars put together. As the human race reacts hopelessly to their world torn out from beneath them, the devil's army will reach into the hearts of men and turn them against one another as they have for so many years. In the final act of vengeance, humans will be attacked from all sides, including within."

Reynia looked up at Elias, who was now even angrier.

"I guess you're just not going to listen to me," Elias said, "everything you say does the exact opposite of convincing me that I am the one for this job."

"Have you ever heard of the term *katabasis*?"

Elias had heard it many times before. Or perhaps he had read of the term many times before. He knew where Reynia was going with this. He turned to Yusef and Jade, who seemed unsure of the term.

"A katabasis is typically a noun," Elias said, speaking to the others, "it refers to a descent or a trip downwards towards whatever lies beneath. Many legends, myths, poems, and stories of old spoke of the katabasis of a hero who would descend into whatever underworld he or she believed in, often searching for a loved one or a particular item."

Elias thought of the books that had been strewn across his bedroom floor in the fracas with Galileo. He thought of the heroes in those stories. He thought of Dante, of Aeneas, of Odysseus, of Osiris... of Jesus Christ himself.

I am no hero, he thought.

"The Aeneid," Reynia said, reading his mind, "is a favorite of mine."

Elias looked unimpressed. He knew where Reynia was headed this time as well.

"Why is it your favorite?" Jade asked.

Elias spoke before Reynia had the chance.

“I doubt if it is really his favorite, he just wants to compare Aeneas to me. In book six of the poem, Aeneas is led to an opening in the ground, where he descends and meets with the spirit of his father. His dad then gives him a prophecy of the future of Rome and so on and so on...”

“You are more similar than you think Elias, you both descended into hell and you both returned alive. I think that fact alone makes you a hero. Also, don’t forget, Yusef had a similar experience to yours. You both stand more qualified than any soldier or warrior this world can create. Not only do you possess certain talents that come with being a part of your lineage, you have the upper hand in that you’ve both been there before.”

Yusef stepped forward, placing a hand on Elias’s shoulder.

“My friend,” he said, failing to get a return gaze from Elias, “I know you are scared. Allah knows I tremble at all that has been placed before us. But I also know what lies ahead if we simply sit and watch events unfold.”

“What are you saying?”

“We can ignore all that this man has said. We can do that very, very easily. In doing so, however, we can take the risk of watching our world burn, while living the hell of knowing that maybe...just maybe, we could have done something to stop it.”

Elias’s eyes watered.

“That hell, to me,” Yusef said, “would be much worse than any we could descend to.”

He gently squeezed Elias's shoulder and then stepped back.

Elias gazed at Yusef who smiled and nodded back.

The tears in Elias's eyes welled to the point of overflowing. He turned to Jade who had nothing to give him back. Looking at the ground one last time, Elias then turned to Reynia.

“We'll do it.”

XX. His Journey's End & Our Beginning Woe

The dark-horned master peered over the edge at the dismal scene hundreds of feet below. He watched as one speck in the crowd, slightly larger in size than the rest, scampered over and around others before disappearing into the shadows. He sighed and considered the implications of what just happened. He had just lost his most loyal servant and perhaps his best ever general, but no-matter, there could be no tolerance for weakness in the hours and days to come. Minions, hundreds upon thousands were gathering upon the stone surfaces below; anticipating, preparing, for an announcement, for war.

As he prepared in his mind the words he would say both to motivate and to instill the sense of urgency, the scrape of elements against metal behind him caught his attention. The great mechanism in the center of the courtyard was turning as it had so many times before. The man rushed to its side, hoping that maybe this time, for once, he would be in luck. As stars and engravings aligned, the symbols of the bridge, the tree, and the gate, each on the third circle from the center, came very close to one another. *Close enough*, he thought, to be worth considering.

In the distance, the faint churn of industry pumped and grunted with the sounds of those who sustained it. A large mechanism churned and twisted, squeezing the last lives of summer from the ancient trees of earth. The colifoid, as it was called, was primarily comprised of a large stone wheel with a hole at the center. Large, muscular workers gripped rods extending from the sides, pushing the wheel clockwise. The roots from Earth's many trees descended and twisted downwards into the surroundings. Workers would use obsidian hooks and chains to grapple the roots and pull them down into the

center of the wheel. As the workers on the exterior of the wheel grunted and pushed, stone teeth in the hole of the wheel would mash the roots as they twisted and became braided tightly together. The life of the roots, which revealed itself in a transparent ooze, would seep out the sides via stone tracks and canals.

The substance known as pwakstifund, comparable to the manna of old, sustained life here. It provided people and creatures with all of the nutrients needed for survival. The many fresh-water lakes and rivers provided the necessary water. And then there was always meat, though it was a tad harder to come by. Hunters would have to raid the earth of its sinking dead, scraping for what flesh still remained attached to bone. The taste, as imagined, would have been best described as spoiled. And yet, the fiercest of warriors sought this delicacy for its apparent power to increase one's strength in body and in mind. Acts of genocide and mass burials from the world above had made recent attempts at scavenging a success.

Half of these warriors, the bulk of the remaining naremfes in the underworld, pushed the rods of the colifoids. They had just returned from a feed and their strength was needed for speed of production. Feeling stronger than ever was a good thing. The faster they pushed and the harder the stones would grind together, the more substance they received. Vast amounts would be crucial in the moments to come. Rather than being stored in the massive stone vats nearby however, the bulk of the liquid was being diverted to barrels in wooden carts near the bases of the circular towers in their cities. The carts would bring up the rear of one of the largest war parties in the history of the world. Soldiers would need to be fed, and this was what they would get.

The other half of the narems were dispersed in various locations throughout the black valleys, preparing and anticipating their attack. One particular group, consisting of anxious and bloodthirsty spies, had hid themselves in a cavern near the entrance to Kedvian Bridge. The viaduct, which crossed the largest gulch in the underworld, was the only structure separating Centrestia's forces and the earth from the most massive of incursions. It was also the only thing connecting them.

The other side of the bridge marked the last outpost of reason for the creatures dwelling here and the last outpost of safety for humans; a land far-less desolate and industrious as that beyond it, yet still lacking the nature and many of the desirous physical properties of the earth above it.

Many who lived here were in fact human. Their blood, blue beneath the surface of the skin and red when spilt, contained different properties than the blood of earth humans. Soul-less properties enabled them to live forever unless killed by a creature or person of the same species. They had given up their rights to a normal life complete with aging and death. Aging they had done, but their frames did not show it. Cain had kept one promise—that they would live forever. Their only possible reprieve could come if they sacrificed themselves for a human while in this world. But they couldn't simply jump in front of a blade or onrush of creatures. The sacrifice would require selflessness and love.

Many, in hopes that if they lived good lives and protected the earth from attack, they may receive some form of freedom from immortality, remained vigilant and cautious at all times of imminent danger. Two of these men stood at their posts on the other side of the viaduct. They had sniffed out the hiding spies in the darkness, knowing they could make a move at any time.

Armed at the side with a large, circular, bronze horn, one of the men paced the square, elevated space of a stone tower. Stroking the mouthpiece with his thumb, the mocha-skinned, muscular man held an outstretched, gold, monocular device to his left eye, scanning the length of the viaduct and just a short distance beyond. His partner, over eighty feet below, groped a massive metallic chain with rings nearly three times the width of his massive biceps. The chain draped over a cliff and down the closest, southern side of the viaduct. The other end of the chain was fixed upon the base of the bridge. Fastened to the cornerstone of one of the bridge's many stone legs, a sharp pull on the chain would rip out the stone from its place and inevitably causing a large chunk of the bridge to fall. This strategy was a last resort, but one that the man clung to as required due to recent events.

The chain bearer peered up at his companion hoping for some sort of sign or notion that he could either release the chain or pull with all his might. His partner's swift motion to focus the lens of his scope caused his heart to skip a beat. The horn-bearer motioned for his friend to come up to the top of the tower. His hand picked up speed and the guard finally dropped his scope and shouted down to his companion, "get up here! Now! You need to see this!"

The sky in Hell was always red, lit both by fluorescent minerals in its walls and the growth of magma pools that littered the ground in distant and random spaces. What the man saw in the very distant reach of his scope was somewhat perplexing. A faint, dark, spot; blurry at the edges and almost the size of a granule of sand, but increasing in size with each passing moment. The guard below placed the nearest link of the chain around a massive obsidian stake that protruded from the ground. Racing to the side of the

tower, he grappled a thick rope, which hung from above and began to seemingly run up the wall, putting hand over hand, over and over to quickly reach the top. Reaching the top, his friend pulled him over and helped him into the box. Pushing his scope into the man's chest and pointing in the exact direction from where he saw the spot, the tower guard readied his horn, awaiting the decision of his friend.

The chain bearer twisted the tip of the lens for focus and peered through the hazy red atmosphere. Almost immediately, the shape faded into view. The black blob was now about the size of a nail head and was increasing in speed. Raising his hand to signal his companion, he raised four fingers followed by a firm first. "Now!" he shouted, "Do it now!" The guard obeyed, blowing hard into the horn four times. Each sound of the horn was low and heavy. The sound echoed through this side of the valley, echoing and creating similar reactions from other guard towers until it reached the largest city of Vagan.

The sound of four was to put the military on alert. Perhaps most importantly, it notified Centrestia that he should get to the viaduct immediately. He would be both followed and preceded by a score of elite bodyguards, one at every angle, coming forth from the city. The protectors and assassins were not the biggest of necessities. Centrestia, after all, was the largest naremf in Vagan or anywhere this side of the ground. His silver fur, which grew thickest on his nape and his back, was a sign to all who followed him of his majesty and strength. His very approach would often shake the ground as he walked with his fists and large feet pounding the earth. With nearly as much speed as the fast-approaching blip in the distance, Centrestia and his elite group of warriors made their way from Vagan across The Barren Fields to the viaduct towers.

The guards had made their own way down to the ground to meet their leader. The bodyguards and tower guards all nodded to one another, showing both their senses of urgency and camaraderie. A couple of the bodyguards handed weapons to the watchmen and all made a stout line across the entrance to the bridge. Centrestia stood back from the group and waited for the horn blower to approach.

“What is it?” Centrestia stared into the haze. He could tell something was coming, but he didn’t know what and he wanted the guards’ explanation.

“We’re not sure Sir, something large in stature is fast approaching. Would you like us to raise the alarm?”

“No.” Centrestia moved the man to the side and took the scope from his hand.

With the pounding of fist on the ground, the ape leapt through the air, bounced off the side of the tower, grappled the rope, and swung to the other side. Flying over his companions, he crashed back down to the ground, gaining the clearest line of sight across Kedvian Bridge. As Centrestia raised the monocular device to his eye to get a closer look,, the second guard stepped forward.

“A group of spies lie in the caverns at the other side of Kedvian, Sir. Whatever approaches is likely coming to bring them aid or to...”

“Give them their commands,” Centrestia interrupted.

“Yes, sir.”

Centrestia’s eyes widened as he watched the figure emerge over a hillside beyond the bridge and come barreling down it.

Six figures emerged in front of it, also in black, forming a semi circle as if to welcome or embrace what was coming. But the object didn't slow. If anything, the figure, which had rapidly descended the hillside, was moving even faster.

"Grab the chain!" he shouted, signaling for two of the guards to respond. The two men, lifted the chain from the stake and stood about ten lengths apart from each other, holding firm and anticipating their next order.

The black form, which had now reached flat ground had caused the six figures near the caverns on the other end to disperse in all directions. Some screamed and yelled while throwing objects in surprise. Others' shouts were quickly muffled as they were too slow to move and were trampled over by the onrushing form.

Dust rose through the air as the object picked up more speed and the bridges' foundation itself began to vibrate slightly with the force of the creature that now ran upon it.

Centrestria called for the men to raise their weapons. Each who had swords or spears pointed them in the direction of whatever was coming. Centrestria tossed the scope to the guard and knelt in front of his men. His protectors now became the protected. Staring back towards the rushing beast, he held firm.

"Be ready," he said, "brace for impact."

XXI. And Best Prepared Endure

For the first time he could remember, Elias was grateful that Southern culture preached and feared the end of the world. This fact alone kept many hardware stores like Al's in business. They didn't have to keep every little thing on their shelves to compete with the big guys. What many of them did keep however, was clothing, food storage items, non-lethal weaponry, and preparatory gear.

Checking the labels for size and durability, Elias thumbed through all of the available gas masks that Al had to offer. Yusef in the meantime looked at the various types of emergency and quick-fix meals. Al stood in the background thumbing through a hunting magazine.

"You know," Al said, his eyes never leaving the page, "your Dad was into this stuff too."

Elias had not forgotten. Most things that reminded him of his father either left a very bad taste in his mouth or he had destroyed in bouts of anger. The church his father preached in, had met this fate by fire less than a decade prior.

"Yeah, I know, he was always scared of something."

Choosing a light, rebreathing mask that specifically protected against sulfuric dioxide, Elias held one up to his face and then held one in the direction of Yusef. "I don't recall there being poisonous gases down there, do you?" He asked,

Yusef shook his head.

"Still, the smell was pretty strong back there."

Yusef nodded.

“Are you going to help me out here?” Elias asked. “You don’t seem to concerned about how we are going to survive.”

Yusef didn’t respond, but instead just held up a flat, shiny package that read “beef stroganoff” and shrugged.

Good point, Elias thought. “It’s a good thing those packs are flat. Get as many as you think we can fit in a small pack and let’s go. I have no intention of staying long, but we’ll need at least enough to survive a few days. Make sure to pick meals with plenty of protein and find some pouches of water that can travel well in our packs.”

Yusef got back to it.

Elias turned to a glass case that rested in the corner of the store. Faded handprints were smeared across the sides of the case where inquisitive children had braced themselves to peer inside. The weaponry that lay inside was nowhere near spectacular, but it would be exactly what they needed; rope and grappling hooks; anti vehicle and personnel caltrops, machetes and Tasers; tear gas canisters and flare guns. Elias could see a potential use for all of the items except for perhaps the tear gas. He knew that all of the creatures he would run into were accustomed to gases, he knew they had the strength of immortals, but he knew he could at least stun them, or disable them as a means for escape.

Ten minutes later, they were loading the back of Elias’s truck with most of the gear from the store. Elias didn’t think of himself as a hoarder, but he wasn’t an expert survivalist either. He bought pretty much everything he thought they might need and they were on their way. The school had picked up the tab on this one. Al was happy to oblige.

Moments later, they were pulling up the path towards the house.

Reynia was in the woods, digging. He had begun prior to Elias and Yusef heading to town. The passage between Tennessee and the world below had been used a bit more than usual lately. Whatever had come to the surface recently looking for a prize, had left empty handed, but had cleared a path more than big enough for two. Reynia on the other hand, wanted to make sure that upon their return, Elias and Yusef would have as little difficulty as possible making their way out. He had carved stairs of dirt leading out of the cemetery ground and piled rocks to fill the hole when necessary. Assuming, that is, that they made their escape by coming home.

There were many gateways to Hell. This was the only one in Tennessee. They may not have the option of returning to the surface via this path, but Reynia, Jade and Alexa would hope for the best. Reynia would also make sure Jade and Alexa were prepared if and when Elias needed them.

The Studebaker pulled up to the usual onslaught of rushing and barking dogs, this time plus two. Yusef stepped down from the passenger side to the leaping embraces of his heelers, which were clearly glad he had returned. Nodding to Elias and bowing to the others, he walked alongside his companions and into the woods.

“Where’s he going?” Jade asked, carrying Alexa while walking up through the herd of smaller dogs towards her husband. Alexa also looked concerned, but merely rested her head on her mother’s shoulder while watching Joe disappear into the thicket.

“He needs to say his prayers,” Elias responded, “something we should also consider doing, seeing as we will need an act of God to survive this trip.”

Reynia emerged from the woods, dusting himself off. “So we’re ready then?” he asked.

“All set, Yusef just needs some personal time and I need the rest of you to help me decide what we can actually take from our pile back there.”

Galileo came around to Elias, rubbing the thick fur of his side on Elias’s knees before turning to sit at his feet.

“I know you think you’re going with me,” Elias said, reaching to rub the spots behind Galileo’s head and ears, “but’s just not possible. Besides, they didn’t have gas masks for dogs and I’m just not willing to take the risk.”

A short growl followed by a low whine ensued as Galileo nestled back into Elias’s frame. “I will need you to watch over the family while I’m gone though, can you do that boy?”

Galileo barked and popped up to his feet. Giving two quick licks to Elias’s extended hand, he turned and made his way to Jade’s side where the other dogs remained. Elias approached Jade and Alexa, kissing both on the forehead and rubbing the heads of each dog at their feet.

“Do you have to leave?” Alexa said, peering up at her Daddy.

“Yes sweetheart, gotta go get me some rainbow goblins.”

Alexa smiled and reached out for him to hold her. Elias happily accepted, squeezing her tightly and hugging Jade as well.

“I love you both very much, more than anything.”

“Love you too,” they both replied.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to come with you?” Jade asked, “I have a way with nature you know.”

“And have you leave Alexa with this guy?” Elias responded. “I don’t think I quite trust him enough for that.”

“Hey,” Reynia said, approaching from the rear of the truck, “I’ve babysat your ass for the whole of two decades thank you very much.”

“No offense old man,” Elias said, turning from Jade, “I just don’t trust you to be alone with my daughter. I don’t need you filling her head with any nonsense. It’s bad enough you have me going on your errand to save the world. It’s bad enough that I have to leave you with my wife and daughter.”

“But Elias...”

“No buts,” Elias replied, looking her in the eyes, “we can’t risk Alexa losing both of her parents.”

“It’s Ok,” Reynia interrupted, you should stay, you both will be safe here. I’ll make sure of it.”

Elias handed Alexa back to Jade and motioned for her to go to the back of the truck and begin packing their stuff.

Elias turned to Reynia with some of the same fury that he had experienced in the woods days before. His eyes lit up and his muscles tightened.

“If anything happens to them...anything at all. You will experience a fate worse than death. Or in your case...a fate worse than life.”

Reynia showed no immediate emotion, though his eyes drifted, as if contemplating severity of Elias's warning.

"Do you hear me?" Elias said, growing angrier. "I don't know much of what I'm capable of now, but I'm guessing I'm about to find out. I'm also guessing I'm about to meet a few people who would not look too keenly on your failing."

His words settled quickly in Reynia's heart.

"They'll be safe."

"There's something you need to understand Elias, you have great potential, but if you fail, Alexa becomes our only hope. I will not lose her."

"You will not lose either of them."

Reynia nodded.

The three of them packed what goods they could agree on, including plenty of food and water, a couple of masks with headlamps and select weaponry. Yusef returned from the woods looking refreshed. He was ready. He sent his dogs off with the others and walked towards the bed of the truck.

All made their way to the cemetery except for Alexa. Jade left her with the dogs for fear that the site of her daddy descending into a grave would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Yusef leapt into the hole first. Elias waited for his friend to situate himself and flip on his headlamp before tossing him the rest of the gear. Hugging Jade for perhaps the last time, they prayed to God together, for safety and protection. Jade wept as she whispered the words of the prayer in his ear. Grabbing her waist and pulling back, Elias kissed her forehead and lips, and turned to jump down into his father's grave.

Elias gave one last stern look at Reynia to make sure he understood his job and then gave him the thumbs up. Reynia picked up a long, wide, flat board that was resting against a tree and set it over the hole. Though the purpose of this was to prevent rain, mud, or creatures from getting inside, Elias felt like he was being buried alive. Nevertheless, he took three last breaths of that Southern air, stepped further and deeper into the family grave and they were on their way.

XXII. Familiar

The sheer force of the beast's weight knocked Centrestia flat onto his back but nothing more. The creature was clearly in fear for his life; his eyes bulging and his head turning in all directions. It likely didn't help that as the ape beneath wrestled with him for control, nearly thirty blades of varying shapes and sizes were lunging for his heart.

"Stop!" Centrestia yelled, halting the attack. "He is clearly not what he once was."

The soldiers stepped back, peering towards the truth of their leader's words. The beast they were watching him grapple with had single-handedly killed so many of their friends; had ordered the assassinations of their families. Nevertheless, he had once been their friend, many, many years ago.

Rolling over and on top of Sempersius, Centrestia pinned his arms down.

"Stop old friend, just stop, you are safe now."

Centrestia felt the rough pounding of Sempersius's heart slow to rhythmic thud beneath his own.

"You are safe," he repeated.

Rising to his feet, Centrestia motioned for two of the soldiers to help him. They pulled Sempersius to his feet, the dead weight of his limbs alone, showing that he had finally given in to the physical pain of his wounds.

Each soldier placed a large arm over his head to brace Sempersius at his side. Though not a prisoner, he would need to be carried and forced if necessary into town to receive the rehabilitation he needed.

Centrestia stepped in front of them, examining Sempersius for signs of dementia and to make sure this was not in fact, a trick. Lifting the ape's head, Centrestia peered into his eyes. Placing his other hand on the chest, he felt again for the rhythm within. Both were in severely weakened states.

“What has he done to you?” Centrestia whispered.

Then it dawned on him. *Rebirth*, he thought. *My God*.

“It appears, my friends,” he said, seeking the attention of the guards and warriors behind him, “that our two darkest enemies are once again working together like father and son.”

“And by the looks of it,” he continued, peering deep into the sunken whites of Sempersius's eyes, “something tells we are on the eve of something horrible.”

Gathering enough strength merely to cough and then sigh, Sempersius shifted his gaze to the atmosphere beyond them.

“Something... something's coming.”

And at that moment, the beat of his heart seemed to murmur, skip a beat, and then multiply into a series of beats under the palm of Centrestia's hand. Another series of beats followed, doubling, tripling and magnifying in size and then frequency.

He felt the change shake his very frame all the way to the dirt beneath his feet. The vibration rattled up his spine to the back of his head. Centrestia looked back at his friends, his eyes wide with both anger and fear.

They had felt it too.

War drums beat in the distance. It had begun.

XXIII. The Dark Descent

I am no hero, Elias thought as he paced down the pitch-black tunnel. The tight spaces, made just large enough by the creatures that traversed them in the night, were nothing close to comfortable. They had walked diagonally downward for nearly three miles. After every half-mile or so, the path would dead end at another hole. After passing through the hole, the trail would then continue diagonally downwards again but in the opposite direction. The path moved east then west, east then west, again and again in a zigzag of descent.

Approximately one mile into their trip, as a precautionary measure Yusef tied a rope to his waist, put about seven feet of space between him and Elias, and wrapped the other end of the rope around Elias's waist. This strategy prevented the two men from losing each other but it also enabled Elias to more carefully lower Yusef through each hole they came upon. Yusef also mentioned after mile number two, that the ground felt softer at his feet. Should the ground give way entirely, the length in rope could give Elias time to brace them or essentially catch Yusef in the process of a life-threatening fall.

After about fifteen miles, which seemed to go by in a very short amount of time, Yusef stopped for a drink. They had stopped many times on the trip thus far but this time Yusef looked worried.

"What is it?" Elias asked, pointing the bulk of the blue light from his LED headlamp square between Yusef's eyes.

“Well despite my appreciation for light in times of darkness my friend, you could start by dimming your light if and where possible.”

“Oh, right,” Elias said, removing his lamp and dimming the brightness.

The two men sat with their backs against a tunnel wall, propping their feet against the opposite side. Both put their feet high up on the wall, trying to extend their legs and stretch.

“In Georgia, not far from my home...”

“Not far from my home, you mean.”

“The country of Georgia.”

“Oh... right...”

“There is a hole in the earth known as Krubera.”

Elias thought for a moment. The name sounded very familiar.

“It is a cave near the Black Sea,” Yusef continued.

“Oh! Yes, isn’t it supposed to be the deepest cave in the world, or at least one of many?”

“Yes,” Yusef replied. “I believe it is difficult for scientists to know exactly which caves are the deepest unless they find a point in which they cannot delve deeper. I believe explorers are still finding routes that are leading them deeper into Krubera, just like they are the cenotes of Central America, the caverns of South East Asia and so on. I have also explored many caves in Afghanistan and have dug tunnels of my own.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Elias asked.

“Usually, by now, we would have encountered water. Usually, by now we would have been forced to descend through a sump, down a cascade, or across a pitch. None of those things have gotten in our way.”

“And this worries you how? We’ve simply had a lot of good luck. Don’t jinx us Joe.”

Yusef put his ear to the wall to listen for the sounds of rushing water. The faintest of murmurs rattled his earlobes and he motioned for Elias to listen as well.

“Do you hear that? Yusef asked, focusing hard on what could possibly be transpiring.

“Nothing, just the sound of my own heart beat.”

“Perhaps, perhaps it is something else.

“Let’s keep going, it’s not like we need to make it anywhere before nightfall so-to-speak, but our limbs are getting tired and we need to try to find a place to camp if and where necessary.” The two picked up their gear and continued down the path.

“Do you remember anything about it now?” Yusef asked as he walked.

“About what?

“About Hell, or wherever it is that we are going.”

“Not a whole lot, it comes and goes in dreams. I know it was nothing like the way it is described by Dante or Homer, though I believe their Hells are different places entirely.”

Elias contemplated all of the literature he had studied on that matter. Despite eventually telling psychologists and friends that he had hallucinated and made up the entirety of his stories, he knew they were true. He spent most of his college days studying

characters like him, mainly fictional, who had made the descent and lived to tell the tale. He had studied folklore, theology, demonology, and even geology hoping to find something that proved he hadn't seen it all in dreams.

Most of his research led to conspiracy theories, government cover-ups, and inexplicable events that had changed societies and civilizations. Eventually becoming a teacher, he had settled on accepting explorer's stories and theories as simple good fiction.

One French author though, who he had never paid too much attention to, Jules Verne had somehow done a decent job describing the tunnels in *The Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Elias knew that millions of years ago, there had been volcanoes in the earth around his home, but the land had long since changed. The mountain range near his home, which had once had peaks that grew taller than those of the Rocky Mountains, had flattened out into overly large hills in comparison to most modern ranges.

After another mile and a half, Elias stooped to lower Yusef down once more. This time, Yusef's feet did not touch the bottom, his legs merely dangled in space. Elias pulled Yusef back up and both men leaned over the edge, pointing the sharp beams of their headlamps into the darkness. The beams made contact with a greenish glow. The emerald reflection seemed to move and glimmer proving immediately that they had reached water.

Fetching more rope from their bags, the two men decided it would be best if Elias took the lead on this one. Even though Yusef had much more experience with tunnels, he also had the tactics and strength to prevent a catastrophe should one of them need them. Yusef used his body as belay so that Elias could slowly lower into the space. Scanning the area of the cavern with his headlamp, Elias saw nothing out of the ordinary other than

the green-taffy-like appearance of the water below. The smell of sulfur, which had hit them in clouds during their trip, was not particularly damning.

Elias's began to notice lines in the rock to his side. These were not lines made from cracks or from liquid, but rather roots. The roots appeared to glisten like the water as they twisted and branched off like tributaries, descending further and further down before disappearing into the liquid below.

"Just a bit farther, I'm going to lay flat on my back and test the water to make sure it is not acidic or harmful."

Yusef braced himself for the extra weight that would come from Elias's movements. The water was very cool to the touch and completely transparent. The green that they saw appeared to be a reflection of the elements at the base.

"Can't be very deep, if you lower me just a bit more, I will try to touch the bottom."

Extending a leg into the water, Elias felt a frigid rush from his boot to his face.

"Did you reach the bottom?" Yusef asked, his muscles twitching as he held up the dead weight.

"I'm not entirely sure," Elias replied, "my foot appears to be numb at the moment."

Elias yanked his foot from the water, hoping to shake off the effects of the temperature.

"I'm not sure why we didn't feel the cold before now, it's like ice."

"There could be a number of reasons," Yusef said, "we should be grateful for water rather than fire, no?"

“You’re right, but I’m not sure where you and I go from here. I can’t see incredibly far with this lamp but it appears to branch out into an underground river or lake. If the water is so cold to the touch, we’re never getting through it.”

“The same thing happened to the explorers in the Black Sea cave, I believe,” Yusef said, “they eventually had to stop because the water either became so deep, they didn’t know how far they would need to dive before finding more, or the water was so cold, they couldn’t dive in it to begin with.”

Perhaps parts of Hell are frozen, Elias thought.

“Is there somewhere to the side, perhaps a rock you can reach where you can rest your weight?” Yusef asked, “I have control, but your dead weight is a bit more than I imagined it would be.”

Elias looked around and noticed that the cavern walls did slant and descend before reaching the water’s edge. This left approximately ten feet of rock that could be used as a perch for them and their gear.

Dust fell between his eyes and the beams of light from his helmet. Small chunks of rock followed as the rope rubbed against the opening above him. Elias peered upwards and was startled by a dagger of stone not far from his head. The stalactites had been there the whole time, but Elias had only been looking down and out. The cavernous ceiling was littered with the emerald-green formations that for a moment felt to Elias like they were closing in on him. Some sharp, some littered with dripping microbial ooze, they didn’t provide a very welcome scene.

Elias noticed a similar shape to the one above his head about fifteen feet away. This pointy pillar pointed up from the ground however, and could make a good spot for resting their gear and possibly a position to anchor them for further exploration.

“I think I’ve found something,” Elias said, “if you can lower me the gear, I think I can swing it over to a piece of inverted stalactite. Yusef agreed and they began to finagle their gear between each other. A couple of carabiners and bottles of water fell into the pool below, but for the most part, Elias was able to gather their gear from Yusef as he lowered it and then toss it to the spot. Elias realized how much he took for granted the sturdy ground that was now above his feet. The act of tossing objects with precision while suspended in air, was no easy task. He had not maintained stability either. His body had begun swinging a bit in the air as he stretched to throw the items. He could hear Yusef grunting and growling above as the man struggled to hold the weight.

“Sorry.”

“It is fine, we will need to swing you anyway to reach the gear.”

Elias agreed as both men braced for the maneuver.

“Wait, if you swing me, there is a good chance that I will either become impaled on a stalactite or that the tips of the stones may cut our rope. I also don’t have much distance to go before I’m in the water.”

“What do you suggest Elias, my arms are getting weak.”

Elias peered up at the spikey chandeliers above him.

“Dust is falling and the stalactites appear weak in the bases. Suppose I knock a bunch of them down, it would give us room to swing and prevent any injury.”

“Assuming they don’t crush your skull when they fall.”

“Assuming... yes.”

“I still have one of the shovels up here,” I will lower it to you,” Yusef said, as the rope rubbed harder against the edge of the hole, causing tiny strands to break off and fall with the dust.”

Elias reached for the shovel just in time for a glob of cold goo to drop right between his eyes. The sudden occurrence startled him and he began flailing his arms to get it off.

Yusef struggled with the rope. “What’s going on?”

“The ceiling just shit on my face!” Elias yelled back, trying to keep the substance out of his mouth.

Yusef peeked over the edge.

“It looks like you’ve got a little bit of whatever is in that water on your face Elias.”

Elias returned a glance, squinting, with one eye shut. “You think?” he said, wryly.

Raising his hand a second time, Elias sighed as he waited for the shovel to be lowered. Once in his hand, he began swinging it towards the source of the goop.

“You should be a bit more careful, your weight is becoming more difficult to hold. Your erratic behavior isn’t helping.”

Elias ignored him, pulling his weight up on the rope to swing and then bouncing back down. Swinging up and around, Elias swung the shovel through the air, making contact with two or more stalactites. Oozy stones broke free, crashing into the water

below. The water splashed up on Elias, startling him again with the cold. But he kept swinging.

“I’m going to swing three more times!”

Yusef quivered too. But for a different reason. Sweat drenched his face as his muscles twitched. He was losing his grip.

Elias stretched on the first swing, knocking down five pillars above him. He leaned in hard hoping to swing back high in preparation for the next pendulum motion.

“One...” he said, loudly and slowly.

He got the swing he wanted, coming in fast and hard, making a helicopter motion and knocking down nearly a dozen formations with both his legs and the shovel on the upswing. Water splashed up all around him as the light from his helmet bounced around the ceiling.

“Two...”

And that was all it took.

Yusef screamed and the rope gave way.

Elias felt the split-second rush of free-fall before his neck hit the frigid water like a brick. The sudden impact and recurrent feeling of surprise sent crackling jolts through the frame of his body and caused stabbing pain in his heart. Sub-zero water plunged into his lungs as he screamed out in shock. Wide-eyed with terror, Elias looked up through the water above him. In all the rush of the moment, he nearly missed the bright blue light flying towards him. Bouncing off the wall of rock, Yusef’s body came flailing towards him. The crash of weight on his stomach didn’t hurt as much as he had anticipated. The pain came from inside his chest and the back of his neck, but even those pains were

fading quickly. Most surprising to Elias was that he felt himself sinking, both deeper into the water and into a deeper state of mind.

He was losing consciousness.

A sharp pull at his back sent his arms and legs upwards. But it wasn't the rope. Everything seemed to stop as the weight of the water disappeared around him. He was no longer just sinking; he was falling through a large hole that had opened up beneath him.

Unable to speak or yell out for his friend, he did all he could think of by merely reaching out towards him. As his vision faded from blue to black, a sharp blue light crashed towards him again. The whites of Yusef's eyes flashed into view as both men reacted in horror.

Elias felt all that was beneath him give way and again he was at a free-fall.

Free-falling straight down, into the darkness.

XXIV. The Heart of Hell

The city of Maydrer stood taller than any Cain had attempted to build. The kingdom lay carved within the walls of a prehistoric volcano. Though no magma filtered through its veins, the people and creatures who called this mountain their home feared that someday, should they turn back to wickedness, that it may once again breathe a tongue of fire and burn their homes from within. For now though, they took solace in the support the structure provided. Like the Anasazi of Earth, their homes were elevated and protected from attack and from the elements. If an attack did come, the guards would give the signal and all ropes or ladders would be dropped; all the lights would be extinguished. The many of Maydrer would simply blend in to the black of the mountain.

Though a signal had come, Centrestia ordered that Sempersius be holed up in the city for treatment. The elders and priests of the city would leave one ladder extended for him.

Centrestia was hoping that Sempersius could also blend in; that his black fur would disappear among the igneous rock of his people. After passing through Vagan, Sempersius had been taken here. This was where they hid their treasures, and treated their wounded. Had the mercenaries who were trampled in his rush across Kedvian Bridge found the means with which to track him, either by scent or by scope, they should fail. That was the hope. He needed treatment and healing. The mountain itself was said to have healing powers, which even immortals like Sempersius needed to regain their strength. Luckily, narems did heal quickly, but how much time would he have?

Back near the Barren Fields, the beat of drums grew louder and the stomp of feet grew in number, not only from beyond the bridge but also nearby. Recently, the guards in the tower above Centrestia's head had sounded two separate alarms: one, to alert all citizens of pending threat, and the other like the one before, to rouse any militia, warriors, or tredesties across the valley who would support their cause. Many had already arrived. Many marched in groups from neighboring villages, hillsides, and caverns. Most had known for some time that something massive was coming. Not only could they feel it in the air, but the tredesties had also flown into the great cities, had perched atop the great spiral towers, and had watched the armies forming.

They all took great jeopardy in being here. With potential punishments worse than the curse they already bore, the tredesties took perhaps the greatest risk.

Those who were captured, shot down by archers atop the towers, or crushed by falling stones, suffered a horrific fate. Their wings were ripped from their backs, their eyes plucked out, their mouths sewn together. They became the gredifers that wandered aimlessly in Cain's chambers. Similar fates awaited anyone caught behind enemy lines. The curse of immortality wasn't the worst punishment of living in Hell and Cain had made sure of that.

Centrestia knew the sacrifice that every warrior and citizen was making and he prayed it would be enough. He had assigned his greatest armies and his strongest generals to build cities and fortresses near the four gateways to earth on this side of the gorge. The others, which lay in enemy territory, were nearly impossible to traverse. Cain had found ways of entering all and most had been either damaged irreparably as a result, or he had

found that the gates were useless; leading to locations covered by ocean or uninhabitable, heat-scorching deserts.

The times that he did find success in entering the Earth, his plans had been thwarted by tredesties who would spot his armies entering the pathways and would alert Centrestia. The leader would then send elite guards and trackers up into ground after them. This is just one reason for the harsh nature of punishment for tredesties. They served as angels to the earth and fallen angels if captured.

Centrestia was pulling warriors from all of these places, putting a lot of risk into leaving the gateways with only a handful of guards and nothing else. These few soldiers would be the last hope for Earth, should Centrestia's army be defeated. Centrestia knew this, but he took a gamble on whether Cain knew. Regardless, recent reports from tredesties had stated that Cain's army outnumbered them three to one. The enemy would have to cross Kedvian Bridge and Centrestia had his guards on standby to pull the legs out from beneath it. Still, he knew Cain's ambitions, his brilliance, and his Father. He wasn't going to doubt the enemy's tactics were in place.

A tredestie flew into view, circling above Centrestia's head before swooping down and landing just beside him.

"Sire," the being said, folding his wings back and attempting to catch his breath, "it would appear that as per the usual, the enemy is pulling many carts behind them.

"Why did you come down just to tell me this?" Centrestia asked, "they always have carts to store the pwakstifund for the soldiers."

"Yes Sire, they do. But there are thousands upon thousands of them, carts. Though I could not swoop low enough to see their contents they appear to be quite heavy,

heavy enough to slow the march quite significantly. Though the drums sound near, I anticipate the rear and bulk of the army will take some time to get here. They are struggling to pull the weight of those carts Sire.”

Centrestia stood in deep thought of his surroundings. He had considered the geography many times. The Valley of Cain consisted of hundreds of small cities. Each formed with the intent to construct colifoids or ziggurats in different locations. The cities had become overpopulated because they no longer had room for expansion. This was just one of many reasons, Cain’s attacks had become more frequent.

On the outer edges of these cities and on the edge of the area where Centrestia now stood, freshwater rivers, carved deep and twisted through towering gorges. Some gorges were thin enough in width, that if one got a running start, he or she could leap from one end to the other. But as luck would have it, the gorge that separated Centrestia’s lands from the Valley of Cain, was so wide that a massive viaduct nearly a mile in length, known as Kedvian Bridge, had to be constructed so that people could cross from one end to the other. This crossing was only necessary many years ago, before Cain’s cities had expanded, when the people of Vagan and other cities would wander in search of their own pwakstifund or low places to gather fresh water.

Centrestia had considered having the viaduct torn down many times. For the time being however, he had decided to just keep the structure heavily protected. And at this time, more protected than ever. The Barren Fields no longer held up to their namesake. Though they had never presented even a weed of fauna, the fields were now covered in Centrestia’s armies, some pushing to the very edge of the gorge before staking their

camps. No archer's arrow could reach them, nor could any trebuchet or swinging device's boulder crush them from the opposite side of the gorge.

Many began beating their own drums, drowning out the sounds of those approaching on the other side. Many peered out into the distance in anticipation.

Centrestia turned to the tredestie, still trying to figure out what Cain had devised.

"Was there anything else?" he asked, "anything out of the ordinary?"

"Just the cannons Sire."

"Cannons? What was different about the cannons?"

"They just seemed larger than normal Sire, larger in size and in number."

There were many weapons of war in Hell, but a very small number of ways in which an immortal could die. Both sides had found many weapons and militaristic tools when raiding and stealing from the dead in the earth. But most proved of no use here. Bullets flew inaccurately in the thickness of the air and only caused temporary setbacks. The sharpest of blade proved more useful in lopping off of limbs or even heads. But should the owner of such appendages find them, each could be reattached for regeneration. Thus it was a common practice for swordsmen on horseback to decapitate a victim, and ride off with their head, either keeping it for a trophy or tossing it into the depths of some gorge or magma pool. If the men or beasts lost their bodies in war, their spirits would simply live on; either taking on the form of bodies in the ground above, or seeking out a long and more tedious form of regeneration in the mountain of Maydrer. The latter method was much more common on this side of the bridge; the method of stealing and desecrating bodies having been forsaken many years ago. This was the primary reason Cain's armies were so much larger. Those who were weak enough to be

defeated in war, often were too weak in mind to battle through the regeneration process. Most would simply forsake their oaths and wander off towards the Valley of Cain lacking anything besides a spirit, which they could call their own.

Centrestia stated only the obvious. “Blocks are for building, cannons are for breaking down.”

In that moment, he came to a somewhat disturbing realization.

In all of the sound around him both from the arrival of supporting armies, the conversation with the tredestie, and the beat of his armies drums, he had failed to notice something particularly haunting: silence.

The drums of the enemy had ceased and he hadn’t even noticed. Eyes widening, he turned to one of the guard towers and motioned for the man on top to blow the horn for silence. He did so and immediately all sound ceased. Only the clatter of flapping flags in the passing heat and idling horses hoofs’ clanking against rock were heard. The mass of men and naremfes waited in silence.

“Go,” Centrestia whispered.

The Tredestie turned, began sprinting, unsheathed his wings, took four leaping steps, and leapt into flight. Flapping his wings vigorously he soared over the edge of the gorge cliff and dropped down out of sight. Moments later, the creature shot out, up and towards the upper atmosphere before disappearing into the air of enemy territory.

A faint, yet continuous squeaking sound began churning in the distance. The same sound, overlapping the first, then began followed by another and another until the sound was no longer faint but large and loud.

Centrestia moved towards the sound, trying to get any idea of what approached.

Then abruptly, the squeaking stopped.

Suddenly, one small flame appeared in the distance upon the edge of the opposite cliff. The light from the fire seemed small, as if it rested upon a hand-held torch. The flame dipped slightly and a second flame appeared. The second flame dipped in order to reveal a third. Like a chain reaction, a series of over one hundred flames appeared one after the other until a complete chain of fire lined the entire edge of the rival's cliffs.

Though no faces could be seen, there was no doubt that Cain's army had arrived and had commenced their strategy.

Big cannons, Centrestia thought.

Then, before he could put his next thoughts into words, all flames dipped simultaneously.

"Pull back! He shouted. But it was too late.

A series of pops and coughs erupted from the other side, as the flames danced up and down. A sharp crack whipped through the air as massive black balls exploded towards the Centrestia's forces. The forces nearest the cliffs barely had time to turn around before more than one hundred cannon balls struck the cliff just beyond their feet. The foundation shook, cracked, and all at once gave way. A large portion of the cliff gave way and nearly two hundred men fell, screaming, into the gorge. A handful of men had leapt from the falling rock and had clung to the edges of the rock wall. A second round of cannon blasts followed, sealing their fate.

The remaining army pushed as far back into the fields as they could.

Centrestia and other naremfs leapt into the crowd, scooping up men that lied close to the new edge that had been created. The armies that had recently arrived stopped in

their tracks, appalled at the carnage that had already begun. For a moment, there was fear and confusion.

Centrestia motioned for the bulk of the army to push as far back as possible. Cain, he realized, had created a weapon that deemed the width of the gorge as no longer an obstacle. Getting the attention of the guard tower again, Centrestia waved his arms up and down like wings. With another sound of the horn, a moment went by before the sky became littered with tredesties.

“Take out the cannons,” he shouted.

Flying with numbers but no definite formation, the winged men dipped and rose through the air, creating enough velocity to soar to the other side and swoop down to the torchbearers and pluck them from their perches.

A dozen cannons or more reacted, shooting balls into the sky, piercing only a couple of tredesties that could not dodge them quick enough. In a tactical move, the angels then swooped down to fly just below ground level and out of sight.

Centrestia was grateful for their strategy. Grateful they could make the move on their own. The tresdesties had proved invaluable to his army’s success throughout their history.

He watched as some flames disappeared, while others were extinguished after being dropped or forced over the cliffs. The faint outlines of bodies and canons fell with them in the struggle. The eruption and crash of splashing water below only confirmed what could just barely be seen.

The cry of the tredestie was a loud one. A deafening screech like that of a hawk or a falcon could echo for miles. As they fell upon Cain’s forces, their swooping battle cries

drowned out the sounds of falling enemy's who screamed themselves while falling or being thrown over the rocky edges. But the tredesties' cries turned to those of sheer horror as the opposing armies retaliated to the aerial attack. The tredesties had nowhere to fly but down as arrows began ripping through their wings like shards of glass. Many fell from pain, others just to escape. Centrestia's response had worked, for a moment. But again, he had underestimated the enemy. A horn's cry from above him signaled the tredesties' retreat. Those who still had the strength followed; using the strength of tattered wings to bounce through the air awkwardly. Others, maimed and broken simply fell to their feet and sprinted for the cliff's edge, knowing if they simply dropped out of sight, that they could evade captivity. Some dropped, some never rose. The soldiers awaiting their return quickly attended those who made it safely back.

Centrestia had a decision to make. Without knowing exactly what lay on the other side of the gorge, he knew that some of his men had been dropped behind the lines. He couldn't let them be taken, nor could he allow their sacrifice to be for nothing. He knew an ambush could be waiting, should his men charge the bridge. He knew his vantage point from the air was no longer an option. He knew he had to do something fast or risk another attack.

"I need a few good men!" he shouted, "and we'll need rope, a lot of rope!"

Men and naremf's rushed to his side.

After a discussion amongst a circle of thirty some-odd soldiers, the half which were men withdrew themselves to fetch rope and more men. The naremf's stayed with their leader and prepped for his strategy. The men returned with the ropes and the whole group moved to the broken ledge.

Each naremf had a separate rope fastened to their waist and shoulders. With their weight quadrupling the weight of a man, four men were assigned to each naremf. The squeaking sound they had heard prior to the first attack began churn once again and it was clear they were out of time. The sound was nowhere near as loud as it was previously. Clearly, the tredesties had some damage. Nevertheless, the sound remained, and as before the flames reappeared.

“Now!” Centrestia shouted.

Each naremf galloped on all fours, racing for the edge. The men who held the ropes planted their feet and braced for the drop. As canons blasted from the other side of the gorge, a dozen naremf s dropped at a free fall into the gorge below.

Cannon balls plowed into the cliff again, splitting through and completely breaking three of the ropes. The men screamed in horror as the cut forced them to fall back with the release. The others held strong as the remaining naremf s were lowered into the gorge. Eventually each rope was cut and the naremf s were on their own. All twelve of them had survived and were now ascending the opposite gorge wall. They had been chosen over the men for this purpose, their ability to climb with speed and stealth.

For now, the plan was working. Centrestia could barely make out their movements as they zigzagged and hopped up the rocky face. He had pulled everyone back for the next series of blasts, which shot just above the climbing naremf s’ heads. These shots barely reached the cliffs at all. The other good news was that when the naremf s had crossed the water just moments earlier, they had found many of the soldiers who fell during the first blasts. They had not been swept downstream, but rather they clung to the rocky edges, trying to regain their strength.

As the narems reached the tops of the cliffs, their frames hopped through the air and disappeared into a scuffle of bouncing flames and smoke. Eventually, every flame went out and once again, there was darkness and silence.

XXV. Deep to the Roots

Elias couldn't comprehend how it all had been a dream. Peering into an autumn sunset, the black skeletons of leafless trees crisscrossed through a reddened sky. As he squinted and took a second glance, his other senses fumbled through a sharp pain on the back his head. The sound was both muted and deafening: a constant rush of noise he eventually interpreted as water. The smell of a number of elements: the wet ground beneath his body, various types of stone, and the unmistakable scent-turned feeling of unwanted water up the nose. His body felt weighted down, his skin and limbs heavy in their movements. Sitting up, the pain seared through his brain and everything circled into view.

The trees were not really trees but roots. The season may have been autumn, but the sky was dark and only reddened by its reflection off of something burning in the distance. He had clearly fallen some distance as proof from the water that poured out from a hole in the rock way above him. His feet still rested in the water of this newly-formed river he had washed up from. His clothes were completely soaked and the gear that he still had consisted of some batteries in his pocket and a loop of rope around his waist.

Then it dawned on him.

Yusef! He thought.

He couldn't remember anything at first, how he got from his house in Tennessee here. Then it all came rushing back: the descent through the tunnels, the oozing stalactite, and eyes... bright wide eyes falling straight for him. He stood up and shouted for his

friend. Looking up at the hole, he thought maybe he would see him, that perhaps he had caught himself before the waterfall.

Not a chance, he thought.

The water was moving too fast and too strong. He looked around, peered through the inverted forest. He saw where the river cascaded down a mountainside and then connected to another river. He saw that river disappear into a canyon and so on. The ground at his feet was like black sand. Nothing grew from the ground up, only from the sky down. The further down he peered, the fewer the roots there were.

In the very far distance downward, he could make out flames, dotting the landscape. In a sudden moment of both familiarity and worry, Elias realized he was back.

...

Yusef sat between a stone and wall of rock at the base of the cascades. He peered as far as he could up the mountain, but he saw nothing. He had clung to the rope on Elias's waist as they plummeted from the falls, but the impact at the bottom had been too much for him. Coming out of the water, while being sucked down in the current, he looked over just in time to see Elias's limp body bounce around a boulder and catch on the edge of the river. This was just a split-second before he himself was thrust through another current and bounced over a set of cascades. The water at the base of the cascades became shallow and he cut his stomach on some jagged rocks. The same jagged rocks however, saved him from being pulled into the canyon below.

Taking in as much of his surroundings as he could Yusef determined that he should wade through the river and ascend the hill on the other side. He dared not to believe that this mission had been for nothing, and that Elias had died in their free-fall. Regardless, he had to find him soon. Pulling his shirt up, he was quick to note that he could have done without the bleeding gash across his abdomen. The sudden pain from revealing the wound made him wince a bit and bite his lip.

You've had worse, Yusef, he told himself, rubbing the scare over his eye.

Pressing his shirt firmly back against his skin, he stepped back into the water and waded carefully to the other side.

A splash of rocks hitting water behind him, startled him, stopping him suddenly. He almost didn't dare to look. He remembered the men and beasts he had run from as a child. He knew that if one lurked in the shadows behind him, he would have but seconds before he was pounced on and squashed upon the sharp rocks of the river.

Nothing came.

He decided he had one of two choices, to turn and fight, and possibly die, or sprint into the current and hopefully be pulled downstream. Both had their risks, but the latter would at least buy him a chance of surviving.

"Wait," a voice said, "do not be afraid."

It was a woman's voice and had come from the wall both above and behind him.

Yusef turned but saw no one, until a flicker of dust and small rocks fell from the rock wall above.

"I'm coming down," the voice said.

Yusef struggled to put the voice to a face or to anything, but nothing came. Suddenly, he saw her. Camouflaged in black and grey garment, a stealthy figure descended the face of the rock wall in front of him. Stepping on small, jutting rocks with cat-like precision, the figure almost failed to reveal she was human. Nearly a body's length from the ground, she twisted before leaping to the ground below. Down to one knee the woman raised her head so her hood could fall from her face.

The shine of her long black hair was almost invisible in the low light. Her light brown skin and the whites of her eyes were her only features that didn't have potential for simply blending into the backdrop.

She took two steps forward. And again, Yusef was frozen.

"I am Jeshin," she said, "and you must be..."

For the first time in a long time, Yusef was speechless.

"Well..." she said, as she began to walk to his side, "you are clearly not a naremf and your eyes look far too alive to be an enemy..."

"An enemy?" Yusef asked.

"Anyone pretending to be human. While your shirt is stained with blood, I think it is your own and despite the look of fear on your face, you appear to be comfortable in your own skin."

Yusef attempted to return to his usual manner of meek tone and reactions, but the woman had him spellbound. His eyes remained wide and he trembled at the core.

"Come out of the water, that may help with the shivering."

"I'm afraid it may not," though I will follow your request.

Yusef stumbled out of the water, tripping and falling to his knees. The woman rushed forward to help him.

“I am not usually this clumsy, my apologies.”

The two exchanged glances for a bit, then she motioned for him to sit down. The woman walked past him and gazed up the mountainside.

“It would appear you came from above,” she said, her eyes fixed on the hole in the rock.

Yusef nodded.

“Did you come alone?”

Yusef didn’t know how to respond. The woman had helped him to this point, but could he really trust her? Would he ruin everything by telling the truth.

“That scar on your eye,” she turned to face him, “I would bet it’s an old scar, from when you were young?”

Yusef remembered the dread of watching the blade come down. He remembered rushing to turn his face so he wouldn’t lose his eye. He felt the scar again and felt tears well up in his eyes.

Jeshin knelt down and put a hand under his chin, lifting his head.

“You trusted us then and you can trust us now.”

She stepped back and peered up at the top of the rock wall. Yusef followed her gaze upwards and immediately noticed the whites of nearly a dozen sets of eyes staring down at him. Startled at first, he immediately felt at peace. He felt rejuvenated.

“My friend, his body crashed into the river’s edge near the top of the mountain...at the base of the falls.” The woman looked to the others and they sprinted off and upwards. Yusef noticed the brief shine of blades at their waistlines as they darted off. He then saw the circular shaped imprint of a scimitar beneath the dress of Jeshin and he wondered just how she knew the way he got his scar.

“I told you,” she said, tracing his stare and removing the blade, “don’t be afraid.”

She handled the blade and turned it towards Yusef. “Take it,” she said, handing it to him. He took the blade cautiously, and handled it upside down. Jeshin bent down and picked up the bottom of her dress. Raising it to the knee, she wrapped the bottom half over the blade and pulled back, ripping straight through the garment. She tore off a large piece and moved towards Yusef’s shirt. Cautious again, he looked on in suspense.

Smiling, she lifted his shirt. He squinted as blood and skin came up with it.

Jeshin bundled up the piece of her dress and placed it on the wound. Again, he squirmed a bit from the pain.

“Hold that there, place pressure on it,” it should help you.”

Yusef smiled and nodded.

“Now, how are you at climbing rocks?”

“Better than most.”

“Good. We’ll start with this wall, and hopefully the others can help us find your friend.”

XXVI. Against the Day of Battle

As the smoke began to clear, the guard atop the tower made out the movements of ten or more large bumps galloping down the bridge. A blast of fire erupted behind them and he was able to make out ten naremf's galloping at full speed in front of the plume of fire. The ball flew just over their heads and crashed into the side of the viaduct.

The guard signaled the soldier below and raised an alarm for everyone to run and help. When the soldiers reached the end of the bridge however, they decided it would be best to stand back lest they be trampled in their wake. Each stood, with weapons raised however, anticipating what could be following them.

The ground beneath them murmured as the naremf made it safely back with all but all of the wounded tredesties. The cuts on their bodies, the arrows protruding from their legs, heels, and backs proved there had been a fight and that something had chased them.

Centrestia ran through the ground, leapt through the air, and crashed down upon the bridge following the last naremf that passed.

"What was the scene Captain?" he said, turning to a medium-sized naremf in the crowd. The soldiers helped the ape by removing three wounded tredesties from under his arm and over his shoulder. He grunted and nodded to the assisting men before approaching his superior.

“Sir, there are thousands upon thousands, I have never seen an army so large. The bulk of them are camped in the valley on the other side of that hill. They will march on us soon.”

“A smaller group had branched off to the side Sir,” another naremf said, stepping into view, “mainly naremf Sir, but mindless creatures, for they didn’t know how to respond to our attack, they just ran in fear. It was clear they had been used to push the cannons to within firing range, but besides that, I cannot be sure. The front lines were willing to shoot right through them to get to us. It is more than possible that they were once one of ours. But they all looked so broken. They were unrecognizable.”

All of the naremf looked at each other and at the ground. Most were overcome with sadness and disappointment. Centrestia remembered the fear in Sempersius’s eyes, remembered how empty he looked inside.

“Though he is a coward, and he never shows his face, I fear that Cain’s father may have something to do with all this. To make giants and warriors act like children; to instill so much fear in the brave of our kind...”

“And what of this force?” Centrestia continued, “you say thousands?”

Nearly all of the naremf were up and listening now. “Yes sir,” they said in unison.”

A tredestie limped into view, holding his shoulder, a pool of red underneath his hands. “If I may speak Sire?”

The others made room for his approach.

“The scavengers, are without number. Cain and his father have milked the earth of every fallen murderer, thief, and scoundrel to be found. Some appear well trained, but

most just run forward absent-mindedly hoping to latch on to someone or something and then pull it apart. They are many Sire, and if the whole mas of them comes running across that bridge, we wont be able to stop them.”

Centrestia peered past the men at the large chain, which ran over the cliff and down to the foot of Kedvian Bridge. *We may not have a choice*, he thought.

“Sire,” the tredestie said, “I don’t think this is just another invasion, I think that this is The Invasion. Cain has grown tired of waiting. Their cities and industry are exhausted. I believe killing all of us is just the first part of attack. I believe a return to earth is the final destination.”

“They cannot live again on the earth,” Centrestia noted, “they cannot feed off what sustains it,”

“They believe that Cain’s father is the god of that world Sire, they believe that through him, all things are possible.”

“That world is part of this world, and he has never shown his face here. He is the god of lies. If only his son could see that.”

Centrestia peered out at his thousand or so men, naremfs, and tredesties that lined the edges of the barren fields. The last of their aid was just now marching into view, a group of elite female trackers, known for their keen sense of stealth and camouflage. They looked smaller in number than he remembered, but then again, so did every group and every race that still fought for good. They had all once followed the man they now fought; they had all lost everything as a result. What this group lacked in number, they kept a small advantage in the strength that comes from being united. They fought for what had been taken from them; because all men had the right to mortality.

Centrestia looked back at the villages and cities; those with dwellings that spread across the basalt, limestone, and granite surfaces; those that were carved into the mountains; and the lights that lit the homes of those already weakened by years of war. Aside from the beautiful rock formation and the fresh rivers and lakes, this was their Hell, but this was their home, and in his mind, the last hope for earth.

...

Cain sat on a large boulder sharpening a seven-branched sword, nearly six feet in length; his hands moved slowly and intricately around corners and back down to the shaft. Mensendia sat on a large rock just beneath him, reaching up to scratch his back with her own man-made weapon, the zhua. The iron hand, with razor sharp claws, moved up and over his shoulder muscles, ripping his skin just slightly and keeping him comfortable. The five remaining mercenaries, who once waited at the cavern near Kedvian Bridge, knelt before him, quivering.

The man closest to the center, his cloak torn and his own sword bent, spoke very cautiously.

“Master, we did not expect anyone from your lands to come. So, we were most surprised to see our general running towards us, and naturally we thought, that he might stop.”

“He is not your general!” Mensendia shouted, standing up above the men. Cain glanced at her and nodded for her to sit down. Standing slowly, Cain raised his blade to his face and examined the sharpness of one the branches. Running his finger over the top

and center, he turned to look at the men beneath him. Jumping down from the boulder his feet crashed into the ground, causing dirt to fly upwards and into the faces of those before him.

Pacing around the men, with his armies watching, he was hoping for better news. Most of his cannons were now gone or broken and he had just been told that his once-most decorated general had been taken in by the enemy.

“Stand,” he said, eyeing the tip of the blade.

Reluctantly, the men stood, forming a single-file line in front of him.

“Sempersius was a great general...”

He turned slightly, lowered the sword, pulled back, and then ran blade through the first man’s chest. No sooner had the blade gone clean through the man’s stomach and out his back, then the entire line of men were both connected and impaled by his blade. Turning his wrist and pulling back sharply, the men crashed to the ground, some broken in half, all of them empty at the center. Gasps and reactions echoed across the armies who looked on.

“But Sempersius is weak,” he continued, “he is empty! I cannot tolerate where I am supposed to find strength.”

Cain nodded towards a group of nine men and women who watched on horseback below. They each turned and walked off towards a particular group of soldiers. Ten muscular men, with chains wrapped around their chests and waists emerged from the crowd and gathered up the broken men. One by one, each was taken to the edge of the cliff and thrown over the edge. Normally, Cain would have had them sent back to a city, and healed their organs with fire. There was no time for that now.

“You had best stay here,” he said, speaking in Mensendia’s direction.

“Master, I am more deadly a warrior than half the men in that army.”

Taking three large steps, Cain was right at her side. For a moment, he looked at the men being tossed over the edge. Suddenly, he reached out, grabbing Mensendia by throat, and lifting her up. As he pulled her towards him, she clung to his hands and gasped for air. Through her struggling she remained stone-faced as her face was pulled up next to his. He looked her up and down and then right in the eyes.

“But I care nothing for them,” he said, and threw her back down on the stone.

He walked off and up to the top of the hill. Peering down at the waiting army, he waited for each and every set of eyes to be directly on his. Then, swiftly, he raised his dripping blade to the sky. A deafening cry of approval rang out from the entire valley; thousands upon thousands of those screaming for blood.

Satisfied, he turned, and descended the other side.

XXVII. Of Foe or Seeming Friend

Elias had never heard a sound more horrifying. He knew it came from some distance but more than ever he feared being alone. He had stopped dead in his tracks, taking in the deafening hum that had rung out from the valley bellow. Above him, an orchard of roots hung down in rows. He had been walking alone for some time, taking in what he could see from the red sky and the tiny flames that dotted the landscape below.

The pain in the back of his head still pulsed and his step was a bit wobbly at times, but he was regaining full strength and perhaps most importantly, his sense of awareness. Through the hum he could sense something was near.

A set of hand-shaped roots hung in the air just before him. Stepping forward, he spread the branches like curtains and peered into the darkness. Nothing came. His gut told him that he was hearing more than just the rattling hum below. Stopping again, he remembered what Yusef had taught him. Getting on all fours, he put his left ear to the ground.

Isolating his breaths from his heartbeats he then sought to pick out something small and faint that he thought was separate from the much larger sound. Then he heard them, four distinct bumps, one after the other. The sounds got louder and louder and then stopped. Elias looked out again and again saw nothing. He put his ear to the ground and heard it again. This time instead of four, there were only two and very close. He looked up just in time to see a black figure about five feet in front of him leap through the air and crash right on top of him. Falling hard on his back, Elias rolled back and pushed out with his knees. The dark-skinned being flew through the air over and behind him. Noticing the

ease in which he pushed the person off, he knew they were small or lightweight and that maybe he had a chance. Without a weapon, he rolled over and scanned the scene in front of him. Seeing the figure struggle back to its feet, he got a running start, lunged forward, and hard tackled them to the ground.

The two rolled around throwing blind blows until Elias's fist struck face and the result was not what he expected: a woman's cry. Elias jumped back and about two seconds later a second figure rammed him hard from behind. This person was a bit larger, his bulk being large enough to knock Elias flat forward. His face hit the ground hard. But the sting came from a sharp blade, which was digging into the back of his skull. The second person had one foot on his back and was pointing a large spear-like rod at his head.

"I told you I had this!" the woman shouted, clearly upset with the man.

"You cried out," he replied, "it is my job to protect you."

"Clearly I did not need protection!"

"Speak for yourself."

The spear's blade was pressed deeper into the back of his head. Elias groaned in pain. "Would you mind perhaps pointing that somewhere else, like my back or my neck? That spot on my head really hurts."

The woman stepped forward, grabbed Elias's head by the hair, and lifted a sharp blade to his neck. "OK, the neck then." No sooner had she pulled Elias head back, that three blades were pointing into the skin of her own neck and that of her friend. Elias strained to open his eyes.

Flint was tapped against steel and torches lit up all around them. Nine women in grey, black, and white camouflaged dresses formed a semi-circle around the scene. Each holding their own blade, they did not speak, but rather pointed for the two dark-skinned figures to lower their weapons and step back. The woman acted hesitant, but when two additional blades were pointed at her friend, she complied.

Elias's head dropped back to the ground when it was released.

"My damn head, can't catch a break."

Standing and dusting himself off, Elias looked at everyone around him. It was clear that the camouflaged women were not intent on hurting him, but he wasn't convinced the others were either.

"Everyone please lower their weapons."

Slowly the blades came down.

The man who had pinned Elias with his spear looked angry. Despite being surrounded, he raised his spear again and lunged forward. He was cut down by two sharp swipes at the back, with a third grazing and catching his neck. He continued to fight forward.

"Stop Lutalo!" the woman shouted.

A tear rolled down her face as she pleaded with him. "Just stop."

The man went limp at the knees and sunk to the ground. The brown-haired women around him, who kept their lower faces masked, seemed intent on both keeping peace and eliminating anyone if necessary.

Against his better judgment, Elias stepped forward to help the man. At first, the man resisted and pulled away violently. But eventually he accepted Elias's hand. The small woman also stepped forward and they helped him up together.

When he could see that the man could stand on his own two feet, Elias released him and moved to the front of the circle.

"My name is Elias. Can each of you identify yourselves?" The women in the back stayed silent. The woman in the middle, who was holding up her friend, cleared her throat.

"I am the Princess Junia," she said proudly, "This is my bodyguard Lutalo."

"Why did you try to kill me?" Elias asked.

The princess and her bodyguard had been waiting for Elias for some time. They had followed a pathway given to them by an ageless friend. They had traced the roots of a baobab tree and entered through a gateway, moving along the tops of the mountains. They had sought the cascades in hopes of finding him prior to reaching the narems. They had hid behind a curtain of dangling roots, camouflaging them in ash.

Junia had been sent to help him, and even though she demanded that she come alone, Lutalo had been at her side since she was a child. She couldn't convince him to stay behind.

"You were sent to help me?" What lineage do you come from?

"The lineage of the warrior."

A few of the women in the group snickered.

Junia stared them down.

“They doesn’t understand,” a woman said, “stepping into the scene from the shadows. Her dress was like that of the others in the circle, but her hood had been pulled back to reveal all of her face, and her dress had been torn at the bottom.

“My name is Jeshin and we are all part of an elite group of warriors ourselves.”

The women looked on proudly as their leader identified them.

“My apologies Princess, but they did not understand how someone with skin so much darker than their own and skills far less superior could be of the same lineage.”

“The same lineage?”

“Yes. Some of the greatest warriors in the history of this world were women. Our first mother Eve was much more than just a helpmeet; but apparently somewhere our lineage branched off because we appear very different from you.”

“And yet I cut the throats of creatures twice your size and much faster, just moments ago, before finding Elias. He’s very lucky my instinct convinced me to stop.”

“I’m sorry, did you just say that you eliminated creatures who had seen you?”

“Yes, why?”

“How far away was this?”

“Just a ways behind us.”

Jeshin nodded for the others to go immediately. Within seconds they had all extinguished their flames and disappeared into the darkness.

Both Elias and the African warriors were startled.

“What’s going on?” Elias said.

“I’m not sure if any of you understand yet,” Jeshin said, “but the people and creatures who live here cannot die. You can wound their bodies beyond repair, but

inevitably they live on. Or, like the scavengers of Cain's army, their spirits evacuate the bodies they have stolen and go off in search of others."

"That horrible sound you just heard, that is the sound of war. That is the sound of thousands of scavengers and warriors coming our way. If they learn you are here, they will forego any plans of war to track you down. An army can stop Cain so many times, but the lineage of humans, they can destroy him."

"Well, I was sent here to figure out what's going on here...so...I guess I'll be going now. Job done."

Nodding, bowing, and backing up from the group, Elias backed right into Yusef. Startled and overcome, all he could do was hug him.

"Careful, my friend," Yusef said, unable to hold his stomach as Elias squeezed his weak frame, I did not come out of that tunnel unscathed."

"Oh! Sorry!" Elias said, backing off, "Are you alright? What happened?"

"Just a gash from rocks on the riverbed. This woman here has helped me."

Jeshin smiled briefly before returning her attention to the situation. Her face shifted immediately to one of great concern.

"There is a great battle going on below. I should be on the frontlines but a couple of the women detected Yusef and Elias's arrival when the waterfall was formed. We have a very delicate situation here. The fact that you all have come is no coincidence, but it is remarkable. Hopefully there are more of you. Regardless, the situation is very, very delicate."

"Why is it such a big deal that we are here?" Junia asked.

“You can potentially save us and your world just by being here; but if everyone below finds out that you are here, there could be two possible outcomes. You could somehow help us defeat Cain or you could be captured and killed.”

“Hopefully,” she continued, “my ladies have found living bodies that have not moved from where you left them.”

“So sorry,” Junia said, “we didn’t know.”

Jeshin smiled slightly, nodding.

They all waited anxiously for the group’s return. Within thirty minutes, one of the women raced into view. Catching her breath, she looked at her leader, shaking her head.

Jeshin sighed and looked at the others.

“Now we must run.”

“Run? Why?” Elias asked.

“We must get to Centrestia before those creatures alert Cain or sound any kind of alarm. If an alarm is sounded, a most massive and swift manhunt will take place.”

“A manhunt?”

“Yes, for all of you.”

XXVIII. A Bridge of Wondrous Length

Half of the elite guards were immediately sent to the base of the viaduct. Centrestia had swung to the top of the guard tower and was peering through the monocular. His greatest nemesis made up the point of a V-shaped mass that was converging on Kedvian Bridge. In an interesting move however, Cain stepped to the side and ushered the masses on to the bridge. This move was quite unexpected and would require an immediate change of strategy. He had hoped to wait for Cain to reach the middle of the bridge when the chains were pulled. As the bridge collapsed, they would see their leader fall and hopefully retreat in fear. Instead a mass of scavengers ran on before him. Centrestia's strategy would need to change and fast.

The guard who also looked on pressed the issue.

"Sir, should we signal the guards at the chain?"

No response.

The on rush met the half-mile mark and the time was now or never.

"Sir!"

No response.

Centrestia knew his army would have to fight, but he had hoped it would just be in defense. Moving against all the odds, he gave the order to the guard. Not to pull the chain, but rather to prepare for attack.

Mostly startled by the sound, which blew from the tower horn, the armies that had barricaded this end of the viaduct and that had blanketed the barren fields, moved into attack stance and waited for the second alert.

The bulk of the army moved towards the bridge and towards the enemy that rushed towards them. Only wide enough for ten men, the viaduct would prove a difficult battlefield.

Keeping his eye on Cain, who had not entered the bridge, Centrestia had run out of time. As his heart sank deep in his chest, Centrestia signaled the attack.

Leading the attack were naremfes, followed by elite female fighters. Both groups could move at top speeds, with the naremfes being able to barrel through large numbers of scavengers at a time. If the approach went as hoped, they could eliminate the bulk of the enemy's front lines by simply pushing through and sending many over the edge. The women behind them would then cut down anyone remaining. The remainder of the army would then follow, hoping to push the entire group back and attack the remainder of Cain's army on the other side.

The impromptu plan worked. As both armies ran towards each other at top speeds, the front-line naremfes picked up extra hops in their steps and pounced upon the horde of scavengers, stomping and punching as they ran. Like one massive bullet, the front of Centrestia's army flew through the face of the enemy, forming a giant hole and almost eliminating any sign that they had been on the bridge. Any survivors that surfaced, after hitting the water below, were pounced on by the elite guard that had waited at the base near the chain.

One such naremf, who grew anxious and ready to fight, began swinging in and around the openings of the viaduct. Moving in and out of the gaps, he prepared to climb after reaching the enemy's side. But then he saw it. He knew what the hooded mercenaries had been hiding. Another chain, different in color, which blended into the color of the gorge, had been wrapped around the opposite side of the bridge. The stones beneath it had been loosed and when pulled would fall much faster than on the other side. With all the air he could muster, he roared to his friends below. Knowing they wouldn't understand, he quickly descended towards them.

Above, the bulk of Centrestia's army had reversed the scene by marching and pushing back over a third of the bridge. The naremf below leaped in and out of gaps trying to reach his friends. Leaping for a final jump, a falling body struck him in mid air and he plummeted to the water below. Three guards who witnessed the scene, rushed to the water's edge to fetch him. Choking from water inhalation, he was pulled out and up. With the only words he could muster, he alerted them:

"Another...chain!"

Astonished by what he said, two of the naremf's jumped up and began a quick ascent up the cliff.

In the meantime, on the enemy's side of the bridge, a second army began to emerge on the hill. This wasn't a normal group of warriors however. Naremf's in varying sizes, and thick, muscular men, pulled massive-wheeled carts. The men and creatures grunted as they reached the peak of elevation and began their descent. Chunks of rock fell from the sides as they trudged down the hill towards their master.

Centrestia watched from the tower as the carts made their way towards the bridge. He again picked out Cain though, who had conspicuously moved towards the side of the bridge's opening. Reaching down, he appeared to pick up something large and pull it over his shoulder.

Centrestia's attention shifted to a group of soldier's nearby. He dropped his monocular and strained to see what was happening. A small group of soldiers had gathered near the cliff edge struggling to handle some sort of situation. Motioning, they waived him down. Leaping from the tower, he rushed to their side. Looking over the edge, two of his guards struggled to climb towards him.

He reached down in time to grab and pull one. Anxious the guard yelled out:

"Another chain! Sir! They have another chain."

"What?" Centrestia shouted, "That's impossible!"

"It's true Sir!" he responded, "we found it near the other side."

Angered, surprised, scared, he hoped he would have enough time to pull back. Faster than he had moved in some time he raced to the base of the tower.

Leaping up the side, he screamed to the guard above. "Sound the retreat!"

The guard made the sound, which echoed across the valley. Bloodied and battered, Centrestia's armies stopped dead in their tracks. Looking at the short distance forward, a retreat seemed inconceivable. That is until Cain emerged before them; one man between them and the carts coming down the mountain. Stepping forward, he revealed the chain dangling from his massive shoulders.

Those who hadn't already begun their retreat did so now. Like a small city, frantically trying to evacuate to escape a catastrophic event, the warriors ran for their

lives. With a tug of the chain, the stones below cracked and like a whiplash, the viaduct quivered. All who were on the bridge lost their footing. Many tripped and stumbled over the edge.

Lifting the chain high above his head, Cain moved to take the final blow.

The chain system had been Centrestia's design and was about to eliminate his entire army. He realized in that moment what Cain's plan had been. Use the scavengers to bring out his army. Pull the chain to destroy the army. Bury them with blocks and use the blocks as a makeshift bridge to cross. He knew Cain had come too far to change his mind.

As his army scrambled back to their feet and again, tried their escape, it was only a matter of time. As Cain smiled down and Centrestia looked on in fear, both almost missed the sound that came next.

Ancient horns, which hadn't sounded in nearly two decades, rocked the air from all sides. The guard towers, which stood near the gateways to earth, were sounding their alarms; one followed by two, then three. Three towers behind Centrestia were sounding. Even two, which had been virtually deserted, sounded over Cain's shoulders.

Immediately he dropped his chain and ran. His entire army retreated, heading for the hills. Like Centrestia, they would seek out the source of the alarms.

Centrestia crashed down below as the retreat continued to sound beneath the ringing of the alarms. He would order his army to the hills and send any remaining tredesties again into enemy lands. If they could find the mortals before Cain did, that could prove their greatest victory of all.

XXIX. Anointed Son Avenged

The view from Mount Maydrer was both spectacular and frightening. Two walls of fire, which had recently collided in the center of the two valleys below, had seemingly reversed themselves and were spreading up the mountains towards them. Elias, Yusef, and Lutalo all lay upon stone tables and were being administered to by priests and priestesses.

Jeshin and Junia stood at the window, one hundred feet above the ground.

“What is that substance that you are rubbing into my head?” Elias asked, “It smells sweet.” The priest who was helping him simply smiled, bowed, and continued to administer to him.

“It is pwakstifund,” Jeshin said, “it sustains life here.” She continued to look at the scene below. “The trees that each of you followed to get here have power. They were designed in the creation to connect our worlds. Those that lasted the lengths of time could not simply grow straight up forever. They could however, grow downward towards us. We have special tools, we use to milk the roots and provide us the food that we need to live. It also has healing properties that I’m sure you are feeling.”

“It is not normal for roots to extend this far down,” Lutalo said.

“That would seem correct, in your day, when most of the trees are just hundreds of years old. But the trees that mark the gateways, like you and some of the animals, they have been guardians for thousands and thousands of years. This is just one reason why we are constantly at war. Cain uses machines called colifoids that suck the trees dry. He never seems to have enough of what he wants. So he tries invading, he tries to steal our

lands, because he knows the roots here are as full of life as they were in the beginning. In autumn however, the roots seem particularly alive, as if they have been reborn. We always farm the most in autumn.”

“How do you determine the change of seasons here? Yusef asked, stepping down from his table.

“The temperature changes here as well,” Jeshin said smiling, “things change.”

Elias noticed the two exchanging glances and smiled himself. He was happy his friend could have someone besides dogs or brothers to keep him company.

“What happens now?” Junia asked, “my blades are getting dull.”

Lutalo, who was looking worse for wear, laughed a bit until his laughs turned to coughs and the priestess who attended to him, motioned for him to lie down.

“You don’t know when to stop young woman, there is not always someone who needs killing.”

Jeshin motioned for one of her warriors to step forward.

Junia immediately tensed up, for it was the same woman who had laughed at her earlier.

“This is Maydee,” Jeshin said smiling, “she will train you to be a better warrior; and I anticipate you will have anger on your side. This may help you if you learn to control it.”

“I am already a great warrior, I do not need your help.”

“I have no doubt you may be a great warrior on earth, and a warrior you are destined to be. However, the enemy here has had thousands of years to practice and you nearly lost in a fist fight to that man.”

“Sorry about that,” Elias said, “again, I truly am. I just have animal instincts on occasion.”

Yusef smiled, shaking his head.

“Fine, I’ll go, but what about our mission?” Junia asked.

“The alarms will have saved us some time; and once the other mortals have been rounded up, Centrestia will likely want Elias and the others to develop a strategy.”

“Me?” Elias asked, startled by her comment.

“You’re the Lineage of Dreams, right? She asked, “your mind is capable of creating and teaching even us something new.”

“OK,” Elias said cynically, folding his arms and shrugging his shoulders, “why not?”

“There were five alarms, the creatures who attacked the Princess likely sounded one. We had Elias and Yusef in our company and did not sound an alarm for them. That means at least two more mortals are close by and two hopefully will be found by tredesties if they haven’t already been captured by Cain’s forces.”

“All will be needed to defeat Cain,” Elias said.

“That is correct,” Jeshin said, “god willing, our ancestor Abel will be avenged, we will be avenged, and one of the earth’s most dangerous adversaries of all time will be gone forever.”

Junia moved to leave with Maydee. “You coming?” she asked to Lutalo.

“I should rest,” he said, and for the first time, he simply let her go, “you’ll be fine.”

A horn signaled the approach of General Centrestia. Hopefully, he would bring good news.

XXX. And What Thou Fearest, Alike Destroys All Hope

Jesse couldn't decide which part of the last week was actually believable. He wanted to simply wake up. After following the advice of complete stranger in a hooded cloak, he had jumped into an abandoned well and hiked countless miles downward.

Nevertheless, the man had saved his life, there was a path beyond the well to follow, and he felt a strange but warming sense of purpose.

Another thing he couldn't decide, was how to respond to the blade-wielding man who had seemingly dropped from the sky and landed in front of him. He had been out of the tunnel merely moments before a loud horn sounded off and he was ducking behind some black stones.

There had been no use in running. The man or thing had literally approached from and had dropped from the sky; the black and empty sky. The man had extended his hand and was barking something about Jesse coming with him right away. Though the man looked panicked and full of anxiety, Jesse's mind wandered in the moment. The man's words were jumbled and arrived as if under water. Jesse just stared at the feathers that stretched and jutted from the man's shoulders.

What is happening? He thought.

Then, singular words broke through the slow-motioned blood-shot eyes, and yelling.

“You will die if you are captured. You will die the most horrible death.”

That phrase snapped him back. In the distance behind the man, archaic towers jutted upwards in all directions. Lights, small but rage-red, charged up the hill towards him. Again, the man and his hand beckoned towards him.

“Come!”

Jesse arose from his crouched position. The tredestie’s eyes widened.

“You are much larger than you looked crouching down.”

Both men examined each other. Both seemed nervous at how this work.

“There is a gorge, just beyond that pass in the distance, do you see it?”

“Yes,” Jesse responded.

“We must get you to the other side.”

“Perhaps this would be easier if I had the wings,” Jesse joked.

“There is no time for this! Normally I carry things from beneath my chest, you must climb on my back.”

Jesse stared in doubt. He couldn’t understand how this was going to work. The man or creature was taller than him and perhaps more muscular, but he appeared wounded. An arrow whizzed past his ear, grazing him. The decision had been made for him. He leapt on the man’s back and grappled the straps near the man’s weaponry.

With a deep breath, the man began a full-lunging sprint towards the flames.

“What are you...”

The tredestie reached a ledge and leapt into the air. His wings extended fully, nearly knocking Jesse in the face. Arrows ripped through the air towards them, one clipping the right wing; one slashing through Jesse’s right leg. They bobbed through the air, and swooped out of sight.

He had seen them as a child, naremf, but Elias had trained himself to believe that they were simply creatures of fantasy. His therapist had convinced him that they were figments of his imagination that he had created to make him feel safe.

He felt anything but safe as an enormous ape surrounded by six others of varying sizes approached him. He wished that Galileo might leap from the shadows and stand guard. Yusef stood nearby, also appearing awed at the sheer size of the creatures.

Centrestia walked forward as the guards stood in place. Slowly, he walked fist over fist until he loomed directly over the two men. Pacing around them he sized up their bodies and breathed hard from his nostrils.

“You’ve both grown, but not by much.”

Elias remained frozen, his eyes the only movement in his frame. He followed Centrestias’s movements in front of him and over to and behind Yusef. He took a breath and soaked it all in. He cursed himself for shutting it all out. Finally, he sighed, and smiled.

“I think hugs should be in order,” Elias said, stepping forward awkwardly with his arms raised, “but I’m not quite sure how that would work.”

Centrestia looked un-amused as Jeshin and the others grinned at Elias’s approach.

“I should probably thank you for returning, the arrival of you and the other mortals was incredible timing. But I simply cannot make light of this situation. We should handle this situation delicately. We will need perfection in strategy.”

“Strategy for what?” Elias asked.

“Cain means to take back what was taken from him on earth; a home away from Hell. He feels that the stars have aligned for him. Though he cannot see them, he has a device that he feels connects him to the cosmos.”

“We need seven of you to prevent this,” Centrestia continued, “seven of you to avenge our brother Abel.”

“You mean for us to kill Cain?” Yusef asked.

Centrestia nodded. “You must kill him before he kills all of you.”

“Nearly twenty years ago, you tried, but you were too young. Some of the others were older, but none of you were ready. I knew then, that you were special Elias. I prayed that if we helped you escape, that somehow you’d return.”

“What?” Elias shot up, “I didn’t know that others were killed!”

“Remember my friend,” Yusef interrupted, “you and I came to a crossroads. We were being chased and there was the moment we had to go our separate ways.”

Yusef’s eyes welled up as he spoke.

“I asked how I may someday find you,” Yusef continued, “so you briefly told me about Tennessee, about your home, and about that church. You told me of its location in the forest, that I might find it because of its stained glass windows.”

“And then I destroyed it.”

Elias was remembering now, and cursing himself once again.

“I came home only to realize that I was returning to an empty house,” Elias said, “after I woke up in a mess of my sweat and blood, I sought out and destroyed what I felt was the source of all of my pain.”

Yusef put a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank God for your gifts, Yusef, thank God for your lineage. There is no way you could have found me.”

“We could have met up here, like we are now,” Yusef replied, squeezing his shoulder, “but I knew there was a good chance you had forced yourself to forget as I had tried to for so many years. I knew you might need help remembering.”

The two exchanged smiles and then hugs.

Centrestia walked with the men to a balcony that stood out over the city.

Junia emerged, sweating heavily and breathing hard. The three looked at the scene below and beyond.

“There is something in all of us, Centrestia said, all of us who have ever loved or wished to protect something. I would call it a fear. A fear that creates powers and strengths we never knew we had. A fear that tells us if we don’t act, this will be the end of all things as we know them. I call this *Fearest Enden*.”

The words hit Elias at the core. The others looked equally touched.

“I think Eve must have felt that,” Elias said, “when she realized what Satan had convinced her to do. I think that enabled her to become the best she could be.”

“I think you’re right,” Centrestia said, “her actions in a sense gave humans the power over immortality. We must use that power somehow to defeat Cain for good.”

“I’ll admit,” Centrestia said, “I’ve stood in this very spot countless times, trying to figure out in my head how you could do that. It became clear over time however, that I would not be able to devise a plan for you, you would have to do it yourselves. You will have whatever help you need from us, but the method will be up to all of you together.”

As he spoke, a scenario evolved just below them. The crowd of guards made way for an approaching group. Three humans, followed by the three immortals who had found them, had emerged. One, a bulky flannel-shirted man with a slight limp; another, a blond-haired woman decked out in high-tech, but rather unnecessary hiking gear, and a long-haired, dark-skinned man with dripping-wet, brown pants and bare feet. All appeared equally bewildered, yet intent on getting to where they needed to be.

“Where is the other one?” Centrestia shouted at the crowd below.

Everyone in the group looked to the person next to him and to those behind them. For a moment, the naremfes and other warriors looked as bewildered as those they had just rescued. The tredestie who had picked up Jesse, pushed his way through the crowd and to the spot just below the balcony.

“Before I picked up this man, I noticed a ceremonial line of sorts leading up one of the towers Sire. I most regretfully say that I believe they captured someone. I’m sorry I could not prevent it.”

Centrestia did not respond, but rather he closed his eyes and sunk his head. The other immortals present followed. The humans however, while looking sad at the news, appeared confused at everyone’s response. Elias especially, was especially troubled, but wouldn’t let that keep him silent.

“A rescue mission.”

Centrestia lifted his head, but his eyes remained closed.

“If it were possible, it is likely this person is already dead.” He turned and began walking away, but Elias cut him off.

“Let’s be real here. We’re all here, and it looks like we’re all adults, capable of doing some damage unlike before.”

Centrestia looked down at him.

“Elias. What you may not remember, but others here will is that as a small boy you approached an entire line of enemies on your own. You stood in front of Cain himself and a score of the enemy and demanded to know the whereabouts of your father. I think Cain meant to kill you in that moment as he emerged from the crowd, but something in your eyes scared him. I think that in that moment, we all saw weakness in him for the very first time. But again, something made him turn his back and run, the same way he did just moments ago at the sound of the alarms. Perhaps it was that same fear. But there must be seven of you to kill him, and there simply isn’t enough time.”

“The stars have aligned old friend,” Elias responded, “the Ten Immortals know that, we know it, and you know it. This is no chance circumstance. I’m asking you to put faith in us and put a little faith in whoever it is they have over there. All we can do is try. *Fearest Enden*, like you said. Everyone here is scared, but we have to try something, we have to.”

Centrestia looked down at his soldiers who stared back up at him. “OK,” he said, turning to the three next to him “you’re in charge.”

XXXI. In Captivity

Mensendia ran the jagged fingernails of her iron weapon just an inch from the man's quivering face. His black, rectangular-frame glasses had slid to the edge of his nose, nearly dropping off his face. Since his hands were tied to the platform that he had been placed on, she extended him the courtesy of using the zhua's fingers to raise the spectacled back over his eyes.

"You will want to see all of this," she said, "your own death can be one of the most powerful memories."

The man shook his head and cried.

"Please don't kill me," he stuttered, "I didn't even want to be here, mu Uncle made me come, I can just leave and we can forget I even came."

Mensendia frowned just momentarily. "What a boring story, I think I'll play with you for a just bit longer anyway."

She moved the blades of the hands over his body, stopping at points to jab him or rip his clothing. He writhed in pain and twisted in his bondage.

Cain stood back and watched. The man had been brought to the courtyard to be burned. But as the minions who had so proudly delivered him to Cain looked on, Cain could not complete the task, but rather he sent them all away. He said that he should consult with his father. No one dared argue with those words, and all dispersed. Now, the man, lay upon a sacrificial alter with nothing but fear to keep his heart beating.

Cain peered down at the cosmic mechanism and tried to figure the meaning to all of it. Why had the signs pointed him to war, but then the humans had come? Was the man

who lay upon his alter even significant, or should he have just eliminated him the moment he was brought forth?

Mensendia continued her trickery, showing no remorse, but rather enjoyment. That was until suddenly, the man stopped squirming. His body jolted a few more times, but eventually the man straightened his limbs, closed his eyes, and became perfectly still. Mensendia became angry. She poked him with the knuckle of the zhua, she prodded at his thighs and then belly but got no response. She leaned in to listen to his heart and was disappointed to hear it beat slowly instead of the racing nature she was expecting. She became belligerent, smacking the weapon on the ground and pulling at her own hair.

“What’s wrong human? You no longer feel fear?”

The slight smile formed on the man’s face.

Mensendia raised her zhua in the air as if to throw a death-strike. Her wrist was stopped mid air as Cain grabbed the hand of the zhua, ripped the weapon from Mensendia’s hand, and tossed it to the side. She looked at Cain with anger in her eyes and stormed off.

Cain then approached the man to have a look for himself. He was curious about the man’s appearance, knowing full well how Mensendia had treated him.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked in a demanding voice.

The man opened his eyes. Sweat still dripped from the ends of his black hair.

“In all of my suffering, I reached inside and remembered who I am.”

“And who is that?” Cain asked, unimpressed.

“I am a Taoist, I have found my inner peace, and I know that you will not kill me.”

Cain smiled. “And why won’t I kill you?”

Because in addition to being a Taoist, I am also an alchemist; or really, *The Alchemist*. I am one of the last surviving of an ancient Chinese family with very ancient secrets. Secrets not even your father could discover. You will need my help if you wish to survive your invasion of earth.

Cain’s demeanor changed. He knew exactly which family he spoke of. He knew they held the secret to the golden elixir: the long sought after substance that could grant immortality to humans. When his forces had invaded earth in the past, they aged rapidly and became weaker. He had immortality here and his followers had it, but the elixir would be crucial in sustaining a long and drawn out invasion of earth.

Cain grabbed the man’s throat and squeezed it like rubber. The skin around the man’s neck became red as his veins bulged out.

“You will tell me where to find the elixir on earth. Or you will die right now.”

The man lifted his head as if to speak. Cain loosened his grip and placed his ear near the man’s face. The man could only make out a whisper in Cain’s grip.

“Again, like I said, I am at peace,” he said with a weakened smile.

Cain frowned, turned to look at the man, and then threw his neck down in anger. The whiplash tossed his head bouncing off the base of the platform. As the man’s eyes lolled towards unconsciousness, his lips again formed a smile.”

Fuming, Cain left the man atop the altar and disappeared again into the mouth of the mountain.

XXXII. A Solemn Council

A great council had formed in a circular room carved from obsidian. A circular table sat at the center. Each of the humans had been given a seat and though no head of the table was obvious, all attention was on Elias.

“I am no strategist,” he said, as everyone looked on, “but things sometimes just pop up in my head and that’s all I can hope for today. I do think before we can make any strategy however, we need everyone’s lineages and talents on the table. We should also consider what lineage the hostage may be, for we may need to utilize their talents at some point.”

“If they are still alive,” Centrestia said.

“We are done focusing on the *if’s* General. It must be the *how’s*, it must!” Elias demanded. “Is everyone at this table in agreement?” All nodded, including the hesitant general. Jeshin, in addition to members of the elite guard, and a couple tredesties stood along the walls of the room. They also agreed with Elias.

“We must be united in this,” he continued, “but everyone has a say. You must tell us if our strategy won’t work and why.” He looked to the others in the room. “I’m counting on everyone.”

“Now, what about the new folks, who are you and why are you here?”

The longhaired man looked the most uncomfortable. Though his upper body was toned with muscle, his otherwise scrawny frame looked uncomfortable between the two naremf guards who stood behind him.

“What about you?” Elias said, directing his gaze at the man.

The man sat up, pushing his hair behind his ears.

“My name is Rafael. I come from South-Eastern Venezuela and I am a member of the Yanomami tribe. We have for a long time been guardians of parts of the Amazon rainforest, but especially in Venezuela. There are not many of us left because our home is rich with gold. Though we do not have much use for it, mining companies have murdered much of our people to find it and steal our lands. We are a protective and sometimes violent people. My father raised me near the rivers and falls of the area. I can survive under water for and dive to great depths. I hunt, live, and survive on the water. “

The woman next to him had just removed an orange beanie from her head and was straightening her blonde hair with her fingers.

“Hallo,” she said with a thick accent, “my name is Daphne and I am an architect from Holland. Like Rafael, I spend a lot of time on the water, but for a different reason. I design amphibious homes and other structures that people can live or work on.”

Everyone in the room seemed a bit more intrigued than they had originally been about the only overdressed person in the room.

“While I cannot claim a tribe, I know that my family comes from a group that was living near the Rhine long before the Romans. While Rafael may have a bit of Warrior in him, I think we can say that he is of the Lineage of Seas or perhaps a combination. Likewise, the Dutch have always been a people of the Seas, however we have also designed great and useful structures; that’s where the Architect comes in.”

Jesse sat quietly, rolling his thumbs over one another. “I guess I’ll be last, though I don’t believe I have much to offer.”

“These naremfes are quite large,” Elias noted, “but your not much smaller. I would say that your strength must be one advantage.” Elias had failed to pick up on the accent.

Jesse smiled. “I suppose so. You see, I just learned who my parents were this week; my real parents anyways. I was raised in the Scottish highlands.”

“You’re Jesse!” Elias shouted, remembering Reynia’s story and how he was related to Jade, “we’re kinda related.”

Jesse looked confused.

“Oh, sorry, keep going, I’ll fill you in in a bit.”

“OK, well as I was starting to say, I was adopted as a baby; I was taken in by a Scottish family who is of the Lineage of Trees. I saw many attacks by naremfes and evil creatures while growing up near the Caledonian Forest. However, I never understood my full purpose with the trees. I was and am very protective of my family. So, when I learned about my real parents, how they died, and The Lineage of the Shepherd, it was painful, but life made a little more sense. Again, though, I don’t know what I can give any of you, other than protection and perhaps strength.”

Centrestia’s eyes had been welling up with Jesse’s story. “I know both of your families, but I especially knew your real father and mother. They were two of the kindest humans I have ever known.”

“Thank you Sir,” Jesse responded, “I hope to learn as much as I can of them. I think they probably wished that I would never get mixed up in any of this. I know they gave me away to protect me. I will not let their deaths be in vain.”

Around the center of the table, a map of Hell had been intricately carved. Centrestia used an iron rod to point at and identify where they were and where Cain was.

The map was very detailed and included all cities on both sides as well as gateways, mountains, towers, rivers, gorges, Kedvian Bridge, and also some outlying areas that to Elias at least, appeared a little vague.

“What’s this?” he asked, pointing to an unidentified circle on the far left of the map. A similar circle, also unidentified, appeared on the opposite side of the map.

“I’m not sure if it’s been explained to you how the tredesties came to exist. Without going into too much detail, we have recently deemed stealing from the dead or from the earth a gross sacrilege.”

The tredesties in the room both dipped their heads shamefully.

“Though I must say,” Centrestia continued, “that I wish we had more of these winged creatures. They have been at times our only advantage.”

“Please continue,” Elias interrupted, “what do the circles represent?”

“At one point in time, before we learned to use pwakstifund for our only means of survival and sustenance, we would loot the earth for all that we could find: weapons, sunken ships, and any type of forgotten earthly material or treasure that you could imagine. We have forsaken these things.”

Elias’s eyes lit up and he could tell that Centrestia knew why.

“Nevertheless,” Centrestia said begrudgingly “these circles or pits are at your disposal.”

“Pits?” Yusef asked.

“Yes,” Jeshin responded, “once forsaken, we attempted to bury them. But, in Hell, there is only so much you can bury and so deep you can dig. Most items lie half buried in

circular pits. If you need weapons, we have them, but if you need to build something, if you need wood, this is unfortunately your best option.”

Elias peered over the rest of the map.

“What about the rivers?” he asked.

“What about them?” Centrestia responded.

“You said we could travel on the backs of creatures, on foot, or by other means, but you didn’t mention the rivers.”

“Because in some places, a bottom has never been found, most consider the waters here to be cursed. We still drink the water. It is fresh and free from impurity, but it is filled with uncertainty. Again, you are free to do as you wish, but again I give this permission with caution,” Centrestia said.

“How do you drink the water?”

“Really?”

“Yes. I mean, if it is at the bottom of these gorges, do you have to lower buckets with ropes to get your water?”

“There are lakes and wells that the water feeds to, systems that run through the veins of the rock and come out at certain points across the land.”

“Over this entire map, how many wells would you say there are?”

“Maybe a hundred.”

“Good.”

Everyone looked at Elias, studying him. It was unclear what he was thinking.

“The towers,” he continued, “I know you say that the beings here are immortal, but could anyone really survive a fall from one of these towers?”

“It would take a very long time to regenerate,” Jeshin said, “but you can’t hope to reach the top of one anyways, they are the most heavily guarded.”

“There is one tower though,” Centrestia said, “where Cain conducts his business. It is likely where the human is being held.”

“I can get you there,” an unfamiliar voice said.

The group turned to see Sempersius walk into the room. Two priests at either side, he still appeared very weak. Centrestia arose from his seat and walked in his direction.

“This is impossible, you were reborn, how can you even understand what is happening around you?”

“He woke up during one of our treatments in a fit of rage,” one of the priests said, “it would appear that his brain and heart were too strong for the ceremony’s effects. His state of childish bewilderment may have only been temporary.”

Centrestia placed his forehead against Sempersius’s in an act of unity and understanding. “You may be able to help us old friend, but rest for now.”

All returned their focus to the center of the table. Elias’s focus had never left, his eyes were fixed upon Cain’s tower, and he had an idea.

XXXIII. With Him, or Who Deceive

Three days later, though no sun had risen or set, change was in the air and Cain could taste it. He had left his prisoner in the strategy chamber with Mensendia. He had given her strict instructions not to hurt him but rather to try to gain his trust. So far, she had learned nothing. But rather, she had merely heard stories of monkey kings, peaches, and again the golden elixir. She had passed it all off as myth, telling Cain over and over he should let her kill him. Over and over he refused, telling her he was vital to their next and perhaps last invasion strategy.

Cain asked for a full report from his generals. The guards had seen no signs of movement from the enemy and even spies had reported that no one had left or entered the great city of Vagan.

Most of Cain's army had been wiped out on the bridge. His strongest fighters, his guards, and his generals still remained. Those who had been loyal to him from the beginning, stood guard on the outskirts of the valleys and on the bridges leading to the towers. Scavengers recuperated by pushing the colifoids and pushing the pwakstifund into the cities. Though they had the strength to work, they were weak in muscle and in mind. Cain would need to wait for sometime before trying something so bold a second time.

He contemplated raiding the earth; sending another mission to eliminate more gatekeepers. After all, he figured Centrestia would be distracted with the humans. But why were the humans here? What were they planning? He wondered if perhaps his father might finally step in. He had acted in his name on so many occasions; he had carried out

the shedding of blood in his name; he had enacted the power of rebirth and other ceremonies; he had even heard his father's voice. Moreover, even though he hadn't seen him since the night before he convinced him to kill his brother, he knew that he was real. He knew he was alive and well. He just thought that maybe he could help him again like he helped him to escape the flood so long ago. He was ready for change. He had been ready for some time.

As he peered out over his kingdom from the highest tower ledge, he wondered, *where do I go from here?*

A hooded messenger, one of his spies rode briskly into view. A small orange speck moving swiftly over the distant landscape, his torch whipped through air as he rode. Cain watched as others rode out to meet him. Their torches joining the first rider to form a large moving flame. Upon reaching the outlying villages, the rider continued until he had reached the great city where Cain headquartered his empire. Cain watched as the horse continued past all of the guards to his very own tower and then ascended the edges without ceasing. Moments later, his stricken horse galloped across the courtyard and into view. The hooded man leapt off the horse and fell to his knees as Cain approached.

"Forgive me, my Lord for this unethical approach, I knew you needed to know this at once. I have never something like this before, so I came as quickly as I could!" The man struggled to catch his breath. Cain removed his own hood, revealing the full length of his horns. Clutching the man's robe in his hand, he lifted the man up from his knees and off the ground.

"What did you see?" His eyes lit up.

“Centrestia, Lord, his army, they march on us this moment.”

Cain smiled, frowned, smiled again, and then tightened his grip on the dangling man.

“Why didn’t you sound the alarm?”

“I thought it best not to cause chaos my Lord, our army is weakened. I thought you would want to strategize.”

Cain walked the man over to the ledge and set him down. “This would a good move, I appreciate you coming straight to me.”

The man gave out a large sigh of relief as Cain turned his back to walk away. Stopping mid stride, he turned his head slightly.

“Where are the humans? Do they march with them?”

“We have not seen any humans my Lord. It’s as if they do not exist.”

Cain turned swiftly and kicked the man square in the chest. The force sent his frame through the wall and over the edge. His screams evaporated in the length of his fall. Cain emerged above to watch as his body collided with the ground.

“We will not be outsmarted by these humans.”

Mensendia emerged from the hall, alerted by the scream.

“What happened?” she yelled, clearly worried.

“Tell the others,” he shouted back at her, “we’re going to war.”

...

Rafael's eyes floated just above the surface of the water. A long, thick rope, which extended many yards behind him, he clenched between his teeth. As the long wooden structure, which stood on log pontoons, emerged from the lowest archway of the viaduct, he would swim left or right on his back, guiding it and preventing a hard collision with the rock walls.

Daphne steered from the rear. Standing on the back edge of the craft that she designed, and dipping a long wooden shaft into the wake, she was the only person besides Rafael who could be seen on the outside of the vessel. Yusef, Jeshin, and her warriors, who sat on wooden benches inside the cabin, had covered themselves, the boat, and Daphne in coal dust and other elements to help blend them into the backdrop.

The army who marched above, kept their eyes fixed straight forward as to avoid giving away their additional threat.

Rafael had spent the last two days swimming through all of the rivers, tributaries, and even some of the wells. He had mapped out everything in his mind so he could be the perfect guide. The main river, which ran under Kedvian's Bridge, snaked its way all through the land and neared Cain's lands by the Colifoid farms. He had found a short opening like a sea cave in which they could park and hide their vessel under the lip of the rock. The tunnels of the cave passed both through rock and out of water towards a small feeding lake in one of the farms. If all went to plan, they would emerge from the lake and follow a path leading to the rear of Cain's largest city.

Using extra rope, which they had brought in bundles on their ship, Rafael would take lead through the tunnels, guiding the group and giving them something to follow. Yusef would follow close behind, listening and sensing any possible dangers,

obstructions or enemies. Jeshin's warriors, once above, would provide security in getting the humans to the top of Cain's tower.

...

All tredesties who were able had remained in wait with Elias, Jesse, and Junia on the stone porch of the city. They had sent off the first group by water and now watched as Centrestia's forces marched into the Valley of Death. They would use both the air and the distraction of all-out war to sneak through the skies to the tower. If they made it to Cain's tower unscathed, Elias would have three sets of bodyguards in his attempt to rescue the other human. If all went to plan, Jeshin's group would eliminate the guards at the base of the tower and work their way up.

If the aerial incursion received resistance at the top of the tower, the first group of tredesties would deal with the opposition while Yusef and the others approached from below. Elias and his friends would be dropped nearest the mouth of the mountain, so they could explore the most likely hiding place. Once inside, Jesse would guard the entrance, and Junia would fend off remaining guards while Elias rescued the prisoner. This, was the plan.

XXXIV. War Then, War

Centrestia had taken point with Semperius at his side. The elite guard followed directly behind. The bulk of the army, led by men on horseback, consisted of both male and female warriors decked out in whatever armors they could scavenge. While the naremfes couldn't find much in the ways of armor like the others, nearly every soldier, naremfes included, had been fashioned with bevors or neck armor to decrease the possibility of decapitation. The rear of the party was a handful of priests and priestesses who still hoped and prayed, that after all these years, the Light might intervene.

After descending the same hill that Cain had marched down just days earlier, Centrestia spread his forces wide into an enormous semi-circle with the cliffs at their backs. This thinned out the army almost completely, with only three lines at either side. While the main army was commanded to halt, Centrestia, Semperius, and the guard marched on to a point far ahead of the others. The battle would begin with them.

Through a haze of black dust, Cain emerged dragging his seven-branch sword along the ground. As more dust swirled and as winds passed through from above, an entire legion proceeded from the mouth of the towers behind them.

Nine generals on horseback, each leading a separate block of troops, were quick to notice Semperius at the head of their opposition. The sight of his eyes glaring back at them, fists clenched, was enough to startle some of the horses; reluctant to proceed.

Though just a man, Cain was strong enough to take on two or more naremfes at a time. After halting his army, the two generals who stood in his way discussed how they might do just that.

“Are you sure you are strong enough to fight?” Centrestia whispered.

“I feel stronger than ever,” Sempersius said smiling, “rebirth has made me feel young again.”

Cain’s black magic had worked on hundreds of naremf in the past. This was evidenced by many who stood in his army even now lacking enough focus to even look at their enemy. Sempersius had been the exception. What was supposed to be his greatest punishment had made him stronger than ever before.

Without warning, Cain charged forward, his blade raised in his hand. Centrestia and Sempersius responded and galloped at full speed in his direction. Splitting their run, each moved out and to the sides as Cain came in between them. They both then swerved back in and simultaneously leapt through the air to crash on top of him. Cain reacted by sliding down to one knee as the two collided above him.

The collision dazed Centrestia who rolled off and to the ground. Cain turned to Sempersius who, also a bit dazed, landed on his feet. Cain ran at him and collided with the naremf by butting heads. The knock rocked Sempersius off his feet, and flat on to his back. This triggered the guard to charge in defense of the generals. As the guard ran forward, Cain’s generals signaled their charge, and suddenly two giant masses were running at full speeds towards each other with their leader fighting at the center.

Centrestia’s forces, though thinned looked to post an advantage as Cain’s army rushed towards the middle of the skirmish, while they move to surround them from the sides.

...

Peering down from above, to Elias and the others, the battle resembled a giant eye. With three large figures fighting at the center, lines rushing towards them, and one army beginning to push outwards towards a second army who now surrounded them.

The tredesties veered to the side, hoping to be swallowed in the black haze growing bigger from the mass collision below. The haze would make it tough to breathe mid-flight, but the tredesties were more focused on protecting their cargo and on avoiding detection from one of the armies fighting beneath them. As they were swallowed up in the ashy cloud, many flew blindly using a large amount of their strength and self-control to merely avoid screaming out; for the cry of the tredestie would give them up for sure.

...

A lone soldier, who pledged his allegiance to Cain, lay broken on the battlefield and peering up at the sky. In his weakness, he sat up and observed twenty white spots disappearing into the black clouds. He tried to scream out, but his lungs had been battered by the fists of a naremf and what sound he did make was drowned out by the sounds of war.

Naremf after naremf jumped on top of rushing soldiers, knocking them flat into the ground and then beating and stomping them down. Still however, Cain's army was larger, with more weapons, and had pushed through the army and towards the bridge, chopping down scores of men and women as they went. The priests and priestesses served pwakstifund to those who were broken, some being decapitated in the process.

Cain stood up in the middle of it all, impaling numbers of soldiers at a time. Centrestia and Sempersius were also still in the thick of it but had moved on to individual battles with generals, knocking them off horses and sometimes going to the lengths of dragging over the cliffs.

Cain watched as his army pushed through the enemy to the bridge. What worried him however was that Centrestia's army were making no effort to protect their own cities. Rather, they seemed persistent in holding and continuing the battle in the center of the valley.

Then it dawned on him. Looking towards Vagan and then back to the towers he realized two things. First, he had not seen a single human, and second, the battle had been a diversion. In an instant he was running, pulling one of his own generals off of their horse, and kicking its sides with his heels. Many stopped fighting to observe his race away from the battle and back home.

...

Centrestia had hoped they would have had a little more time before this happened, to give the others as much time as possible. But the effects of it were positive, as the morale of Cain's army was extinguished at the sight of their leader fleeing. Fortunes were reversed as the remaining members of Centrestia's army began dominating their foe. Seeing the enemy flee only strengthened the might of the average soldier and made each swing of blade even swifter.

Centrestia caught eyes with Sempersius who had just turned to observe Cain fleeing. Centrestia nodded to his friend, and Sempersius was then off in a full gallop after the man. Centrestia would stay behind, with a good chunk of his guard still intact and pound out their victory.

...

Rafael was about to reach the lake's surface, when he noticed movement through the water above. The two-dozen or so who followed were alerted by a sharp tug of the rope as they too drifted out of the well. They desperately needed air, so in a synchronized move, the entire group merely did what was absolutely necessary. When reaching the surface, only their eyes and noses emerged. Like crocodiles, their heads bobbed in place until they were ready to make their move.

On their bellies, with blades in their mouths, the group cautiously emerged. One by one, they snuck through a camp of scavengers, leaping over and under the stone canals, which carried the pwakstifund. If a scavenger appeared and made passing impossible, he was seized, neck broken, and vocal cords cut. They didn't have time for anything else. They had to be swift because bodies were falling from the sky, signaling that the tredesties had landed above. In addition, a small alarm had been sounded and guards were following their rushing leader to the top.

...

Elias was surprised by the lack of resistance as they swooped into the courtyard. Other than a few archers who were surprised and kicked from their perches, the archway of skulls before the mouth of the mountain was the only thing left to intimidate unwanted guests.

The tredesties perched themselves at varying points along the top wall of the tower. Like gargoyles they would sit and wait for an attack from below. Elias, Jesse, and Junia made their way under the arch and into the long, dark hallway. Their shadows appeared large against the flame-lit walls, startling them. But nothing came; only voices from the room at the end, a woman and a man.

As they got closer, Junia bent down to see if she could sneak an ear towards the entrance. As she slowly turned the corner, the woman's voice suddenly stopped. The other two moved to either side of the entrance. Elias, who had carried no weapon to this point, tapped Junia on the shoulder and asked for one of hers. Keeping her gaze forward, she obliged. Holding the blade at waste level, he waited for Junia's signal and then stepped into the room.

Lights and shadows bounced around the domed ceiling above. The floor, though black, appeared to move as he got closer to the center. Jesse and Junia came in behind him, each moving to either of his sides and around the backs of the stone thrones. Once Elias emerged from beyond the first throne, he immediately saw the prisoner on the other side. Guarded by a host of hideous creatures, the man did not appear to be in too bad of shape. Though his hands were tied, and his mouth gagged, he did not seem pained or in stress.

Elias stepped into clear view of the man alerting him. Putting a finger to his mouth, he hoped the man understood the universal signal for quiet. The creatures who lay with their heads aloft in gross fashion did not notice Elias, but rather they kept their line of scent upon both the man in the throne above and the opening in the back of the room.

Junia had reached the room's equator, when she leapt up and climbed on to one of the thrones. Moving with the utmost stealth and silence, she moved from throne to throne towards the man. Noticing that she and Jesse might eventually come back together, Elias caught Jesse's attention and motioned for him to go back. They would need a guard at the entrance in case they were interrupted.

With each step that Elias took, Junia would take one, both hoping that if one were heard, the other could balance out the sound and quell any suspicion from the gredifers..

Sweat ran down her legs as Junia tip toed over the second to last chair and extended her leg to the chair of the prisoner. He held up his bound hands to hold hers and enable her to swing her other leg over. Standing on either arm of the chair, she placed her blade between the outstretched hands of the man and cut the rope. The gredifers heads and bodies began to sway as they could sense that something was happening. The prisoner removed his gag, pushed his glasses up onto his nose and provided the next universal signal of *what now?*

Junia turned to face Elias, still standing directly over the man.

Elias didn't have enough time to even raise his hand and point to alert her before a flash of steel from behind her swung in and made five holes in her back. Junia cried out as the sharp points then dug down through the flesh of her back. A small white-haired woman crawled up from behind Junia and used the hand to push Junia forward and send

her toppling to the ground below. Her body crashed down on the gredifers, startling them and sending them crawling in all directions.

The prisoner recoiled as the woman clawed her way over the throne and on top of him. Resting her thighs on his shoulders, she swung down her steel hands impaling both of his on the rock arms of the throne. Then, she simply sat on his shoulders glaring down at her human throne.

Elias had had enough. His heart bumping hard through his chest, he suddenly felt overcome. And like in his encounter with the beasts near his home, he simply let go.

“ENOUGH!” he shouted.

The shout emerged as a loud roar and deafened all in the room as it bounced off the walls. The gredifers whimpered under their masks of skin and scurried off into the shadows. Jesse ran inside to see what was happening. Elias turned to him with a look of dark and deep-rooted anger. Jesse froze, scared by just his gaze.

Elias turned back to the helpless man who shook from the pain of being forcibly outstretched.

“Let. Him. Go!” Elias demanded.

Lifting the man’s impaled hands and controlling his arms like a puppet, the woman laughed.

“No.” She laughed louder as she played with her toy.

The man writhed in pain as Elias’s anger grew.

“Fight back!” Elias yelled, as the man’s arms flailed artificially. He could sense something in the man, something he wasn’t showing.

A commotion could be heard outside and voices began approaching rapidly down the hallway. Jesse backed into the room, hoping he could temporarily stop whatever approached.

Elias watched the man's visage change as his limbs swung around in front of him. The more the woman laughed, the more he seemed to completely relinquish control. Eventually, all that seemed to remain were limp limbs and a beating heart. Eventually, the woman noticed what was happening.

"Come on!" she yelled, laughing, "you need to entertain our guests! Come on!" The woman began swinging the impaled arms around wildly until suddenly they stopped. Midair, the hands stopped and the woman struggled against some unseen force. Quickly, she became agitated and her laughter turned to screams. Looking down at her victim, she was appalled to see his left hand moving on its own against her. As Elias had earlier, the man reacted against the puppetry and made the universal signal for quiet.

Horried by the sight, the woman hesitantly quieted down.

Reaching over, the man grappled one weapon with his bloodied right hand and ripped it out. Reaching over with a bleeding left hand, he grappled the right weapon and did the same. Gripping both weapons, he ripped them from the woman's hands and tossed them crashing and clanking off the stone floor below.

The woman trembled as her captive rose up, turned to face her, grabbed her by throat and head butted her, breaking both his glasses and her face. She screamed as she did a backwards somersault off the throne, and hit her head on the floor below. A crackle rippled down her spine as her body sprawled out on the ground. In moments the gredifers had returned and were swarming over her body.

The man she had held captive pulled his broken glasses from his face and tossed them to the side. Turning to face Elias, he stepped down from the throne and walked towards him.

Elias still shook from his anger, but extended an arm to help the man.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“My name is Fan,” the man replied, bowing, “Fan Li, the alchemist.”

“We need to get you out of here.”

“I think your friend needs you more, I will be fine.”

Junia was struggling to stand. Jesse ran into the room followed by a score of women to help her. Maydee was the second to reach her, helping Jesse and Elias to lift her up. Yusef entered the room next, scouring the room for Elias.

“Elias!” he shouted, “come quick, we have him, it is over.”

Elias checked to make sure the others were all right as more women rushed in.

“You must come quickly,” Yusef repeated.

The two made their way out of the chamber, up the long hallway, and out into the courtyard. Cain lay upon the altar pinned at the neck by Sempersius. Jeshin held his legs as Rafael stood by the side, tracing the edges of the seven-branched sword with his eyes.

Elias couldn’t believe it. His plan had worked seamlessly.

Cain looked over to see all of the humans emerging from his chambers. He had failed. The great mechanism lay between him and the others, watching him. The symbols, the alignments, they had all been for this.

As Elias approached, he still quivered. He felt everything around him start to slow; even the movements of his own arms, his own legs. His heartbeat became louder

and louder until he could feel the thump of blood beats reverberating all around him. He imagined the beat of drums and the large army descending the hillside towards him. He saw the hooded man and the morningstar raised and swinging in his direction.

He remembered Alexa's voice and how it interrupted the dream. He remembered how her voice made all the bad in his mind disappear. He missed her and he wanted to go home.

I must finish this, he thought, I will be home soon.

He was almost positive that the man from his dreams lay upon the altar; or at least, that he resembled him. His hood was ragged and torn and he appeared weakened by the hand on his throat, but the man called Cain looked very similar to the man that had haunted Elias's dreams for seventeen years.

"I always thought, that the devil was in my dreams. Only this man never had horns and you do."

"What can I say?" Cain replied, his voice broken and raspy, "people always get my father and me confused.

Sempersius appeared intent on punishing his former master.

"I followed you here. I killed for you and I died for you. For what?" he asked.

"You're still here aren't you? I gave you eternal life."

"You gave me immortality," he responded, "do not confuse the two. Eternal life is someplace far, far from here. It's a place where people and creatures live in happiness and joy, not misery, fear, and sorrow."

“You didn’t want eternal life, you wanted the here and now. You wanted what all of these humans want and like them you didn’t want to wait. What are you waiting for now?”

Sempersius looked at Elias and then at the others. “What are we waiting for?”

The tower rattled as a number of naremfes including Centrestia made their way up and onto the scene.

“I think you can let go of his throat,” Elias said, “he’s not going anywhere.”

Sempersius reluctantly obliged, Jeshin as well. Cain sat up on the altar, swinging his legs around to sit on the edge. Elias stepped closer, completing the circle that had formed around the man.

“It would appear that everyone has abandoned you, even your wife in there is done for.”

Cain smiled. “She is not my wife. I have had many wives and Mensendia, though quite the faithful follower was not one.” He stepped off the table, approaching and towering over Elias. Sempersius stepped forward but Centrestia held him back.

“I’m assuming all of this was your idea, the diversion was almost perfect.”

Elias had a bad feeling about where he was going with this.

“What if I told you that you and all of your friends made for an even better diversion?” Cain asked slyly, putting a finger on Elias’s chest.

“What are you talking about?” Elias asked, knocking his hand away.

“As far as I can tell, there’s only seven on you. Where are the others? I’m assuming they’re dead, or possibly dying. Who knows?”

Elias immediately thought of Jade and Alexa. “They’re protected.”

“By immortals? I think you’ve learned that even we have weaknesses. You wanted to know about my wife? I sent her on a few errands for me, you know, on earth. Word has it, she already eliminated a pathetic old couple.”

Jesse rushed forward, smashing into Cain’s chest with his shoulder and sending him crashing back into the altar.

Smiling again, Cain struggled to get back to his feet. “Apparently I struck a nerve.”

Jesse stepped over him, grabbing him by the horns and lifting him up. Cain squirmed under his grip, startled by the human’s strength.

“I am proof that she failed,” Jesse’s eyes lit up with anger, “and you have your guarantee that in whatever pit of fire and outer darkness you end up after this, I will be sending her to meet you.” Jesse released him with a thrust and returned to his place in the circle.

The look in Cain’s eyes showed that he believed him. The smile disappeared as he contemplated something.

“Looks like you’re finally realizing the reality of all of this,” Elias said. “Rafael, bring me the sword.”

Rafael dragged the massive blade across the stone as Sempersius and Centrestia lifted Cain back on to the altar.

“I’m not entirely sure how this is supposed to work,” Elias said, “Cain, you were there, what did God say to you?”

Cain remained silent.

Elias motioned for all of the humans to surround the blade. “Just to be sure, I think each of us should be holding it.”

Jesse stood in the middle, gripping the hilt with both hands and lifting it over his head. Elias, Yusef, and Junia stood to his left, while Rafael, Daphne, and Fan stood at his right. Each placed a hand on the hilt and the group moved forward in unison.

“Wait,” Cain said, “you don’t know what you’re doing. Don’t you know that I will be avenged? You cannot understand the magnitude of what you are about to do.”

“It is Abel who will be avenged,” Centrestia said.

“Upon the altar,” Sempersius continued, “you will be our offering.”

Elias contemplated their words. *An offering to whom?* He thought. He had seen no evidence of his god in this world.

As the branches of the sword loomed over Cain’s body, he became very still. Closing his eyes he uttered a final prayer.

“Father, the time has come. Let all that I’ve done, bear witness of your name. My blood hath been your blood, now my spirit, the same.”

The last words had barely escaped his lips before the top tip of the blade pierced through his stomach. His eyes shot open in surprise, only to close just moments later as his body twitched and finally succumbed.

The humans made a collective sigh of relief as they released the blade and stepped back. All in the circle looked over the limp body of the man who had been their greatest adversary. Many of Jeshin’s warriors cried, while others celebrated. The naremf for the most part, remained stoic.

Elias grabbed Yusef and hugged him. “We did it!”

“We did it old friend,” Yusef replied, “you were able to save the world after all.”

Elias laughed, smiling brightly. He almost failed to notice the chill.

A rush of cold air descended on the group like a cloud and for the first time since they had arrived in Hell, Elias could see his own breath. The sudden shift startled everyone. The women and soldiers began cowering as not only the cold, but some invisible weight began bearing itself upon their shoulders. Elias tried to react. He tried to call out, but his tongue wouldn't connect with the words he wanted to say. The look of sheer terror on the faces of the narems, told Elias they were experiencing the same phenomenon.

Elias's fear however came from the scene upon the altar. Cain's body, which had gone completely limp and blue, was changing. Starting at the chest, and then moving to the limbs and head, the muscular frame regained its living form. Life was breathed into the skin, as the body appeared to inflate with a form or entity inside of it. The horns popped out of the skin of the head and dropped to the ground. The head rolled back, extending the neck upward as a voice emerged from the mouth. A low growl followed by the most haunting laughter Elias had ever heard. The body twitched and jerked as the beast within it laughed hysterically.

All watched in shock as the left hand of Cain's body reached for the hilt of the blade and pulled the dripping sword from its body. Each limb and twitching part of the body appeared to a mind of their own. That was until the eyes opened and revealed two black pupils and a mind to the madness. Sitting up, the creature turned, pointed the sword

down and threw it right at Sempersius. The sword ripped through his shoulder, nearly taking off his arm and sending him crashing down.

“That was foolish,” the voice said, laughing again, “you just killed my son.” The laughter stopped. Everyone but Elias began to back away, covering their eyes or crying in fear. Elias was scared. Horrified in fact, but something in him, as usual, had brought strength in the time of fear. He felt his heart thump and his muscles tighten as he considered just who or what was in front of him.

You should let me speak, coward, he thought, knowing the man was listening. He had felt him in his thoughts many times.

The man frowned as the burden was lifted from Elias’s shoulders.

“A father’s vengeance is unlike any other, let’s take your father for instance.”

Elias felt his own anger rush from his head to his feet. He imagined reaching for the man’s throat and choking whatever life there was out of him.

The man smiled. “Once the scavengers had taken the flesh from his body, he came to me in spirit. He and I had made a deal you see. His soul for the chance to be with that dreadful woman he called your mother.”

Elias’s heart beat uncontrollably.

“When he realized that not only had I lied, but that he would not be able to return to protect you,” he said, “it took nearly a legion to hold him down.”

“You see, that is one major difference between your god and me. When you make a covenant with him, he is bound. When you make a covenant with me, you are bound. I don’t think your father quite understood that one.”

Elias considered the weight of his words. “Where is he now?” he asked.

“Your dad?” he responded, “well his spirit is in Hell.”

Elias looked around. “You mean he is here?”

The man laughed again. “No, you fool, the real Hell. My home. Where I am God. Where I rule. Earth.”

“You are not the God of our world,” Yusef said, emerging from the group, “you lack a body of your own, and as a coward you must steal just to speak.”

The man appeared annoyed by the interruption. “Thank you for bringing up my next point,” he said. “Have you ever seen this God Arab? Has he spoken to you as I am now? Or has he turned his back on you? Your Christian friend here believes His Son died for him,” he said pointing to Elias, “but what happened then? Did your God take vengeance on those who killed him?”

“He will judge them,” Junia said.

“Wow,” he said, “when exactly? When he can fit the time into his schedule? You people put a lot of faith into events of the future you don’t even know exist. And judging, what is that? Is he going to send them to...hell? I don’t think giving them to me would make a whole lot of sense now would it?”

Elias smiled.

“Something about all of this pique your interest?” the man said.

“I’m just pleasantly surprised that you haven’t vehemently denied His existence. You’ve tried to suggest weakness in Him, but you have more or less only confirmed that He is real and that’s all that really matters to me, considering of course that you are his opposite.”

The man frowned again.

“We’re all here, we’re all alive, your son is dead and I believe you were going to get vengeance somehow?”

The man stepped down from the altar and approached Elias. He no longer appeared as large as Cain had, but rather he looked smaller, thinner, and more human. Walking right up to Elias, he stopped, placing his face next to his.

“I will start with you,” he whispered, smiling.

Before Elias could respond, the man pushed him to the side, broke past Jesse and the others, and sprinted towards the edge of the tower.

“No!” Centrestia shouted, “stop him!”

The naremf leapt over the group and chased the man all the way to the edge; but the devil eluded him. Taking two lunging steps, he leapt, arms extended, over the edge.

“What happens now?” Elias asked.

“You go home,” Sempersius responded, pulling the seven-branched sword from his shoulder, “everyone needs to go home.”

“What about all of you? I thought that all of you would be freed from your curse if you sacrificed yourself for humans.

“I think we have been,” Sempersius said, “my shoulder does not appear to be healing.”

“What does that mean?” Elias asked.

Many of the immortals cried, others rejoiced at what this could possibly mean. Jeshin stretched her hands out in front of her, she rotated her fingers, noticing immediately a different, yet familiar feeling in her bones.

“I don’t think we will evaporate or disappear right here,” she said, “I think we will live out the rest of our lives as we should have. We will die of old age.”

“Can you do that on earth?” Yusef asked.

“I don’t know,” she said, “our bodies have not reacted well to the earth’s elements in the past; but perhaps we could visit.”

The two exchanged smiles and an obvious fondness for one another. Elias wanted to be happy for them, he wanted to be happy for everyone, but he dwelt on the last words of the creature he assumed to be the devil.

I will start with you.

Elias approached Centrestia, who stood at the tower’s ledge. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“How fast can you get me home?”

Centrestia turned to look at him; a look of concern on his face. “You don’t think...”

“He’s going after my family? Yes, I do,” Elias said.

“Then I will have the guard return you as quickly as possible. But you should probably talk to the other humans first, discuss what you will do next.”

“What do you mean, what we will do next? It is finished; we have nothing else to do here. I am sorry my friend, but we no longer have a purpose for being here. The gateways to earth no longer need protection.”

Centrestia appeared disappointed. “I don’t think you realize what you’re saying, it’s not over until the devil is destroyed.”

Elias was un-amused. “Kill the devil? That’s impossible. He’s a spirit, we could never catch him, let alone kill him. There are some causes that are just impossible, some that are not worth fighting for.”

“I’m disappointed, especially after all you have accomplished. Your mind is unlike any other. With the proper training, you could learn to not only keep him out of your head, but to reach inside of him.”

Elias didn’t know how to respond.

“Look,” Centrestia said, “Eve did not make an oath or make the lineages just to protect the earth. She knew that Satan is imperfect and therefore destructible. She knew that if all of the lineages worked together, he could fall.”

“As she did,” Elias replied.

“Quite so,” Centrestia responded, the fact that all seven of you survived is nothing short of a miracle. But you should cling to that miracle, find the other lineages and take him down. The Ten Immortals should be able to help you. But before you rush home, discuss this with the others, make sure they understand how they may continue to be of use and they must watch their backs. Make sure you know how to contact each of them. They should go home too. They should all prepare.”

“How will I know how to find the others? Elias asked.

“Again, the Immortals should be able to help you. In the odd circumstance that they cannot help or are indisposed, I think you have a good friend and tool in that Yusef fellow. Like you, he has learned to exercise his gifts well. The others should seek out the help of the Immortals who likely sent them here. They should seek to strengthen themselves and their abilities. Satan’s legions will be out in full force.”

“What are you going to do?” Elias asked.

“We will help if and how we are able, but I don’t know how much help we will be. Like Jeshin said, our bodies did not react well to the elements of your world. I chose to come here, and it brings me some comfort to finally know that I might die here. That is all I can say for now.

Elias nodded, thanking him. He then returned to the humans to discuss what they would do next. The gratification that came from killing Cain had lasted only a moment. Now his thoughts were turned to home and he prayed that Reynia had kept his word.

XXXV. Hell Shall Unfold

The way back had been both easier and more difficult than the way down. Having to climb upwards for the entire trip was taxing on the legs, but Jeshin had provided them with the original route, which both skipped the waterfall and connected with the zigzag tunnels. Yusef had decided to travel with Elias so they could strategize with Reynia on their arrival. Jeshin, along with two other women, committed to following the men for safety purposes. She and Yusef had discussed the possibility of her staying but she was hesitant. Nevertheless, she planned to test the air and see what happened; Yusef was worth it to her and she was worth it to him.

Elias was slightly jealous of his friend's new romance. He knew he shouldn't be. After all, he was going to be with his wife and child soon. He couldn't wait to hold the both of them in his arms. He especially couldn't wait to share censored versions of his adventures with Alexa.

As they approached the final stretch towards the surface, a dewy fog dipped into the tunnel, drifted across their shoulders and hovered. Elias knew they had arrived near dawn. The scent of a recent rain was welcoming. A slight drizzle began tapping on their shoulders as droplets fell from the soaked roots above.

As Elias was hoisted up through the final hole prior to the cemetery tunnel, a faded orange hue from an Eastern Tennessee sunrise passed through the slats of the cemetery boards, lighting the path before him. They had arrived. Elias pulled the others up and approached the dirt staircase.

Seeing the light, the warriors hesitated. Jeshin's eye's watered with worry and memory.

"I see the light of fire always," she said, "I haven't seen the light of stars or suns in...a very long time."

Elias pushed the board to the side and pulled himself up onto the wet ground. There were no flashbacks from childhood, no fear of being chased. Just heavy wet air and a shroud of mist up to his knees.

The same grey fog blanketed the landscape, hugging the trees for miles in one direction. Elias imagined the fog morphing into figures as spirits would rise from his family cemetery as he just had. He looked to the house. A light smoke drifted from the chimney.

A conversation in the tunnel below caught his attention. Yusef was trying to convince Jeshin to come above ground.

"I already feel weaker," she said, "so do the others. We know that we won't last long."

To prove her leader's point, one of Jeshin's warriors moved around her to the exit. Walking up the dirt steps, she extended an arm to Elias. Almost instantly, the flesh on her arm dissipated, leaving only bone. Elias let go. The woman pulled her arm back but did not disappear. Instead she hovered right on the line between surface and the underworld, staring at the sun.

"What did we give up?"

Though the ground was grey and misty up to his knees, the air and scene through the forest above was clear. Elias peered past ashen oaks and barren maples

to see Jade emerge from the broken front door, a blanket draped around her shoulders. She excitedly made her way down the steps, across the path to the cemetery hugged Elias tightly before peering down at the woman beneath him.

“Who’s she?”

“A guide. This is the first time is while she has been home.”

“Well then pull her up.”

The warrior returned the bones of her hand into the light.

“She can’t.” Elias said.

Jeshin and Yusef had been standing, hunched over, shoulder to shoulder, and now hand in hand.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Yusef said.

“I’m afraid we can’t stay.”

Jeshin’s warriors walked past her and began their descent. The one, bone and muscle dangling, moaned slightly from mess that had become her arm.

“There will still be battles to be fought, to protect your world, we must go back.”

Yusef only squeezed tighter.

“I get the most immense feeling of warmth that I have ever experienced, from you,” he said, “simply touching your hand now has set my entire body ablaze.”

Jeshin smiled, very briefly, and then bowed her head.

“I’m so sorry. We really must go.”

Yusef hesitated for a long while. Then, raising her chin with one hand, he raised her other hand, still clasped in his, to his mouth and kissed it. The two gazed at one another for a moment and then suddenly, Yusef let her go.

Jeshin disappeared down into the dark of the tunnel.

Elias and Jade helped Yusef up into the Tennessee air. They had made it back. But one of them didn't quite feel at home, for a number of reasons.

"I don't think I could live in Hell forever," Yusef said.

"But there's something about her," Elias replied.

"Yes."

Jade smiled as she and Elias exchanged glances.

"I found you," Yusef said "I think that was what I was supposed to do old friend."

"That you did. Thank you for having faith in me and in us."

The two men hugged.

"I imagine this is not the last I will see of you. There is another war coming."

"If you need to get back to your real home, I imagine you can find a route down there that will be safer. Keep you out of a U.S. prison."

Yusef laughed.

"Take care of that sweet daughter of yours."

With that, he smiled at both Jade and Elias, turned, and hopped down into the open grace.

Jade wrapped her blanket up over Elias's shoulder and the two walked back toward the house.

"Is Reynia watching Alexa?"

"No, just the dogs, he had to leave."

:"Leave? Where?"

"Something about trouble elsewhere. He told me to give you this. Said he'd come find us when we're ready."

Jade handed Elias a piece of paper with a symbol drawn on it.



"Ready for what?"

"He didn't say. But you're back and your safe and Alexas's safe...the whole world is safe and that's all that matters right now."

Elias knew she was at least partially right. After what he had seen he'd hold both of them much closer. He remembered the narems and all the creatures he left below. He remembered the horned beast leaping over the edge of the tower.

Elias and Jade sat down on the porch swing. Jade rested her head on Elias's shoulder as they swayed gently.

Elias looked at the piece of paper again.

He remembered the words of the devil, "I'll start with you."

The eastern sunrise rose to its peak in the Southern sky. The fog dissipated in a morning breeze that swirled the fallen leaves. Elias was home, and though he'd likely have an eye over his shoulder for the time being, his family and everyone he knew were safe.

For now.

Glossary of the Extraordinary

Bestsafanus [beh-STOF-uh-noos]

- A healer. One of the ten immortals. Designated to protect and watch those in Western Europe. One of the first sons born in the Lineage of the Shepherd.

Reynia [RAY-nee-uh]

- A watcher. One of the ten immortals. Designated to watch over parts of North America and specifically those of his lineage. One of the first sons born in The Lineage of Dreams.

Nialda [NEE-all-duh]

- A deceiver. One of the ten immortals. One of the first daughters to be born in The Lineage of the Heart. Designated to watch over those in Eastern Europe, and parts of the Middle East and Eurasia.

Presefnod [pri-SEF-nud]

- A peacemaker. One of the ten immortals. One of the first sons born into the Lineage of the Spirit. Designated to watch over and protect the many nations of Africa.

Lutalo [lew-tall-oh]

- Junia's family friend and bodyguard.

Sempersius [sem-PER-see-us]

- One of the first naremf's to ever enter Hell. A Lord of War and Cain's premier general.

Mensendia [men-SEN-dee-uh]

- A former greidifer that has been reborn to love and serve Cain at his side.

Ambrosios [am-BRO-zee-ohs]

- A silverback gorilla centuries old that watches over and protects his home in the Impenetrable forest.

Naremf [NAIR-umph]

- One of the oldest species of beast on this earth. Said to be smarter than humans. Descended with Cain to Hell in order to escape the flood. Many joined Cain's army, many revolted against him.

Tredestie [tre-des-tee]

- A creature from Hell that is part human, part bird. A species that was originally human and that formed when they tried robbing the graves of dead animals for food.

Gredifer [gred-if-ur]

- Wandering creatures that are both faceless and without the ability to stand. Most move on their bellies like snakes never making progress.

Zhua [zwa]

- A weapon that could be fixed to the end of a rope or a shaft. Iron shaped to resemble a hand with sharp claws.

Colifoid [cawl-i-foid]

- A circular, stone mechanism used to twist out the pwakstifund from the roots of the trees.

Centrestia [sen-tres-tia]

- One of the first naremf's to enter Hell and one of the first to rebel against Cane. The leader of the opposing forces.

Yanomamo [yah-nuh-MAH-moh]

- An indigenous forest tribe that lives near the border of Venezuela and Brazil.

Kedvian [ked-VEE-an]

- A massive obsidian aqueduct that separates the two largest regions of Hell.

Vagan [VAY-gun]

- The largest city south of Kedvian Bridge. Home to the naremf's in opposition to Cain.

Pwakstifund [PWOK-sti-fund] – The substance which gives life to all in Hell. A transparent ooze that descends from the roots of the trees.

Saviors, Scapegoats & Sacred Trees: A Critical Discussion

Introduction: A Brief Commentary on the Title: *Fearest Enden*

Fearest Enden, in the most basic sense, is sacrifice in the name of love. More specifically, it is the sacrifice that people make for the ones they love when they fear it might be the end. The plot to some may be just another fantasy novel with a hero and a quest. To me, the novel is its own epistle to the past, which starts “Dearest Eden.” This letter begs the question of what really happened in the Garden on that fateful day. Was Eve really deceived or did she make a sacrifice for Adam and her kin when she realized there would be no other way? Was Satan’s greatest deception to convince Eve to partake of the fruit, or was it convincing her kin that she was to blame for Original Sin? As in stories of old, the heroes in *Fearest Enden* are defined by their choices. The most notable heroes of the past made the largest sacrifices out of selflessness and love. *Fearest Enden* follows its protagonist’s choices as an everyday hero, but its backstories seek to exonerate the first human hero who ever lived.

Fearest is about fear. This novel is comprised in part of characters’ internal conflicts of fear and what might be coming if they do not act. These fears of loss, weakness, death, or of the end – all lead to sacrifice. Eve is one of the central characters in the novel. She made a sacrifice before she made a choice and she did it

for love. As mothers have immense love for their children, 'the mother of all living,'¹ Eve, had a love that was matchless and unending and as such she is perhaps one of the greatest human hero to have ever lived. This story becomes equally the greatest tragedy as Eve became the first scapegoat in human, Judeo-Christian history. Comparable only to Jesus Christ, who defied the pains of hell so that all may go to heaven, Eve sacrificed her paradise so that all could know of hells, and pains, and sorrows and so that all could exist and learn to know true happiness through sorrow.

The novel needed to have a protagonist separate from Eve but it needed to have Eden as a backstory to help recognize Eve as heroine rather than scapegoat. All of the female characters, especially mothers, needed to be strong like Eve, but also the descendants of Eve (everyone), who recognized their potential, could potentially make sacrifices for love on their own.

Enden is 'The End', and can be explained in two ways. The first End is an end of paradise similar to The Fall. Eve made the choice that she did because of a fear of the end, but also because the end of her world as she knew it, could have been the basis of something truly remarkable. Family and loved ones play a major role in this end because without family, the paradise isn't a utopia and the end destination would be hell without them.

The second End that *Enden* is referring to is the end of a physical, earth life.

With the end of life as-we-know-it, in the physical sense, we imagine an Earth

¹ The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments Translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised by His Majesty's Special Command (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Genesis 3:15

without trees or that began its end through deforestation. The tree in the Garden also held immense power just as Eve did. Scripturally, these trees had the powers of heaven on Earth and for Adam and Eve, they did the same. For various cultures around the world, trees had and continue to hold the secrets of creation, life, and life eternal. It would be crucial for trees in the novel to have the same powers to end life or sustain it; the power to be gateways between multiple worlds, to be bridges between heavens and hells.

Eve's Sacrifice

In Genesis, Eve partook of the fruit because the serpent convinced her that doing so would open her eyes and she would become wise.² The exact yarn of events is up for speculation and interpretation. Perhaps however, a beguiling serpent has remained in the lines of the pages, twisting through the order of events and thwarting those who should have never regarded Eve as anyone less than sacred. Had the biblical Adam, who was supposed to be Eve's right-hand man, captured the snake and silenced him, or had he not used Eve as scapegoat when first questioned by God, the interpreted result might not have been 'Original Sin' and Eve or woman may not have carried such a cross all this time.

Fearest Enden suggests that the 'beguiling'³ spoken of in the garden took on more of a literal seduction. It was intended that this plot twist be up for interpretation as well. However, the serpent's involvement would be both more literal and metaphorical. The 'fruit' spoken of was a seductive act committed by the

² Genesis 3:15.

³ Genesis 3:13

devil. The result was Eve's first-born being Cain and therefore, the means by which evil was really introduced into the world. It should be noted that this idea, though formed during the writing of the novel, was discovered to be unoriginal during further research. The concept of 'Serpent Seed' is one that has been debated amongst Christian and Jewish Scholars for some time. Particular texts, including the gnostic *Gospel of Philip*, *The Targum*, *The Zohar*, *The Apocryphon of John*, *Tertullian's Letter of Patience*, and even the *New Testament Books of 1st John* and *2nd Corinthians* make references to adultery, rape, or the serpent directly leading to the conception and birth of Cain.⁴ Whether this be truth or speculation, the concept of 'Serpent Seed' stems from Genesis 3:15 where The Lord states that He will "place enmity between the serpent and the woman, between his and her seed; it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel."⁵ This line suggests that not only does the serpent in fact have seed at that point, but that at some point in the future, a 'bruising' or some type of hostility will take place between his seed and the seed of the woman. This is a battle between good and evil.

In the novel, this battle begins between Satan, Cain, and their armies versus the people, animals, and immortals of earth. Though the earthly battle between Satan and Man was one of the original premises to this novel, and started my interest in the occult and demonology, this particular battle is only foreshadowed at the end of *Fearest Enden* and does not actually make up a major part of the plot. The bruise-the-heel-and-crush-the-head scenario combined with the enmity between

⁴ John Byron, 'Themes in Biblical Narrative, Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry.' 14 vols (Leiden, NLD: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011), pp. 16-19.

⁵ Genesis 3:15

the two seeds⁶ presents the opportunity in the novel for a suitable battle of good versus evil.

The doctrine of Serpent Seed has been given many negative connotations primarily because of white-supremacist groups that latched onto the idea. The Aryan Nations and Christian Identity movements, which believe that whites were direct descendants of Adam and thus superior to all other races, also specifically teach that Jews were the descendants of Cain; and that according to the *Cain Satanic Seed Line*, that Cain was in fact the son of the serpent.⁷ This had led the groups to teach that Jews, like the serpent, have no souls.⁸

By including the Serpent Seed doctrine in my novel, I wanted to make clear immediately, that I was simply implying that the source of the first evil, and in this case Cain, was in fact the serpent. I wanted to imply that Satan was Cain's father. I wanted readers to then follow the story of Cain as it appeared in the Old Testament and popular myth.

After the story of the birth of Adam and Eve's children, Satan and Cain both disappear into the shadows; Satan, after he has doomed all of humanity by his beguiling of Eve; and Cain, after he is banished for standing against God and killing his brother Abel.⁹ Cain is also cursed to be a vagabond and a fugitive and fears that this may be too much for him.¹⁰ He is also given a 'mark' of some kind so that people will definitely recognize him when they see him. Again, worried because this 'mark'

⁶ Genesis 3:15

⁷ Betty A. Dobratz., and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile, *White Power, White Pride!: The White Separatist Movement in the United States*. (New York: Twayne, 1997), p. 134.

⁸ Dobratz, 134

⁹ Genesis 4:1-24

¹⁰ Byron, *Themes in Biblical Narrative*, pp. 16-19.

will surely mean his death, Cain fears this burden is too much. The Lord then states that whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.¹¹

It should also be noted that Cain was a good builder; or at least good enough that he was able to build a city for his family and son.¹² This information was used to strengthen the antagonist in the novel. *Fearest Enden* presents the idea that Cain and his followers descend into the earth in order to escape the flood. Because he is already a builder of cities, it makes sense that he would be able to start a new civilization in this new place. In the case of the Serpent Seed, with Satan being his father, Cain is led by paternal inspiration to begin this trip. He also gains power and immortality from his father. If he is the son of the devil, then he is half human, half-angel, and has this special opportunity.

Upon Eve's realization that she had implemented both sin and death but also Evil, and the creation of an evil race (in the novel), Eve decides that she must dedicate her life and those of her children to preserving a better future. This idea also suggests that while Eve does gain much 'wisdom' from her decision, that she may have god-like or fantastical powers that enable her response. Upon realization that her bloodline is tainted so-to-speak, she designates a number of her first children to become immortal guardians of the future bloodlines and lineages. She gives each child particular powers related to their bloodline, which are then inherited by their descendants. These talents should be used to protect the earth and those they love from evil, harm, or death.

¹¹ Genesis 4:15

¹² Genesis 4:17

The Sacrifice of the Animals

Particular elements of my own religion, combined with the admired teachings of early theologians like St. Francis of Assisi, led me to believe that animals not only have spirits, but are capable of much more than just their own survival. Realizing that the general public would consider the topic of human-animal language and understanding to be fantastical, I had to decide if my characters would accept these phenomena as normal or supernatural. Though some of the older characters in the story accept these extraordinary events as commonplace, I decided that in order to make my protagonist and supporting characters more relevant, they would need to view the elements as supernatural. When supernatural elements became foreign to my characters, I finally made the jump into the fantasy genre, while hoping to make the supernatural elements as believable as possible.

For example, in the novel, I created a creature known as a 'naremf,' that is based on the Gigantopithecus that was said to have lived many years ago, and that scientists have recently discovered may have co-existed with humans. Though the creature seems fantastical to the average reader, I picked it for a number of reasons. The archaeological data has produced the image of a giant creature with intelligence equal to, or in some instances greater than man's.¹³ I wanted a creature that had the same elements of fantasy that one may find in a creature like a dragon i.e. strength, intelligence, mysteriousness, abilities; all that could be deemed fantastical, but all that were at some point real.

¹³ Frank Spencer, *History of Physical Anthropology, Volume 1* (Garland Reference Library of Social Science. Routledge, 1997), pp. 439-440

To add to the actual mystery that exists regarding the extinction of these creatures, the narems first make a sacrifice in the novel by following Cain into the depths of the earth in order to escape the flood. So in a sense, they sacrifice their lives and homes in order for survival. When they realize the mistake they have made, they sacrifice their safety by rebelling against Cain in order to protect the earth from him. Individual naremf characters in the book make additional personal sacrifices.

With some indigenous and aboriginal cultures still holding the belief that animals and humans can speak to and understand one another¹⁴, I thought it would be appropriate to include other animals as these ‘protectors’ of the earth and the gateways to it; the narems being the guardians to the gates in the underworld and the other animals being the guardians of these gates in our world. The novel implies that animals and humans understand one another and work together the same way that some animists believe they do, while also allowing the opportunity for them to communicate as they once did in myth and universal language.¹⁵

The Sacrifice of Elias

It should be noted that many different examples of sacrifices are made in the novel. Each of the lineages ultimately sacrifices their life on earth for katabasis, or a descent into the underworld, typically for the purpose of finding someone or something, including personal revelation. The immortals in the book sacrifice their

¹⁴ Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 100-101.

¹⁵ Genesis 11:1-9. This particular reference refers to the story of the Tower of Babel, where there was one Adamic language and the languages were then confounded.

mortality to protect the mortals of earth. The protagonist in the novel, Elias Hughes, makes the pivotal sacrifice. Being the hero, like those in katabatic myth, he descends below in order to both retrieve and protect the ones that he loves. As a child, he descends into the ground in search of his father. As the prototypical katabatic hero, similar to Aeneas, Orpheus, or Odysseus, Elias ultimately must descend because he has no choice. Contrary to the other examples however, I decided to have Elias's initial journey have him return empty-handed. But Elias's conflict and sacrifice are more than just what he must do to protect his family or to retrieve his father. He has spent years trying to forget or convince himself that he did not disappear when he was a child and that he is not familiar with any of the supernatural circumstances happening around him. One sacrifice Elias makes is overcoming his weaknesses and his internal conflict.

Central Motifs of the Novel

There are a number of motifs in *Fearest Enden*. Two in particular, which are considered part of the backstory, are nevertheless the most sacred and central to the history and creation of the novel. As discussed in the introduction, the novel serves as a letter to the past, beginning with "Dearest Eden." The novel's backstory examines an alternative approach to what happened in the Garden. It likewise stands as an attempt to exonerate Eve. The first part of this commentary will seek to exonerate Eve by examining basic truths of her creation and the circumstances surrounding the commandment not to partake of the forbidden fruit. I will look at the serpent, not as playing the beguiler, but a truthful and necessary role. I will

examine the choice as a sacrifice, which, in turn, should elevate Eve to the status of savior rather than scapegoat. I will finally argue that the actual deceiving serpent(s) lied outside of the garden, waiting to tell the story as they saw fit; thus betraying Eve's character in such a way that the divinely inspired lessons of this story were reversed.

The second half of this commentary will focus on the other saviors and scapegoats in the garden, nature, or more specifically, the trees. I will argue for the case of stewardship versus dominion and how the choice to essentially forget the significance of the trees via destruction and poor use of dominion has had similar effect to, and should be considered another version of, original sin.

Before starting the next section of this commentary, it would be important to note that I will be primarily referring to the Eve of the Old Testament in the King James Version of the Holy Bible. Other specifications of Eve, like the Eve in *Paradise Lost* for example, will be clearly identified.

Savior & Scapegoat: A Defense of Eve

My entire life, I have been heavily shaped by my Christian faith. I have split time between Utah and the Southern United States, two regions famous for strong Christian influences. Religious studies as well as powerful, personal experiences have led to an interest in fundamentalist Christian faiths and/or faiths, including my own, which have used scriptural literalism to shape the lives of its members. Life in the South exposed me to fundamentalist faiths, unique because of their strict adherence to biblical literalism. One group in particular, the snake handlers of North East Alabama, had a direct impact on my path towards *Fearest Enden*. I have a certain level of respect for fundamentalist faiths and their use of biblical literalism.

It takes a tremendous amount of faith, to put your life on the line with expectations coming from the lines of a book. The dangers of this literalism outweigh my respect however, because literalism leads to ignorance of history, and ignorance of the possibilities of change that led to that particular version of text.

The 'handlers' in this particular region of the South are notorious for reasons beyond just unorthodox means of worship. A pastor at a congregation in Sand Rock, Alabama was sentenced to life in prison for the attempted murder of his wife. His weapons of choice, aside from his drunken use of fists, were his snakes. Forcing his wife to place her hands into the snake box, not once, but twice, led to numerous bites and nearly her death.¹⁶ One could say that she lived because of a miracle; that it was by her faith that she was saved.

Had this woman died, who would take the blame? Could the wife be to blame for her own death? A logical person would likely never agree. Nevertheless, fundamentalists may have called it a lack of belief on her part; she could have been vilified or imputed for having placed them in that scenario in the first place. Though this version of the blame game may sound ludicrous, the Old Testament version of the events of Eden, in addition to the baseless opinions of sages, did the same unjustly for Eve; she was forced to deal with serpents on her own. The repercussions have been societal and church-assigned labels, stereotypes, and woman's legal and social inferiority to the man of the Western world.

In the next section of the thesis I will give an in-depth analysis of the stories of Genesis in the Old Testament in addition to scriptural exegesis. There were many

¹⁶ Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*. (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 1-2.

challenges in relying on the few ancient texts available at my disposal. It is important therefore, that I preface the section by stating that the texts I will be analyzing are translations and therefore I will be focusing on the ideas behind the writing more than the linguistic minutiae for the purpose of the analysis and defense of Eve or of Trees in the later section.

In this dissertation I will pull from a number of novels that are either allude to, are loosely based on, or revolve around Eve and the Garden of Eden. I will look at lines from medieval authors Juan Rodriguez Del Padron and Christine de Pizan, who comparable to other authors of their time, wrote about women from history and praised them for their virtues. They were not the first to praise women like Eve, however their recognitions of notable women were universal and not dependent on obedience to men.¹⁷ Lastly, I will look at Aemilia Lanyer, whose who wrote an apology to or from Eve. Lanyer needed to be incorporated because she too saw Eve as a hero and as someone making a sacrifice for love. Each included writer was unique for his or her time, but they brought views of Eve and the garden that were not only bold for their time, but some like *Fearest Enden*, elevated her to the status of hero or at a minimum recognized her choice as a sacrifice.

The thesis will also look at the writings of a number of the early church fathers, specifically Tertullian, Irenaeus of Lyons, Ambrose of Milan, Justin the Martyr, in addition to St. Paul the Apostle. These men are by no means a comprehensive group making up the foundations of Christianity, however they each played a unique role in laying that foundation, but each also had a singular

17 Madeleine de l'Aubespine, *Selected Poems and Translations: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. by Anna Klosowska, trans. by Anna Klosowska (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 21-25.

perspective. This sampling of writers also held strong views on the roles of Eve, the Garden of Eden, or women in the progression of their church. Likewise, though many of the church fathers learned from each other, not all shared the same views. It would be important to identify some differences.

Eve's story in the Bible seems to begin in Chapter 1 of Genesis where God creates all the elements of the Earth and then creates a man and a woman at the same time as is mentioned in Verse 27:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him;
male and female created he them.¹⁸

This verse and the verse previous state that God decides to make a man of His likeness and to give him dominion over the earth, but verse 27 specifically equalizes the creation of both man and woman. This is where the text states that he first creates people and it is called the sixth day.¹⁹ After the seventh day of creation, where the creator rests from his labors, God again creates Man by giving him the breath of life.²⁰ It can be argued that the first creation of man and woman in chapter 1, was merely the creation of spirits, because it's not until verse seven, after he receives the 'breath of life', and that he becomes a living soul. Nevertheless, the story has just begun and it's already a little confusing.²¹

¹⁸ Genesis 1:27

¹⁹ Genesis 1:31

²⁰ Genesis 2:7

²¹ Textual studies of the creation texts in Genesis suggest that there are two distinct creation stories; these are not consecutive events.

The part of the story that exegeses have typically portrayed as Eve's entry into the story, comes in the next few verses, or the 2nd creation story, through an unnatural birth. She was taken from a rib and born in the opposite of natural order, through man.²² After being comfortable in their nakedness, the two go off into the garden. Satan enters the picture almost immediately and convinces Eve to rebel against God. If Eve's story really had begun there, she could have reasonably taken more of the blame for her choice to partake of the fruit. However, according to Genesis, a private pact was made between The Lord and Adam just prior to her creation.

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

And the LORD God said, *It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.²³

In this scripture, The Lord creates Adam, places him in the garden, gives him alone the commandment not to partake of the fruit of The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, explains the consequence of breaking that commandment, and then

²² Pamela Norris, *Eve: A Biography*, (New York: New York UP, 1999), pp. 1-7.

²³ Genesis 2:15-18

states that Adam shouldn't be alone. According to this version of the story, Eve was not created prior to that conversation. As compared to the plethora of classic allusions to Adam and Eve being in the garden together, not as many discuss in particular, Eve's absence from the first commandment.

One allusion in a classic gothic tale, whether intentional or not, describes a similar scenario and implications to consider.

... I was now about to form another being of whose dispositions
I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times
more malignant than her mate and delight, for its own
sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit
the neighbourhood of man and hide himself in deserts, but
she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a
thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply
with a compact made before her creation.²⁴

The preceding quotation is from the 20th chapter of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In the chapter, troubled scientist Victor Frankenstein is concluding that he will not follow through with creating a bride for his monster. I teach this novel to my senior English students every year because the themes of the novel, like *Fearest Enden*, enable students to ponder over the events of Eden. The majority of

²⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (Gibbings and Company Limited, 1897). pp. 194.

the comparisons in the book focus on Adam or Satan. This quotation adequately describes what should have been a defense of Eve.

In Genesis's version of the first creation(s), Eve was created last, and after the commandment had been given to Adam not to partake of the forbidden fruit. Considering Frankenstein's justification for ceasing to create the monster's mate, a similar consideration should have been made, that the biblical Eve was placed in a scenario for which a pact had been made, between a creator and His creation, and on which she placed no signature of agreement. It could be argued that Adam would simply have told Eve about the commandment. Conversely, Adam could have kept the commandment private due to the sacred nature of the conversation. Regardless, if all scripture in the account were to be taken literally, Eve would have never known about the commandment.

In *The Triumph of Women*, 15th Century-Galician writer Juan Rodriguez Del Padron defended Eve via a number of "proofs" as to how women are superior to men in his dedication to Maria of Aragon.²⁵ He elaborates on his premise in one of the earliest sections through a defense of Eve.

...The twelfth proof is that man sinned knowingly, without being tricked, and woman sinned because she was tricked and unknowingly. The thirteenth proof is that the sin of the first man—to whom the commandment was given—caused our perpetual and earthly mortality. It was not the fault of woman, and she was not chastised by the Lord for having tasted the apple,

²⁵ John Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages*, (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 82-85.

but rather only because she had offered it to the man, to whom it had been forbidden. If he had not sinned, all humanity would not have been condemned by the woman's sin, according to Augustine.²⁶

In this passage, Rodriguez further suggests Eve's absence from the original pact as well as her innocence by stating how the Lord did not blame her for actually partaking of the fruit but rather simply for giving it to Adam.

One of the first successful European female authors, Christine de Pizan, also argued in her poem, *Letter of the God of Love*, that not only was Eve without knowledge of the pact²⁷, but that her transaction with the serpent couldn't have been deemed a sin.

...Now as to the deceitful act
For which our mother Eve is brought to blame,
Upon which followed God's harsh punishment,
I say she never did play Adam False,
In innocence she took the enemy's
Assertion, which he gave her to believe.
Accepting it as true, sincerely said,
She went to tell her mate what she had heard.
No fraudulence was there, no planned deceit,

²⁶ Emily C. Francomano, trans, *Juan Rodríguez Del Padrón Triunfo De Las Donas / The Triumph of Ladies*, vols 5 (Medieval Feminist Forum Subsidia, 2016), pp. 1-111.

²⁷ Flood, *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages*, pp. 85-91.

For guiltlessness, which has no hidden spite,
Must not be labeled as deceptiveness.²⁸

Sarcastically referring to Eve's interaction with the serpent as "the deceitful act,"²⁹ Pizan details how God laid out a harsh punishment for something very unintended. According to Pizan, not only was Eve unaware of the commandment given to Adam, but she could not have been deceitful without the intent to do so. If Adam and Eve knew no sin up to this point, or prior to partaking of the fruit they had no knowledge of good and evil, Eve would have had no reason to not believe the serpent was telling the truth.

I doubt that Rodriguez or Pizan sought to denounce The Fall, nor do I. The purpose here is merely to establish and restore Eve's credibility.

Chapter three is perhaps the most widely discussed section of Genesis because it details the moment in which Eve spoke to the serpent and was convinced to partake of the fruit. This section has the potential to counter authors like Rodriguez and Pizan, because as Eve speaks to the serpent, she reviews the commandment not to partake.

And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of
the garden:

²⁸ Fenster, Thelma S., et al. *Poems of Cupid, God of Love: Christine De Pizan's "Epistre Au Dieu D'amours" and "Dit De La Rose"*, Thomas Hoccleve's *"The Letter of Cupid"*, Editions and Translations, with George Sewell's *"The Proclamation of Cupid"*. E.J. Brill, 1990. Christine de Pizan, *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*. I. 604-614, 6.

²⁹ Ibid. Line 604

But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said,
Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.³⁰

These lines appear to contradict the fact that Eve was unaware of the pact. What this could mean, however, is simply that Eve was not alone when she spoke to the devil. This section specifically has Eve stating, “*We* may eat of the fruit...” Contrary to Pizan’s poem, where she states, “she went to tell her mate what she had heard.” The use of *we* in that section suggests that Eve is speaking in the plural of herself and Adam. Verse six of Genesis states:

And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that
it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she
took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with
her; and he did eat.³¹

In this passage/moment, Eve sees the fruit as being physically desirable, desires also to have the wisdom and knowledge it contains, and partakes. But it does not state that she ventures off to find her husband somewhere else, it says that she gave it “also unto her husband *with* her.” The term *with* suggests that this was a moment of equal choosing. Eve may have had the first or final say, but it hints that Adam was present the entire time. This could mean that they took the fruit and/or made the choice together. This would also support the narrative from Chapter 2 of

³⁰ Genesis 3:2-3

³¹ Genesis 3:6

Genesis. If it wasn't good for man to be alone,³² why would it be condoned for woman to be left alone? Granted, this verse undoubtedly refers to Adam being alone in the world as compared to just a moment in time. Nevertheless, there was little reason for the two of them to have been separated after so much emphasis had been placed on the two of them being as one. The Fall itself has arguably more weight and substance than the earth's creation period. If Adam should not be alone in the day of his creation, he should not/would not have been alone in the culminating event of his existence.

Many early Christian theologians viewed the original sin as an avertable abomination. Others like sermon writer St. Ambrose (AD 337-397), an early Catholic Archbishop of Milan, and an advocate for both monasticism and a more religiously regulated empire,³³ said Adam and Eve's sin "brought more benefit to us than harm."³⁴ The paradoxical concept of the fortunate fall, which appears in the *Exultet*, a Catholic hymn sung at the blessing of the paschal candle, and often attributed to Ambrose, portrays a fall that is both "happy" and "necessary."³⁵ This *felix culpa* or happy fall, is also featured in Book Twelve of *Paradise Lost*:

His faithful, and receive them into bliss,
Whether in Heaven or Earth; for then the Earth
Shall all be Paradise, far happier place
Than this of Eden, and far happier days."

³² Genesis 2:18

³³ Boniface Ramsay, Ambrose, ed. by Carol Harrison, Series: The Early Church Fathers edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

³⁴ Arthur O. Lovejoy, St. Ambrose, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1948) p. 287-88

³⁵ Lovejoy, 279

So spake the Archangel Michaël; then paused,
As at the World's great period; and our Sire,
Replete with joy and wonder, thus replied:
"O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense,
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good—more wonderful
Than that which by creation first brought forth
Light out of darkness! Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
Much more that much more good thereof shall spring—
To God more glory, more good-will to men
From God—and over wrauth grace shall abound.³⁶

Milton uses these lines to illustrate a hesitant Adam. After thinking about the enormity of the original sin and its consequences. Adam considers for a moment that he and Eve should be congratulated. He comes to this conclusion after a vision from Michael the Archangel, where he sees that all mankind will eventually be redeemed, but that wouldn't be possible without their original sin.³⁷

Though the language of Chapter 3 of Genesis can be ambiguous, and the meaning behind each of its events is speculative, the conclusion of Eve as temptress is bewildering. After a close reading of this section of the story, it's clear that any

³⁶ Milton, XII. 473-478

³⁷ Lovejoy, 277

Judeo-Christian interpreter's exegesis of Eve as a temptress, must have come from a writer's presuppositions or cultural expectations.³⁸ That determination could have possibly arisen later in the chapter in verse thirteen:

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest *to be* with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.³⁹

In this moment, Adam appears to use Eve as scapegoat by stating that as the person who was given to him by God, had given him the fruit. It could also be read as if Adam was reminding God that He had given the woman to him. Regardless, we have a number of ways this statement could be interpreted and it's a possibility, due to the lack of reverence in my second interpretation, that the first of Eve taking the blame was more reasonable. I see this as the only possible starting point for Eve taking the blame.

At any cost, early theologians used Adam's words and made assumptions about what took place and defined women in the process. One of the first scriptural accounts of blame comes from the Hellenistic Jewish sage Ben Sira (2nd Century BCE), in the 25th Chapter of Ecclesiasticus:

From a woman was the beginning of sin and because of her, we all die.⁴⁰

³⁸ Jean M Higgins., "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIV (1976), 639–47

³⁹ Genesis 3:12

⁴⁰ William Oscar Emil Oesterley, *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, in the Revised Version*, (Cambridge: Cambridge: UP, 1913), Ecclesiasticus 25:24.

This verse refutes the possibility that sin could have come from any source besides women. He even places more guilt on 'a woman,' who we can assume to be Eve⁴¹, than the serpent himself. The text of the Ben Sira when put in context with the social norms of the Hellenistic period, may not seem surprising.⁴² Unless a woman was born into royalty, she has few if any rights. A number of other Apocryphal writers place the blame on Eve, even going as far as to speak for God in *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*⁴³ and *The Books of Adam and Eve*⁴⁴.

Compilers of the Midrash Rabbah, a collection of stories that relate to the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh, sought to define the roles of women via a series of questions and answers, which incriminate Eve. One section in particular addresses how women are to mourn at funerals:

...Why do they [the women] walk in front of the corpse [at a funeral]?

Because they brought death into the world...

...And why was the precept of menstruation given to her?

41 Research has been done to suggest that Ben Sira's 'woman' was not Eve, but rather referring to wives or evil wives, and that Ben Sira did not believe in the Old Testament's implications of The Fall. Levison, Jack. "Is Eve to Blame? A Contextual Analysis of Sirach 25:24." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (1985): 617-23. The author(s) claim that Ben Sira is telling husbands to control their wives and have dominion over them, a concept that could arguably have stemmed from man's interpretation of The Fall and the need to for women to thus become lesser than their husbands. This argument is contradicts itself.

42 TA Ellis, *Gender in the Book of Ben Sira : Divine Wisdom, Erotic Poetry, and the Garden of Eden* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 1.

43 *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, 30:17-18 discuss the creation of Adam and Eve. Verse 18 specifically states, "And by his wife death came." 31:6 discusses Satan's actions in the garden, "...in such a manner her entered and deceived Eve. But he did not touch Adam. Charles, R. H., and William Richard Morfill, *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, (Clarendon Press, 1896), 30:17-18.

44 In the apocryphal text, *The Books of Adam and Eve*, 3:2 has Eve specifically stating to Adam, "Wilt thou slay me? That I may die, and perchance God the Lord will bring thee into paradise for on my account hast thou been driven thence. Charles, R. H. "The Books of Adam & Eve," *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English: with Introductions and Critical Explanatory Notes to the Several Books Edited in Conjunction with Many Scholars*, (Clarendon Press, 1913) 3:3

Because she shed the blood of Adam [by causing death]...⁴⁵

In these lines, the Rabbi identifies his reasoning behind two common occurrences, a funeral procession where women walk in front of the deceased, and menstruation. Women are said to veil their faces in these funeral processions for the purpose of covering their faces in shame; likewise they are linked to death through Eve.⁴⁶ Early Rabbinic writers would likewise commonly ridicule women for menstruation. It was said that comparable to the blood of circumcision, which was symbolic of fertility and offspring, menstruation for a woman was symbolic of a lack of fertility, death, or estrangement from God.⁴⁷ Both instances in the passage (menstruation and veiled funeral processions) are blamed on women and both instances require women to take the blame as Eve has, for bringing death into the world and by causing Adam to suffer. Unlike the more ambiguous texts of the Apocrypha, these lines, which all fall within the same section, specifically refer to Adam, so the reader knows they are referring to Eve.

I will re-iterate that as biblical literalists, these men have little to go on, and perhaps that was on purpose. Perhaps it was part of a sinister plan to either erase Eve from existence, post-Eden, or only speak of her when teaching a lesson. She is mentioned by name only a couple of times in the Old Testament and the same in the New Testament. One author who uses Eve is Paul. St. Paul (c. 5-67) is noted for

⁴⁵ H Freedman, Maurice Simon, S. M. Lehrman, J. Israelstam, Judah J. Slotki, J. Rabinowitz, A. Cohen, and Louis I. Rabinowitz. *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*. (London: Soncino, 1939), Genesis (Bereshith) 17.8.

⁴⁶ Judith R. Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Brandeis University Press, 2002), pp. 68-69.

⁴⁷ Baskin, "Distinguishing Differences." pp. 24-25.

being one of the most influential authors in the New Testament. As a Jew, he persecuted Christians for their beliefs and after his conversion, he arguably continued to pester Christians through letters that demanded they cease to follow false prophets or to lead lives of sin.⁴⁸ His letters to the wayward Corinthians, Paul exhorts them not to become ‘corrupted’ as Eve was:

But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.⁴⁹

In this passage, Paul is specifically trying to steer people away from false apostles or prophets and exhorts the people of Corinth to remember the simplicity of Christ’s teachings and not to let their minds be affected in the way that Eve’s apparently was by the devil. He lays out a similar message in 1st Timothy:

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;
But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.
Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.

⁴⁸ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters*(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 1.

⁴⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:3

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

For Adam was first formed, then Eve.

And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.⁵⁰

In this passage, women are told to dress modestly, sit in silence, and not to practice authority over man because man i.e. Adam came first. He adds that Adam was in no way deceived and that 'the transgression' he blames on Eve for having been the one 'deceived.'⁵¹ Aside from these two scriptures, there are virtually no depictions of Eve outside of the first few chapters of Genesis. With this in mind, it's not entirely clear where St. Paul acquired his attitudes towards women and Eve. Nor is it clear, where followers of Paul, and early Christian authors like Tertullian (c. 160-220) would acquire the necessity to go on the offensive towards women. Like St. Paul's comments on the apparel and speaking permissions of women, Tertullian was a polemicist who wrote a memoriam of sorts on the introduction of sin into the world...by women:

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the

⁵⁰ 1 Timothy 2:9-14

⁵¹ 1 Timothy 2:9-14

devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert—that is, death—even the Son of God had to die.⁵²

In this passage from *On the Apparel of Women*, Tertullian speaks as though he has an axe to grind. He begins by telling women that they are all an Eve, that they are facing some form of eternal punishment just for existing; that they are 'the devil's gateway,' and that they (as one(s) with Eve) took the fruit, broke God's law, persuaded the almighty Adam, destroyed man's image, and even indirectly caused the death of Jesus Christ. Tertullian's polemics were specifically directed towards what he viewed as heresies in the church. Many scholars believe Tertullian himself became a heretic when he conformed to the teachings of Montanism⁵³

Many early Christian writers, including Tertullian, created typologies of the events in Eden and those relating to the birth, life, and death of Christ. Typologies concerning the trees of Eden and the cross will be mentioned later. While these authors may have had the best intentions, their typologies depicted Eve as a tool for evil, while portraying Mary as the vessel of grace.⁵⁴ In *The Flesh of Christ*, Tertullian uses this elaborate analogy as his reasoning for the necessity that the Son of God be born of a virgin.

⁵² Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers. Vols 4: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Part First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Revised and Chronologically arranged with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), *On the Apparel of Women, Book 1, Chap 1*.

⁵³ DE Wilhite, *Tertullian the African : An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007), p. 167.

⁵⁴ Diane Kelsey McColley, *Milton's Eve*, (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 6.

For it was while Eve was yet a virgin, that the ensnaring word had crept into her ear which was to build the edifice of death. Into a virgin's soul, in like manner, must be introduced that Word of God which was to raise the fabric of life; so that what had been reduced to ruin by this sex, might by the selfsame sex be recovered to salvation. As Eve had believed the serpent, so Mary believed the angel. The delinquency which the one occasioned by believing, the other by believing effaced.⁵⁵

In this passage, Mary has become the cure for the evil that was first instituted by Eve.⁵⁶ Because Eve was a virgin when the devil convinced her to bring death into the world by partaking of the fruit, according to Tertullian, another virgin of the same sex must be required to restore life and particularly the redeeming life of Jesus Christ. Deniers of Tertullian's misogyny could use this passage to say that he was embracing women as restorers of salvation. One need only to read the previous passages from *On the Apparel of Women*, to know where he stood. Tertullian also cannot escape the fact that Mary is a 'daughter of Eve.'⁵⁷ She wouldn't exist and neither would Christ without the Mother of All. Nevertheless, patristic writing led to Eve representing sin, sexual deviance and death, while dualistically, Mary represents grace and life.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Alexander Roberts, et al. "XVII: On The Flesh of Christ." *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. (C. Scribner's Sons, 1903) pp. 536–537.

⁵⁶ Dylan Elliott. "Gender and the Christian Traditions." *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. Edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras. (Oxford University Press, 2016)

⁵⁷ Elliott, "Gender and the Christian Traditions."

⁵⁸ Tina Beattie. "Mary in Patristic Theology." *Mary: the Complete Resource*. Edited by Sarah Jane. Boss. (Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 86–95.

Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202) is another Christian who was writing in opposition to heresies and is one of the first Early Christian authors to create both an Adam-to-Christ as well as Eve-to-Mary typology in his piece, *Adversus Haereses*.⁵⁹ After describing the Adam-to-Christ typology via Luke, he explains that Mary, in contrast to Eve's disobedience, declared, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word."⁶⁰ to signify her obedience to his command to bear the Son of God.⁶¹ He then states, "But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin."⁶² Irenaeus then explains how both women were virgins, Eve because she was naked in the garden and did not understand what procreation was, but also that she should become an adult prior to having a family.⁶³ He continues:

[Eve] having become disobedient, was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race; so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her], and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race.⁶⁴

In this passage, Irenaeus blames Eve for The Fall, making her 'the cause of death' for both herself and the entire human race. Both she and Mary were virgins

⁵⁹ Maja Weyermann, "The Typologies of Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary, and Their Relationship to One Another." *Anglican Theological Review*, 84, no. 3, (2002), 617–621.

⁶⁰ Luke 1:38

⁶¹ Reverend Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, *Writings of Irenaeus*, 3:22, Parts 3-4. (Aeterna Press, 2015), pp. 238–239.

⁶² Ibid. Part 4.

⁶³ Ibid. Part 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Part 4.

and while both received a commandment from God that would, in a sense, directly impact the salvation of the human race, Mary chose obedience and (instead of Eve) became the source of salvation. He finalizes part four with the following:

And thus also it was that the knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith.⁶⁵

In this line, Irenaeus metaphorically refers to Eve's decision as a 'knot,' which required the obedience of the other virgin to untie, he states that Eve's 'unbelief' left the human race bound and this required Mary to set them free.⁶⁶ Other Christian theologians had similar Eve-to-Mary philosophies, including apologist Justin the Martyr⁶⁷ (c.100-165) and Irenaeus's disciple Hippolytus of Rome⁶⁸ (c. 170-236). To me personally however, this typology is easily refutable. We can simply examine the basic facts of Eve's role in the fall to find a rebuttal. Chronologically, Eve does not receive her name or title until after The Fall. It is because of The Fall and the choice, that she is "the mother of all living."⁶⁹ Without Eve, neither Mary, nor Jesus Christ in His human form would exist. Her act made possible the birth of Mary and Christ as well as redemption for all mankind through Christ. Likewise, in Genesis 3:15, God

⁶⁵ Ibid. Part 4

⁶⁶ Ibid. Part 4.

⁶⁷ Justin the Martyr has perhaps the earliest example of the Eve-to-Mary comparison in his *Dialogue With Trypho* 100.5. Justin, Falls, T, Halton, T, & Slusser, M, *Dialogue With Trypho, Selections From The Fathers Of The Church*, 3 Vols (Washington, District of Columbia: Catholic University of America Press, 2003)

⁶⁸ Weyermann, p. 621-623

⁶⁹ Genesis 3:20

prophecies that Eve's offspring would have power to crush the head of the serpent.⁷⁰ All would cease to exist without her; her seed is Christ and each of us. The power to crush the devil would have been impossible without her. Her actions did not leave the human race bound, but rather gave them the freedom to exist and the possibility of being redeemed.

It is evident that either the attitudes towards Eve and women came from a few, select scriptures and can be attributed to biblical literalisms, or they were simply prejudices, contrived by non-slithering serpents. As a result, one of the most self-less acts of human nature became associated with vanity and prurience.⁷¹ There is little to no basis for their claims, and thus we see the catastrophic results of perhaps one or two lines of biblical literalism.

Elaborate typologies surfaced in the Middle Ages when the literary interpretations of Genesis were transformed into artwork found in sculpture, paintings, and the illustrations of illuminated manuscripts.⁷² Though created long after the likes of Ben Sira and Tertullian, some artwork showed that their serpent-
esque labels never died.

A popular theological work in the late middle ages was the illuminated manuscript, *The Speculum Humanae Salvationis* or the *Mirror of Human Salvation*, likely created by Ludolphus de Saxonia (d. 1378).⁷³ Page two of the folio features the

⁷⁰ Susan Wiseman, "Eve, Paradise Lost, and Female Interpretation." *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 535–536.

⁷¹ McColley, p. 7.

⁷² "The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages." Edited Richard Kenneth Emmerson., and Bernard McGinn. (Cornell University Press, 1993) p.300

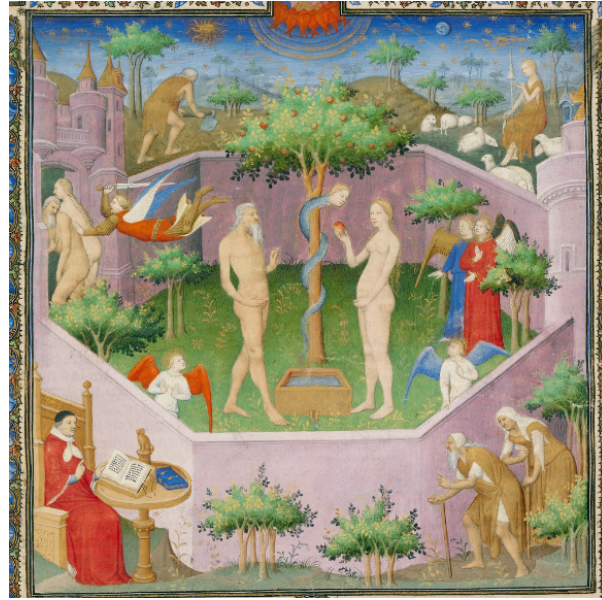
⁷³ Carolyn Merchant. "Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture." (Routledge, 2013) p.45

creation of Eve from Adam's rib, as well as the proceeding piece, *Satan Deceives Eve By Means of the Serpent*. In the piece, one can clearly see a resemblance of Eve and the Serpent, which was an unfortunate but popular motif of the time.



[Figure 1. Ludolphus de Saxonia (supposed author). *Diabolus deceptit evam per serpente[m]* (Satan Deceives Eve By Means of the Serpent). From *Le Miroir de Humaine Salvation* (The Mirror of Human Salvation), Circa 1455. Book Section. Currently a part of the *Wives and Wenches, Sinners and Saints: Women in Medieval Europe* exhibit, at the Newberry Library.]

In another illuminated manuscript by Giovanni Boccaccio (c.1313-1375), illuminator Boucicaut Master portrays Adam and Eve in a series of events surrounding Eden, with the temptation at the center of the piece. Eve's face again, is clearly mirrored with that of the blue-bodied serpent as she holds the red fruit in her hand.



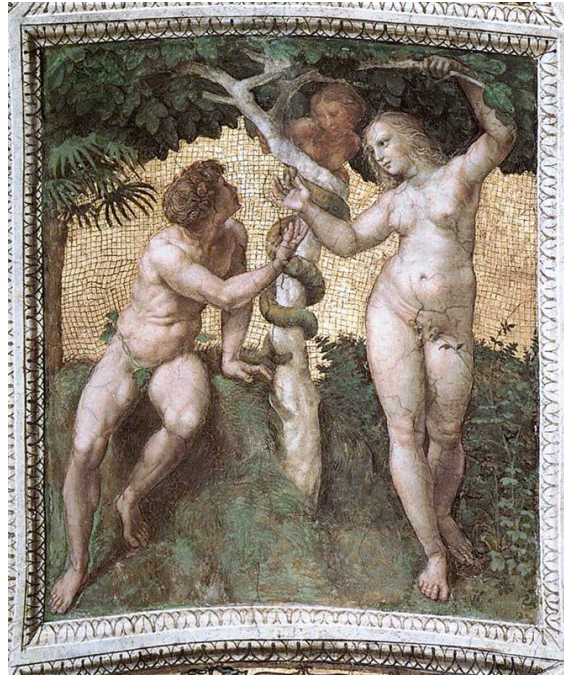
[Figure 2. Boucicaut Master. *The Story of Adam & Eve*. From the book *Concerning the Fates of Illustrious Men and Women*, Created 1413-1415 in Paris, France. Folio. Currently a part of the J. Paul Getty Museum.]

The following terracotta glazed sculpture from the workshop of Giovanni Della Robbia, continues the serpent-esque labels. This image goes beyond making Eve the 'gateway to the devil,' it makes her the devil incarnate.



[Figure 3. Workshop of Giovanni della Robbia. *Adam & Eve*. Created in 1515 in Florence Italy. Terracotta with glaze. Currently a part of the Walters Art Museum.]

Giovanni Del Robbia wasn't alone. Raphael's *Adam and Eve*, from his *Stanza Della Segnatura*, appears to portray the serpent as half Eve.



[Figure 4. Raphael. *Adam & Eve*. From the Stanza Della Segnatura, Created 1508-1511 in Italy. Fresco. Currently a part of the Vatican Museum, The Vatican.]

From the featured works, it is easy to see the perception of Eve that was translated from exegesis into art form. But had Tertullian's or any other early writer's interpretations been less misogynistic, the second snake would have ceased to exist.

I will agree with Tertullian on two points. Eve's choice makes her indirectly responsible for the death of Jesus Christ, as the story goes, and thus, she is also a 'gateway,' but not to the devil, to eternal life.

As John Milton said via Adam in *Paradise Lost*, Eve was “Heav’ns last best gift.”⁷⁴ If we are looking at the Genesis account figuratively or literally, she was the last to be created, but the first of human flesh. Even though Adam is designed as the ultimate man in the direct likeness to God, Eve is born of humanity; it is through her that humanity is born.

Her decision in the Garden was not one of stupidity. She didn’t ‘fall’ for the serpent’s wily ways. She too was created in the image of God(s), and as Milton described, was “with perfect beauty adorned,”⁷⁵ a person whose beauty and intellect made Satan jealous. Does that mean that she was like unto the devil? No. It means that her beauty was beyond compare. Adam is credited for being “too valiant for the devil to attack,” yet Eve, the temptress and lowly woman was able to usurp his valiance to make him partake of the fruit? No.

Adam should, at the very least, share half the responsibility for this transgression. Another successful early woman writer, Aemelia Lanyer wrote “Eve’s Apologie” as part of her poem, “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum” in which she uses sarcasm and the irony of Adam’s status to defend “Our Mother Eve:”⁷⁶

But surely Adam can not be excusde,

Her fault though great, yet hee was most too blame;

What Weaknesse offerd, Strength might have refusde,

⁷⁴ Milton, V.19.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Book 4, Line 634

⁷⁶ Aemilia Lanyer, “Eve’s Apologie.” *Salve Deus Rex Iudaeorum. Containing, 1 the Passion of Christ. 2 Eues Apologie in Defence of Women. 3 the Teares of the Daughters of Ierusalem. 4 the Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie. With Diuers Other Things Not Vnfit to Be Read*, (Printed by Valentine Simmes for Richard Bonian ..., 1611), 761-763.

Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame:
Although the Serpents craft had her abusde,
Gods holy word ought all his actions frame,
For he was Lord and King of all the earth,
Before poore Eve had either life or breath.

Who being fram'd by Gods eternall hand,
The perfect'st man that ever breath'd on earth;
And from Gods mouth receiv'd that strait command,
The breach whereof he knew was present death:
Yea having powre to rule both Sea and Land,
Yet with one Apple wonne to loose that breath
Which God had breathed in his beauteous face,
Bringing us all in danger and disgrace.⁷⁷

In these lines, Lanyer does not release Eve of all blame, but she immediately notes that Adam should definitely not stand blameless. He was made a perfect man, lord of all and was given both the commandment and great power prior to Eve being born. He had the power to command the seas and the earth, but one simple fruit condemned him? Not likely. If women, who are perceived to be weaker than man because Eve succumbed to the enticing of the serpent, what does that say about a

⁷⁷ Lanyer. Lines 777-792.

man of so much status and power? He must have also been equally imperfect and equal in blame.

Eve was one with Adam. They were of one flesh in body and mind. Eve was the mother of all living and though she does not become a mother in the child-bearing sense until after The Fall, she was aware of the effects her choice would have made. She knew that without making the choice, they would either live forever just as two, or die. She chose what she did so that all could live. It is believed that pain did not exist in the garden prior to The Fall, but I believe it did. Eve had to have suffered mental anguish when considering the possibility of death in refusing the devil's choice. Regardless if she suffered or not however, the choice was self-less.

Many definitions of heroes exist. A wide range of characteristics have been used to define heroic characters in literature, but acts of selflessness, which have an impact on a number of people, are unanimously recognized. Eve made existence and imperfections possible, two very necessary elements of life. The imperfections lead to sin, which leads to a need for redemption in order to eventually earn an eternal reward in the presence of Almighty God. Literary heroism requires a sacrifice of self, and Eve sacrificed her happiness and her paradise for others, plain and simple. As the first human, of human flesh, and the first human to make a sacrifice of this magnitude, she is the greatest human hero of all time. Thus the great deception did not take place in the garden, but rather in the minds of those who sought to make the story of Eden their own.

Scapegoats & Saviors: A Defense of Trees

It does not take a biblical literalist to grasp the level of importance that trees had in the biblical creation story or any creation story for that matter. According to the authors of Genesis, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, like Eve, became the serpent's tool to deceive man via the fruit. It could also be argued that trees were both the source of humankind's downfall, but also participants in salvation by offering the wood of the cross.⁷⁸ Trees have long been sacred in numerous cultures due to their pivotal presence in most major creation stories of the world.⁷⁹ It is therefore perplexing that mankind has almost done away with any customs of preserving trees, but rather is wiping them from the earth without thought to the consequence.

Beginning with the biblical, on the third day of the creation, God formed grass, herbs, and fruit-bearing trees. After creating humans in the previously mentioned first version of the human creation, He gives them some ambiguous commandments:

⁷⁸ Several references to salvation via the wood of the cross come from the Anglo Saxon poem "The Dream of the Rood." *The Dream of the Rood: an Old English Poem Attributed to Cynewulf*, ed. by Albert S. Cook (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

⁷⁹ Examples of specific creation stories will be discussed on Pg. 438 of this thesis.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.⁸⁰

This scripture has been the basis of both environmental as well as reproductive debates for centuries. The commonly used phrase ‘be fruitful and multiply’ connotes that man and woman should procreate. As an alternate path of discussion however, perhaps this God wasn’t speaking about familial reproduction at all. Perhaps He was speaking about taking care of the earth, of planting more vegetation and becoming and maintaining sustainability. This might sound far-fetched, but the scriptural language is in fact ambiguous. A literalist at least, should consider why He would discuss both how to treat the earth and creating families in the same verse. Likewise, literalist sages who believed women could ‘be saved in childbearing,’ should consider that this commandment to multiply came prior to The Fall chronologically. If the commandment was given prior, it could have greatly influenced Eve’s heroic decision to partake.

As far as trees are concerned, from a literalist standpoint, the argument that man has dominion over nature begins here. However, he is never given dominion over trees specifically. We might assume that when referring to ‘the earth,’ this means everything on it, but if so, God would have no need to specify dominion over the fish, the birds, and everything that moves. The word that hurts my argument for

⁸⁰ Genesis 1:28

the trees the most is 'subdue.' It typically connotes bondage, slavery, and control, and comes from the Hebrew word *kabash*, which has a number of definitions ranging from 'bondage' and 'assault' to 'trample', or 'under foot.' However, each definition can be used in context of the situation or scripture in which it is conveyed. In the beginning chapter of Genesis, it wouldn't make much sense for the word to connote the exploitation of nature that verse 28 has come to promote. Rather, one should consider that man and woman were just created in God's image and given rule over His creations:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.⁸¹

In these scriptures, an equal male and female are created in the image of God(s) and are given dominion over everything that moves. People who have just been created in the 'likeness' of God and who are then given control of His creations, would not be receiving permission to destroy it. Moreover, in the next chapter, Adam is told to take care of the garden:

⁸¹ Genesis 1:26-27

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.⁸²

In this short passage, the purpose for placing Adam in the garden is for him to take care of it. He has just placed all kinds of good-looking trees in the midst of the garden and the first thing God makes sure to clarify is how one should use the trees:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.⁸³

In these verses, He explains that as the beasts and fowls and fish, the trees are there for man's use, but he specifies trees that produce 'fruit,' and he gives Adam permission to eat the fruit from any of them, except for The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is important to note that this is the first commandment given to Adam once in the garden. It is also important to note that man's first sin or transgression was an act against nature; because they took from the tree, and

⁸² Genesis 2:15

⁸³ Genesis 2: 16-17

because they failed, in a sense to take care of the garden, they were cast out. Man and woman's unrighteous dominion over nature led to their spiritual downfall and eventually will do so to their physical and earthly downfall as well.

The consequential powers of trees do not remain only in the Garden and, like Eve's, their legends vary. A number of wood-of-the-cross legends exist that connect Eden to Calvary through the wood of the same species of tree. Venturing just outside of the King James canon and into apocryphal texts like *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, we read that Seth returns to the Garden to fetch oil for his dying father, Adam. An angel rejects Seth's search for the oil but sends part of the tree back with him.⁸⁴ In the legends, Seth receives either seeds, shoots, or branches of the tree. In one legend seeds are placed in Adam's mouth, in others they are planted at his gravesite; the same results however entail a tree growing at the site of Adam's burial.⁸⁵ The 68th chapter of *The Golden Legend, The Finding of the Cross*, states that Solomon found the tree and had it cut to be placed in his forest house but the workers could not fit it in.

It was always too long or too short. If it did not fit into a place too narrow for it and it was carefully shortened it was immediately seen to be so short as to be completely useless. Therefore the workmen would have nothing more to do with it and it was thrown over a certain pond to serve as a bridge for those wishing to cross.⁸⁶

84 Jacobus De Voragine, Earnon Duffy, & William Granger Ryan, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. The Finding of the Holy Cross. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 277.

85 Theresa M. Kenney, and Mary Dzon, *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es Et O!* (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2015).

86 Jacobus. Pg. 278

In this passage, workers on Solomon's temple exhaust their efforts in fitting this sacred wood within the walls of the temple. It is then ironically thrown into a pond to be used as a cross or bridge. When the queen of Sheba seeks out Solomon and sees the wood, she has a vision of a man being crucified upon it and falls to worship; she tells Solomon, who has the wood buried deep in the earth. A spring comes forth in which people bathe to be healed. Eventually, at the time of Christ's crucifixion, the wood floats to the surface, and Jews use it to build Christ's cross.⁸⁷ Again, varying accounts of each element of this story exist, but the protagonists are the same—sacred trees with the power to damn, to save, and to redeem. Yet humans, like Solomon, have chosen to bury these divine creatures, chop them down or clear them out. As with Eden, there is always a consequence, always the tree circles round to its original purpose of an instrument for salvation.

Whether or not people believe in the wood-of-the-tree legends, there is no denying the divine powers with which trees have been credited for thousands of years. Trees have played divine roles in nearly every major creation story in the world and these are trees whose species still exist today. Perhaps the most notable of those species is the Ash because of its relation to the World Tree, Yggdrasil. To the people of Scandinavia, Yggdrasil was an Ash tree that grew in the middle of the nine worlds, piercing the center of an island, which was surrounded by a large body of water.⁸⁸ The tree's branches extended into the solar system and its roots to the underworld. Three of the largest roots held up the equivalents of Norse earth,

⁸⁷ Jacobus, Pg. 279

⁸⁸ Donna Rosenberg, *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*, (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Pub. Group, 1994), pp. 206-13.

heaven, and hell or Midgard, Asgard, and Niflheim. This tree played the role of creator and savior, a bridge between life and death.

Hindu legends say the heavens were formed from a Soma tree. The branches spread over and around a number of heavens. Also surrounded by a lake, the tree has two birds that sit atop it and help to produce life-sustaining, even immortality granting properties.⁸⁹ The world tree of Buddhism was said to be covered in gems from the ground up and released far-traveling fumes of ambrosia to enlighten the soul.⁹⁰ Buddha meditated under this tree for a number of years while being tempted by various creatures and tempests that the evil one would throw at him.⁵⁴ Some Buddhists believe this tree to be the Bodhi tree, under which Buddha gained his enlightenment. Otherwise known as the Peepul tree, the story states that when Buddha was born, the tree sprang forth from the center of the Universe.⁵⁴ The Muslim world tree or The Tree of Immortality stood in the Garden of Eden when, according to the Quran, Allah commanded Adam and Eve not to partake of the forbidden fruit. Unlike in the biblical version however, the Garden in the Quran only had one tree.

Again, there is no denying the importance of trees to the history of the human race, specifically in the annals of religion. Why then do humans choose to destroy trees in vast quantities? Why no longer hold them sacred? In *Fearest Enden*, sacred trees are motifs that pop up in every new setting and are near the scene of

⁸⁹ Water K. Kelly, *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folklore*, (London: Chapman and Hall. 1863), p. 139

⁹⁰ Richard Folkard, *Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics. Embracing the Myths, Traditions, Superstitions, and Folk-lore of the Plant Kingdom* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884), p.4.

every major plot twist. The novel makes clear at least one forgotten effect of deforestation, the eventual death of the world.

Both the Greeks and the Romans believed the Oak tree to have god-like powers. Homer uses both the ash and the oak throughout *The Odyssey* as symbols of strength and power. According to John Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Romans had conceived a world tree with power to affect the course of human life. As in other stories, humans were believed to have descended or emerged from these trees:

These woods were first the seat of sylvan powers,
Of nymphs and fawns, and savage men, who took
Their birth from trunks of trees and stubborn oak.
Nor law they knew, nor manners, nor the care
Of laboring oxen, nor the shining share:
Nor arts of gain, nor what they gain'd to spare.
Their exercise the chase: the running flood
Supply'd their thirst; the trees supply'd their food.⁹¹

In these lines, Aeneas and his companion have just traveled up the Tiber river and Evander explains that Romulus and the founders of Rome were of a sylvan background, meaning they came from or were raised in the trees. It is not clear whether it was actually believed that men were born from trees, but humans could

91 Virgil, Robert Fitzgerald, and John Dryden. *The Aeneid* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). p. 418.

feel a very strong connection to them. Here, again, we see how ancient peoples had built a relationship with trees, but here we also begin to see where humankind's hatred for the trees comes from. You get a sense of admiration or adoration towards the trees, perhaps even idolization, but the phrase "savage men," also gives a sense of rancor or spite.

During Christian Imperialism in the Middle Ages of central and Western Europe, trees still covered a vast majority of the land, with villages and small cities attempting to emerge in between.⁹² As it is human nature to judge and make assumptions about the unknown, what man could not see in the darkness of the forests became associated with the darkness in general, rituals, bestiality, and unruly behavior.⁹³

The term "forest" came from the Latin *forestare*, which means "to keep out, off limits, or to exclude." Laws were put into place to keep people out of the forest. Much of this had to do with Kings preserving the animals within for hunting⁹⁴ but I feel it also had to do with keeping people safe from beasts and keeping people from turning to the paganism that church leaders felt was the religion of the forests. There was also a fear of man returning to nature and becoming a man-beast or wild man. Examples include Arthurian Knight Yvain in Chretien de Troyes's *Yvain*, Myrddin Wyllt in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, the biblical character of Nebuchadnezzar, or Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

⁹² Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: U Chicago, 1993), p.61.

⁹³ Harrison, Pg. 62

⁹⁴ Harrison, Pg. 69

This hostility towards the forests likely came partly from the attitudes towards the people who lived in them; towards their idolization of trees, which views were deemed pagan and evil. It also likely comes from an attitude that forests became hideouts for the criminal, the rejected, and those who sought to be free from the rules of man. I believe that it came from man's desire to conquer all that was around him and to be remembered. At one point the lands of the earth were mostly forested. The trees stood higher than the walls of cities and loomed over those who sought expansion and domination. Finally, I think that as man sought expansion and to be remembered, trees became a commodity, a beast's head to be cut off, and eventually man could argue that deforestation was a necessity for humankind's progress and survival.

Regardless of the reasons, everything will eventually come full circle, like the trees in Eden and the wood-of-the-cross. The original commandment to take care of the garden and humankind's failure to do so will eventually lead to our downfall. In the following sentence from my novel, an immortal named Reynia explains how the trees of the earth not only provide oxygen for the protagonist and the people of his world, but for others as well:

When man rids the earth of trees in the dramatic fashion that he has, he is not only shrinking our oxygen supply, he is strangling the world below.

This quotation, though fantastical, exemplifies how the effects of deforestation should not just be taken at surface value; there is larger impact than

just a reduction of the supply of wood. The implications stretch far beyond trees as a source, and for many, the loss of trees in great numbers is a spiritual ordeal. In my novel, like the world tree in many cultures, the trees are a bridge between life and death, heaven and hell, perdition or immortality. I believe this to be true in a figurative and literal sense and I sincerely hope we can find a way to reverse our sins towards nature to extend for the time being, our survival.

Influences

In this final section, I will discuss nine authors whose influence had an impact on the creation of my thesis.

One of the first authors that I used in my defense of Eve was Mary Shelley. Outside of the use of *Frankenstein* to support my argument, I have felt a sense of identification with the characters of the novel since I read it at a young age. I first and foremost admire Mary's courage to accept Lord Byron's challenge on that stormy night on Lake Geneva, to create a spooky and symbolic tale. Encircled by talented men in an age when few women were given the power of voice, would have been intimidating to most. I am forever grateful that she accepted the challenge and didn't hold back.

As in my novel, the setting of *Frankenstein* does not remain in one city or country, but moves with the characters from Switzerland to Italy, Germany, France, England, Scotland, Ireland, Russia, and the Arctic. I admire that Shelley makes sure to use at least one feature of each of these locations to put the reader at that

location, whether it be the white-steepled church in Ingolstadt,⁹⁵ the clear waters at the base of Monts Blanc and Saleve in the Swiss Alps,⁹⁶ or the isolated, barren and barely habitable Orkney Islands.⁹⁷

I was also influenced by Shelley's use of *Paradise Lost* in the novel. Victor Frankenstein has many names for his creation, including wretch, daemon, and spectre,⁹⁸ but I was impressed by the monster comparing himself to characters that he had found in the literature he had read, specifically Adam and Satan from *Paradise Lost*:

I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence: but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator ; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire know ledge from, beings of a superior nature : but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Shelley, Pg. 58.

⁹⁶ Shelley, Pg. 229

⁹⁷ Shelley, Pg. 191

⁹⁸ Shelley, The term 'wretch' is featured on Pgs. 34-36, the term 'daemon' is featured on Pgs. 60-71, and the term 'spectre' is featured on Pg. 40.

⁹⁹ Shelley, Pg. 148

In this section, from chapter fifteen, after the monster has described how he stumbled upon some books in the woods, that he took a special interest to *Paradise Lost* because of how he related himself to the characters.¹⁰⁰ He compares himself to Adam as being the first of his kind and in a state of innocence, but feels more inclined to relate to Satan because of his envy towards those who had the happiness in life that he lacked.

In addition to her use of setting, Shelley made powerful references to the sciences of the time, both old and new, including alchemy and galvanism.¹⁰¹ There is a constant sense of mystery and foreboding because the reader does not know where the monster is, when he will appear, and what effects his hands have had. Finally, Shelley's use of cliffhangers to keep the reader wanting more, is remarkable. Perhaps the most notable comes after the most intense chapter of the book, chapter twenty, in which Frankenstein comes face-to-face with the monster after destroying his second creation.¹⁰² After an exciting exchange of threats, both men leave by boat and Frankenstein ends up on the shores of a town being accused by its inhabitants. As the reader, it's hard to imagine what else could go wrong at this point. Nevertheless, Shelley announces more is to come with Victor's words at the end of the chapter:

¹⁰⁰ Shelley, Pg. 145-148

¹⁰¹ Shelley, Pg. 14

¹⁰² Shelley, Pg. 195

I must pause here; for it requires all my fortitude to recall the memory of the frightful events which I am about to relate, in proper detail, to my recollection.¹⁰³

This line is not only a cliffhanger, but it sets the stage for the remaining and gutting finale of the novel.

Another author whose work combines elements of science, mystery, and cliffhangers is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I've been reading *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* or versions of them since I was in elementary school. Doyle always did a great job of describing and helping me to relate to the characters just prior to throwing me into the mysteries that were surrounding them. Sherlock Holmes himself is a very dynamic character that influenced my creation of Elias. Even though Elias was more loosely based on myself as a person, I did want to give him some unique characteristics. In the case of Holmes, I wanted Elias to have particular quirks that made it so certain characters disliked him or found him unique. Unlike Sherlock however, Elias has many people who are close to him and who care about him and his quirks really only annoy his boss. While Elias is no detective, I purposely had him use strategies of deduction to figure out what was going on during mystery scenes in the novel. I used this strategy both to include foreshadowing in a similar way that Doyle would have, to create suspense, but also because I felt that it strengthened his character and built his intelligence.

¹⁰³ Shelley, Pg. 205

As mentioned previously, Doyle is also great at creating cliffhangers. Because his tales were organized as short stories within a volume, Doyle would find ways of placing the shockers inside of individual stories as compared to the ends of novel chapters where moments of great suspense are typically found. For me, the ultimate cliffhanger was the supposed death of Sherlock at the end of 'The Final Problem'.¹⁰⁴ The epochal scene at the Reichenbach Falls has been used, re-created, and imitated countless times in books, television, and film.

The incident comes towards the end of a short story unlike any of the others in which the notorious detective features. The usual narrator is the good Dr. Watson; however, he is not relating the details of a case, but rather of the attempts made by Holmes and himself to evade Moriarty's gang by crossing the continent to Switzerland. After a ruse used to pull the doctor off of the mountain and away from Reichenbach Falls, Sherlock is left alone with his only intellectual equal. Moriarty very decently provides Sherlock with an opportunity to compose a final letter to Watson, before the two grapple on the edge of the falls and die together.¹⁰⁵

Three years later, Doyle resurrects Sherlock, who reveals to Watson that he had never actually fallen. To the contrary, in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes: 'The Adventure of the Empty House'*, Sherlock states that Professor Moriarty was the only one who actually fell to his death.¹⁰⁶ In the various recreations, directors have used the 'falls' as an episode or movie ending to leave the viewer wanting more and

¹⁰⁴ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Loren D. Estleman. "The Final Problem." *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, (Bantam Classics, 2003), pp.754–755.

¹⁰⁵ Doyle, Pg. 755.

¹⁰⁶ Doyle, "The Adventure of the Empty House." Pg. 765.

never really knowing if Sherlock is dead. In the series *Sherlock*, for example, leading actor Benedict Cumberbatch appears to have died from falling off a building after a battle with Moriarty.¹⁰⁷ In what I feel was then a tribute to the cliffhanger, show creators showed a number of ways in which he could have died, but didn't, eventually leaving it up to the viewer's imagination.

I tried to use similar methods for cliffhangers in *Fearest Enden*. On more than one occasion in the book, a character goes missing and is presumed dead. The reader later learns that they were safe or just injured. This is a strong form of cliffhanger and I credit Doyle and James Rollins, the next author I will discuss, for providing me with the inspiration to include them.

Another strategy of both Doyle and Rollins, which inspired elements of *Fearest Enden*, is the use of bloodlines. One of the more intriguing plotlines in *Fearest Enden* are the lineages that have descended directly from Eve. Each child in a series of immortals possesses certain powers, which are passed down to those within their bloodline. Those who recognize their heredity for what it is, sometimes have the innate ability of restoring those special powers for a greater cause.

Rollins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle have both used bloodlines to add to the mystery and suspense behind the true identities of major characters. The conspiracy theories these stories present often lead to the possibility of divine bloodlines and the source of immortality. One of Rollins' Sigma series books, *Bloodline*, for example, suggests that the fictitious family of the President of the United States is part of a special bloodline. This fact leads to a secret society, common in all books in the

107 "The Reichenbach Fall." *Sherlock*. Hartwood Films. BBC. WGBH. 15 Jan. 2012. Television.

series, known as The Guild, whose purpose is to abduct the President's pregnant daughter.¹⁰⁸ While Rollins's use of bloodlines has major impact on his plotlines, Doyle's use of heredity is much more subtle. Holmes refers to bloodlines when describing where his antagonists come from and how they have achieved their status. Holmes explains the history of Professor Moriarty to Watson for the first time:

"His career has been an extraordinary one. He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty. At the age of twenty-one he wrote a treatise upon the Binomial Theorem, which has had a European vogue. On the strength of it he won the Mathematical Chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearance, a most brilliant career before him. But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers."¹⁰⁹

Though this passage is slightly contradictory, Sherlock twice points out the professor's familial history in an attempt to give Watson a summary of the villain's resumé. The professor was purportedly of 'good birth,' but his genes also made him 'diabolical.'

¹⁰⁸ Rollins, James. *Bloodline: Sigma Force, Book 8*. (William Morrow, 2012).

¹⁰⁹ Doyle, "The Final Problem, Pg. 739.

In the next story written by Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Empty House', Holmes gives a similar description to Watson when describing Moriarty's right-hand-man, Colonel Moran:

"There are some trees, Watson, which grow to a certain height, and then suddenly develop some unsightly eccentricity. You will see it often in humans. I have a theory that the individual represents in his development the whole procession of his ancestors, and that such a sudden turn to good or evil stands for some strong influence, which came into the line of his pedigree. The person becomes, as it were, the epitome of the history of his own family."¹¹⁰

Like particular narrators in *Fearest Enden*, Sherlock believes that characters have the ability to take their bloodline and use the genes for good, or use a particular moment in their history to turn down the wrong path.

The aforementioned commercial fiction author, James Rollins, writes Action-adventure-mystery-thrillers in omniscient point of view. Though his books are written for entertainment purposes and have no significant literary impact, Rollins does a great job with settings and narrative structure. His *Sigma Series*, follows a group of elite forces and ex-military who are part of a secret branch of the government. Each of the operatives, especially the protagonist Grayson Pierce, are technically skilled in various branches of science. Each book begins at a particularly notable historic location and deals with the discovery of something significant like

¹¹⁰ Doyle, "The Adventure of the Empty House," Pg. 778

an artifact or mysterious element. The stories then flash forward to modern times and the lead characters are thrust into an adventure that is directly related to the object from the opening. Each chapter also adds mystery as it relates to the object, particular characters, or something specifically scientific. I decided to use many of the same elements—particularly multiple settings and historical background in my writing because doing so would make my plotline more complex, and appeal to a wider audience.

In the earliest stages of the novel, I intended *Fearest Enden* to be considered as magical realism. As in magic realist texts the ‘magic’ in *Fearest Enden* is synonymous with mystery, the supernatural, and extraordinary happenings.¹¹¹ However, comparable to magical realist literature, the protagonist and some of the supporting characters recognize that the supernatural elements are extraordinary and that they do not necessarily belong in their world.¹¹² Though I knew I would have talking creatures besides humans, my research into animism as well as the intelligences of some of the earth’s earliest animals turned up creatures like the Gigantopithecus species, on which I based my first fantastical creature, the naremf.

Two authors who succeed in making the fantastical seem realistic are C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. C.S. Lewis’ books have a number of characters similar to mine: angels and demons in *The Screwtape Letters*¹¹³ and lions, witches, fauns, immortals, apes, magic, and powerful plants in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.¹¹⁴ The naremf, tredesties, and gredifers in *Fearest Enden* all share human characteristics.

¹¹¹ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(AI) Realism* (Routledge, 2010), p. 4.

¹¹² Maria Takolander, *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground*, (Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 31–32.

¹¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

¹¹⁴ C. S. Lewis and Pauline Baynes, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

Similar to the centaurs, minotaurs, or even the faun in the Chronicles of Narnia, these characters appear to be human, but have animalistic features such as hooves, horns, claws, or wings.²⁴

In addition to their admirable characters, the Christian symbolism in the works of Tolkien and Lewis are unmatched. Since *Fearest Enden* is grounded in Christianity, I have looked to these authors as examples. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien presents the life of Jesus Christ through a number of his characters, but most specifically, Frodo carries the ring and the burden of the ring¹¹⁵ in a similar way that Christ carries the cross¹¹⁶ and the burden of the sins of all mankind. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis also presents Christ, but in the form of a lion. He is symbolically betrayed, crucified, and resurrected. He then returns to save his children when they are in the most need or when wickedness has taken over. Even when he does disappear, his Spirit remains.¹¹⁷

Lewis also includes evil characters in his narratives, which are more literal than symbolic. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape refers to the Devil as “Our Father Below.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, in *Fearest Enden*, the literal Cain refers to some unseen power or being as “Father” when calling upon powers for a rebirth ordinance. This entity is clued as being the devil, especially since the Serpent Seed premise of the novel suggests that the devil is in fact his father. In *The Lord of the Rings*, there are a number of characters who can represent evil or specifically the devil; the most

¹¹⁵ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King. Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) pp. 224-240.

¹¹⁶ St. Matthew 27:1-35

¹¹⁷ C. S. Lewis and Pauline Baynes, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

¹¹⁸ Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. This particular reference occurs on a number of pages throughout the book.

obvious figure being Sauron, but the characters of the Necromancer, The Eye, and the Witch Doctor playing likely candidates.¹¹⁹ Sauron seems to be the source of evil in a similar way that Satan is the root of evil.

In *Fearest Enden*, the symbols are not as powerful or as obvious. However, there are a number of lineages and immortal characters whose actions resemble those of Jesus Christ, the devil, and other biblical characters. For example, the Lineage of the Sun has disappeared and will return to the earth at a future date. The Lineage of Shepherds, like Abel and like Jesus Christ, look after the symbolic sheep and make sure their secrets are safe. Elias, like Jesus Christ descends below, though this may not be as close of a comparison because this descent does not happen after his death or demise, but rather once after his father's death, and then again when he has no choice. There are several characters that play guardian roles, which are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Elias if necessary. Reynia serves as a guardian angel, watching his every move from birth and secretively grooming him so that he can live up to his potential.

In both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Fearest Enden* there are characters who symbolically, are willing to carry the cross. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee carries the burden of the ring for a short time and even the weight of Frodo himself.¹²⁰ In a similar fashion, the character of Yusef is willing to help Elias find his way back to Hell. This might not feel like a comparable character, but without Yusef,

¹¹⁹ Tolkien, *The Return of the King. Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*. These references appear in a number of locations throughout the book.

¹²⁰ Tolkien, *The Return of the King. Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings*, pp. .224-240.

Elias would not be able to remember who he really is. Yusef carries the burden of internal conflict for him.

Chief among my influences from earlier literature is John Milton. Some of the themes from Milton's two epic poems, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regain'd*, make up a lot of the subplot elements for the *Fearest Enden* series. I particularly benefited from Milton's portrayal of Eve in particular parts of the poem. His views of Eve both from Satan and from the narrator go far beyond the typical, biblical view. As mentioned earlier, Eve typically receives little to no recognition other than being the 'woman' given to Adam who easily fell for Satan's temptation and as a result, all mankind must suffer. Diane McColley puts it best in her book, *Milton's Eve*, when she says:

Milton sought to redeem her from a reductive literary and iconographic tradition, and to establish a regenerative reading of her role: that is, to show that Milton has fashioned an Eve who in all the prelapsarian scenes is not only sufficient to stand and able to grow, but who while standing and growing, however vulnerably, is a pattern and composition of active goodness and a speaking picture of the recreative power of poetry itself.¹²¹

This passage suggests that Milton's epic wasn't just written to create another perspective of prelapsarian events in poetic form, but to restore the dignity of one of

¹²¹ McColley, p. 4.

the protagonists by allowing readers to see her as he did, a woman of majesty with both independence and reason, but also the ability to grow and strengthen others.

The many ways alone, in which Milton describes Eve's beauty¹²², suggest that she was a remarkable woman; and seek to restore her from that status of evil, to that of a supreme and majestic queen. However, there are also a couple examples of her strength as a person, particularly when Eve is speaking to Adam about their choice to defy God, that stand out to me. One example:

Being as I am, why didst not thou the Head
Command me absolutely not to go,
Going into such danger as thou saidst...¹²³

Referring to Adam similarly to how Aemilia Lanyer portrays him as Head or Lord of all, Milton's Eve questions why he didn't command her not to go into such a dangerous situation. Eve's words change the popular story because Eve not only defies God, but she makes a choice, on her own, and independent of the will of a man. It could be argued that these actions are implied in all versions of the tale. However, Milton specifically provides Eve with a voice that she does not have in Genesis.

Much of *Paradise Lost* revolves around the earth-life of Satan.¹²⁴ He arrives in Eden and observes and is jealous of Adam and Eve;¹²⁵ after being cast out of the

¹²² Milton, I, IV, IX.

¹²³ Milton, IX. 1155-1157.

¹²⁴ Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Barbara K. Lewalski, Blackwell, 2008.

garden, he returns and possesses a sleeping serpent so he can sneak back into the garden;¹²⁶ he tempts Eve;¹²⁷ and he is condemned and cursed by God.¹²⁸ All of these events eventually lead up to the birth of Cain, who is the primary antagonist in the *Fearest Enden*.

Whether or not Cain is actually the son of the Devil, I liken the Cain of the Old Testament and the Cain of *Fearest Enden* to Milton's Satan. After accruing a number of followers, in a disagreement with God, Satan is cast out from heaven.

“with all his Host
Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
He trusted to have equal'd the most High,
If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud
With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie
With hideous ruine and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Milton, IV 358-369

¹²⁶ Milton, IX 185-190

¹²⁷ Milton, IX 664-734

¹²⁸ Milton, X 165-182

¹²⁹ Milton, I 37-47

This passage describes how Satan, with a host of other angels, is thrown out of heaven and falls down through the sky into a bottomless pit known as perdition. Cain's loss of paradise, in *Fearest Enden* is a little less dramatic than the scene just mentioned, but is greatly influenced by it. Cain does have a number of hosts with him, but they have bodies, and the falling is more of a descent in which he and the others had some control.

The biblical Cain was never in a state of paradise per se, but to be cast out from the presence of God is his loss of paradise. Like Satan and his followers in heaven, Cain has a battle with God that culminates in the death of his brother, his curse, and his expulsion to a more nomadic lifestyle.¹³⁰ Similarly, in Book One of *Paradise Lost*, Satan ends up cast out from God's presence but ends up in a deep, dark place. After he and his followers have been there for some time, there is talk of regaining heaven or returning to what they once had there.

Thither, if but to pry, shall be perhaps
Our first eruption, thither or elsewhere:
For this Infernal Pit shall never hold
Cælestial Spirits in Bondage, nor th' Abyss
Long under darkness cover. But these thoughts
Full Counsel must mature: Peace is despaird,

¹³⁰ Genesis 4:1-16

For who can think Submission? Warr then, Warr

Open or understood must be resolv'd.¹³¹

In this passage, the souls who have been cast out of heaven are reacting with a normal state of defense for having just lost their beautiful home. They want war. This uneasiness amongst those who have lost their paradise and are tormented in the depths of hell, is one of the major narratives of *Fearest Enden*. As mentioned previously, comparable to Satan, Cain and a number of his followers descend into the earth in order to escape the flood. Realizing they have truly lost their paradise, an earthly war begins for their return. That is the basis for *Fearest Enden*.

Fearest Enden is a novel that opens in medias res. The protagonist has a unique connection to both his father and religion. He has a katabasis preceded by visits from immortal beings. His descent into the underworld includes descriptions of battles, and his story leads towards an open ending. These literary devices and themes are prevalent in many mentioned epics¹³² including *Paradise Lost*, *The Aenied*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. However, I would be remissed if I didn't credit Dante Alighieri for my descent into Hell. His hero's katabatic quest can easily be compared, though different in nature to Elias Hughes's quest in *Fearest Enden*. Dante's protagonist in *Inferno* begins in medias res in a forest like in *Fearest Enden*, but literally in the middle of the protagonist's life: He wakes up in a forest

¹³¹ Milton, I 653-663

¹³² Peter Toohey, *Reading Epic : An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

and says the infamous first canto of *Inferno* begins “In middle of the journey of our days.”¹³³

For this comparison, I will use the 1884 (James Romanes Sibbald) English translation of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante’s trip into Hell, beginning in Cantos I and II, is the archetypal epic hero’s quest.¹³⁴ Like in *Fearest Enden*, he is approached by an otherworldly character who has been watching his struggles. In Dante’s case, it is the poet or shade Virgil.

And as I downward rushed to reach the plain,
Before mine eyes appeared there one aghast,
And dumb like those that silence long maintain.
When I beheld him in the desert vast,
‘Whate’er thou art, or ghost or man,’ I cried,
I pray thee show such pity as thou hast.¹³⁵

In this passage, Dante has just made several attempts to ascend a mountain and escape this life towards a celestial light. He is stopped and chased by a series of beasts, a leopard, a lion, and finally a wolf. After the wolf chases him off the mountain and he meets Virgil, he is told he must go through hell before he gets to heaven.¹³⁶ Virgil thus gives the hero in the story his quest, or his ‘call to

¹³³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Inferno*, trans. by James Romanes Sibbald (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, David Douglas, 1884), p. 1.

¹³⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 3rd edn (London: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 45-221.

¹³⁵ Alighieri, Canto I, 61-66

¹³⁶ Alighieri, Canto I, 32-60

adventure'.¹³⁷ Virgil states that Dante "must attempt another pilgrimage."¹³⁸ Dante doesn't necessarily refuse the call,¹³⁹ but he finds himself to be very unworthy.

But why should I go? Who will sanction give?

For I am no Æneas and no Paul ;

Me worthy of it no one can believe,

In these lines, Dante notes that the heroes like that in Virgil's poem, *The Aeneid*, were emissaries and that he had no special calling. This is very similar to Elias's call to action or call to katabasis in *Fearest Enden*. Elias does not feel worthy enough to save the world, nor can he see how his descent would impact those he loves.

As mentioned, *Fearest Enden* was intended to have elements of the supernatural that could be potentially believable for an otherwise religious reader. Angels and demons are common in most epics as are supernatural elements, but Alighieri chooses to follow the pattern of the hero's quest by giving his protagonist a supernatural aid. In this case, it is Virgil, who appears at first to be a shadow or shade, but whether or not he stays in that form, Dante later refers to his aid as his Lord and master.¹⁴⁰ Elias likewise has a number of supernatural aids throughout the story: animals that save him from death, immortal beings that watch over and guide him. He even encounters supernatural powers of his own. If he is to have a

¹³⁷ Campbell, pp. 45-53.

¹³⁸ Alighieri, Canto I, 90

¹³⁹ Campbell, pp. 54-62.

¹⁴⁰ Alighieri, Canto II, 140

companion comparable to Virgil however, it would have to be his visitor-turned-friend Yusef, who travels with him to the otherworld. Both Yusef and Virgil are symbolic in their respective stories for human reason.¹⁴¹ Virgil is a Pagan from before the time of Christ and embodies wisdom, whereas Yusef, a muslim, has a gift of the spirit that enables him to sense both danger and goodness but also to guide himself and others on difficult paths.

In *Fearest Enden*, there are many gateways to hell. Elias describes digging up his father's grave as a child, only to find it empty along with a hole leading underground. A number of holes in the story make for gateways to the underworld. None can really compare to the infamous gate that Dante and Virgil pass through. The famous line, "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" comes from Canto III where Dante and Virgil 'cross the first threshold'.¹⁴²

Ye who make entrance, every hope resign !

These words beheld I writ in hue obscure

On summit of a gateway; wherefore I:

Hard is their meaning, Master. Like one sure

Beforehand of my thought, he made reply:

Here is behoves to leave all fears behind.

All cowardice behoveth here to die.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno (Critical Insights)*, ed. by Patrick Hunt, Reprint edn (Canada: Salem Press, 2011), p. 39-40.

¹⁴² Campbell, pp. 71-76.

¹⁴³ Alighieri, Canto III, 9-15.

In this passage, Dante sees the literal gateway to hell preceded by a sign, which warns those who enter to abandon hope. Virgil adds that Hell is not a place for cowards and tells Dante that all fears must be left behind. There are various gates to Hell that epic heroes must pass through. If their journey is katabatic in nature, the first threshold they pass through is often a gateway to hell. When the protagonist in *Fearest Enden* is an adult he passes the threshold again, this time and though he is no longer on the epic quest of tracking down his father, nevertheless his quest is now magnified.

Alighieri runs his protagonist through the remaining stages of the hero's quest (according to Joseph Campbell) including the belly of the whale, road of trials, he meets with a goddess, he encounters a woman as temptress, there is an atonement with the father, there is an apotheosis, there is the ultimate boon, he refuses to return, there is the magical flight, the rescue from without, the crossing of the return threshold, he is the master of two worlds, and has the freedom to live.¹⁴⁴ *Fearest Enden* in contrast has only a few of these remaining devices. In looking at other models of the hero's quest, specifically Christopher Vogler's, *Fearest Enden* and *Inferno* share additional commonalities including the ordinary world, the meeting with the mentor, the tests, allies, and enemies, the approach, the central ordeal, the reward, and the road back.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Campbell, p.4.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*, 3rd edn (McNaughton & Gunn, Inc., Saline, Michigan : Michael Wiese Productions, 2007)p. vi.

Both Dante and Elias come from 'an ordinary world'¹⁴⁶. It was previously mentioned that Alighieri's hero woke up in an earthly forest and did not receive the same type of a call to the underworld or adventure as Æneas or other heroes. He most definitely comes from an ordinary world. The three beasts that prevent him from reaching the summit of the hill may contradict this, nevertheless they are not otherworldly beasts outside of their somewhat supernatural abilities as gatekeepers.¹⁴⁷ Elias, lives in Tennessee in the United States. He is a schoolteacher. His world is very ordinary, with the exception of visits from immortals and beasts.

Dante has various 'tests, allies, and enemies' throughout his journey into Hell. Each circle presents a new group of monsters or different type of sufferer. His tests come at the very beginning when he tries and fails to reach the light via ascending the mountain on three or more different attempts.¹⁴⁸ Likewise, after descending into the depths of hell, Dante finds that progression by the means of climbing out of Hell is quite tedious. As the forest on the earth is symbolic of a sinful world, I like the comparison of the difficulties in climbing out of a depressing world versus climbing out of Hell.¹⁴⁹ For Dante and Elias though, their biggest obstacles are likely to be internal conflict and self-doubt. Elias does encounter a difficult boss and problems with destruction of the local environment, but he has to master his talents to overcome both the problems he must face in the ordinary and fantastical world.

¹⁴⁶ Vogler, p.83.

¹⁴⁷ Alighieri, Canto I.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Canto I.

¹⁴⁹ Alighieri, (*Critical Insights*), ed. by Patrick Hunt. P.36.

I would argue that neither story has a true ‘belly of the whale’ or ‘central ordeal’ in the sense that the hero is killed or badly maimed to the point where all hope is temporarily lost.

When he had uttered this the dismal plain

Trembled so violently, my terror past

Recalling now, I’m bathed in sweat again.

Out of the tearful ground there moaned a blast

Whence lightning flashed forth red and terrible,

Which vanquished all my senses; and, as cast

In sudden slumber, to the ground I fell.¹⁵⁰

In the passage in *Inferno*, when they are crossing the river, they are crossing into Hell. Virgil tells Dante not to fear the creatures he sees around them. Nevertheless, when all of the screaming, earthquakes, thundering, and torment becomes too much to bear, the hero passes out. But he wakes up. Again, that isn’t to the level of death and resurrection or rebirth. Likewise, Elias is smacked in the head with a primeval boney weapon and knocked unconscious. He regains his strength and moves on. Perhaps both heroes are lacking the characterization that would make readers really latch on. Or, because there isn’t a ‘central ordeal’ of larger magnitude that physically destroys a person before they return from the dead so-to-speak, that makes these heroes a bit more believable.

¹⁵⁰ Alighieri, Canto III. 130-136.

The 'central ordeal'¹⁵¹ is also often climaxed by a 'resurrection'.¹⁵² In both *Fearest Enden* and *Inferno* there is no resurrection of a dead hero in the English definition of resurrection. However, if we look at the Latin history of the word, specifically *resurgere*, we get the definition of restoring, rising, or rising again.¹⁵³ If we take that definition in the literal sense, we can look at Alighieri's choice to have his hero and Virgil rise back out of hell unscathed, that this scene would be a resurrection. Likewise, Elias and Yusef's ascension out of *Fearest Enden's* underworld would be considered a resurrection.

Regardless, I was inspired by Dante to create a hero that could descend into Hell with or without the necessity of bringing back his father. He does however, become the 'master of two worlds', and his story like that of Dante's has an open ending.

My Guide and I, our journey to pursue
To the bright world, upon this road concealed
Made entrance, and no thought of resting knew.
He first, I second, still ascending held
Our way until the fair celestial train
Was through an opening round to me revealed:
And, issuing thence, we saw the stars again.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Vogler, p.155.

¹⁵² Vogler, p. 197.

¹⁵³ Charlton T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, 3rd edn (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1890), p. 781.

¹⁵⁴ Alighieri, Canto XXXIV, 133-139.

In this final passage from *Inferno*, the hero and his guide ascended without resting until they reached an opening and saw the stars again for the first time a while. This is another moment in the typical quest that is both similar and different from *Fearest Enden*. Prior to the very end, the hero is given 'the freedom to live',¹⁵⁵ which can extend in a number of directions. For Dante and Virgil, they emerge from the katabasis through an opening and the ending, like many epics, is left open. As mentioned in another section, *Fearest Enden* has cliffhangers and does so at the very end. The protagonist also emerges from an opening in the ground, but though he has agency and is no longer in Hell, he does not have the freedom to live, instead he is arrested almost immediately and the conclusion is left open.

Among the contemporary authors whose work my novel might be seen in parallel, one who created a chosen-one hero and who required many of her characters to make sacrifices for loved ones and for the sake of goodness is J.K. Rowling. Aside from the most notable similarities between Harry Potter and the characters in *Fearest Enden*, I was very interested in the connections between The *Harry Potter* series and *Paradise Lost*. Tom Marvolo Riddle, or Lord Voldemort, is easily a Satan-like character who has been cast out, but who seeks to create glory for himself. Outside of the obvious connection, he possesses the body of the snake, Nagini.¹⁵⁶ As in Harry Potter, it can be assumed that the snake in Genesis is a walking serpent, or why else would he be cursed to go on his belly the remainder of

¹⁵⁵ Campbell, pp. 221.

¹⁵⁶ Rowling, J. K. "Chapter 1: The Riddle House." *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. (Bloomsbury, 2003) p. 1–15.

his life.¹⁵⁷ Voldemort has lost his bodily form and must possess the bodies of others, including Nagini, before he can fully restore his health.¹⁵⁸ The connection is not just that Satan can possess the bodies of snakes as in the garden, but that the hero in the Genesis creation story, Eve, like Harry Potter, can speak to the serpent also, can be tempted by him, but also ultimately makes sacrifices to destroy him and his power. Although I didn't make the connection with Harry Potter originally, Elias from *Fearest Enden* also has the ability to feel animal instincts and to communicate with the animals on a different level.

A contemporary fantasy author who is widely known to share Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a source of inspiration is Philip Pullman. I am ashamed to say that I didn't know much about his work until the film adaptations of *His Dark Materials* were released in the United States. Even then, the American media had convinced me to boycott the film and his books because of his atheism and his supposed intents for the novel's plot. I wish I had ignored them. I have taken up the series during the creation of this thesis and have found that Pullman and I have much in common. Aside from using *Paradise Lost* as inspiration, I believe we are both angered by what literalisms in scriptural exegesis have done to the world. The similarities between *Fearest Enden* and *Paradise Lost* are nowhere near as numerous as in *His Dark Materials*. However, David Colbert points out what he feels are differences between *His Dark Materials* and the events in Eden:

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 3:14

¹⁵⁸ Rowling, "Chapter 33: The Death Eaters." P. 654

In *His Dark Materials*, Lyra and Will are right to defy The Authority & The Magisterium. They do not curse humankind with sin. They save an infinite number of worlds.¹⁵⁹

Though Pullman and even Milton may agree that that the events in Eden via Genesis portray an Eve who defies God and curses the rest of mankind in the process, my Eve, the Eve portrayed in this discussion and in *Fearest Enden* is right to partake of the fruit in whatever form that action may entail. She also, like Lyra, saves many in the process rather than cursing them. If Pullman is an atheist, he may not care, but I have a hunch that he desired to redeem Eve as much as I did.

Conclusion

Fundamentalist Christian religion, especially as it pertains to biblical literalism can definitively shape both perceptions of the world and the imagination. Literal interpretations of text have the power to buoy a life of faith. More often than not however, if people refuse to move beyond the literal and look at the figurative in addition to the possibilities of alternate interpretations, the literal can lead to evil.

Some view religious rites of fundamentalist faiths, i.e. exorcism, speaking in tongues, snake handling, or playing with fire as evil. For others, the evil in fundamentalism is the silencing and mistreatment of women, the domination of nature, or other wrongdoings perpetuated by the interpretations of some verses of

¹⁵⁹ David Colbert. "The Magical Worlds of Philip Pullman: a Treasury of Fascinating Facts." (Berkley Books, 2006) p.9-11

scripture. The witnessing and interpreting of these events, whether they are spiritual, supernatural, literal, or evil, led my mind and dreams to create the scenes for *Fearest Enden*. A fascination with the supernatural elements specifically, developed from witnessing actual terrors, and led to the creation of more dynamic characters, hellish settings, and the darker sides of human or beastly characters.

Those who practice fundamentalist religion live a strict code. Words written before their time define a system in which they live and in which wavering is condemned. The devout can confuse the words of men with the words of God, thus justifying cruel acts like mistreatment of women or of nature. When their eyes are opened, they may feel anger or they may learn to clearly distinguish between spiritual feelings of peace and the sacred, versus the evil and wrongdoing that may have come from literalism. They could also lead a life that combines both a love of figurative literature and literalist religion, attributing fruitions to both literal and figurative interpretations of text. This could also be a life of constant cognitive dissonance.

With *Fearest Enden*, and *Saviors, Scapegoats & Sacred Trees*, there was a need to allow fundamentalist religion and the fantastical to be intertwined. For many who look at fundamentalist religion, they always have been. For those who are devoutly religious, there needed to be the elements of the supernatural that are believable and potentially faith building.

Fact or fantasy, there have been two scapegoats throughout most of the history of biblical literalism, Eve and trees. Eve's story needed to be written yet again. She needed to be analyzed in the critical section of this thesis for the purpose

of restoring her innocence and establishing her at the bare minimum as an equal. The novel then needed to do what was originally intended, elevate Eve to the status of a hero, and perhaps the greatest human hero that ever lived.

This thesis also needed to serve as a reminder to literalists or anyone that this Earth is a garden that needs to be taken care of. That a dominated earth is a dead one and that the scriptural defense of destruction of nature is as much man-made as are the verses depicting Eve as anything less than Adam's equal. The trees of *Fearest Enden*, like the world trees in folklore, like the trees of scripture, the trees in the history of Europe, like actual trees today all have the power to be bridges between the earth and the skies, the heavens and the hells, and between life and death. As mentioned, the loss of trees in great numbers is a spiritual ordeal. If, like Eve, (for the purpose of this thesis) trees were viewed as saviors instead of scapegoats or if humans as a whole, returned to their roots and viewed trees as sacred, if humans learned to view a lot more things as sacred, this world might stand a chance.

Bibliography

Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, E. D. A. Morshead, E. H. Plumptre, Gilbert Murray, and Benjamin Bickley Rogers, *Nine Greek Dramas*, (N.p.: n.p, n.d)

Aldington, Richard, *Scene - At Pherae, outside the Palace of ADMETUS, King of Thessaly. The Centre of the Scene Represents a Portico with Columns and a Large Double-door. To the Left Are the Women's Quarters, to the Right the Guest Rooms. The Centre Doors of the Palace Slowly Open Inwards, and Apollo Comes Out. In His Left Hand He Carries a Large Unstrung Golden Bow. He Moves Slowly and Majestically, Turns, and Raises His Right Hand in Salutation to the Palace*, Euripides, *Alcestis* (London: n.p., 1930).

Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: The Inferno*, trans. by James Romanes Sibbald (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, David Douglas, 1884).

Alighieri, Dante, *The Inferno (Critical Insights)*, ed. by Patrick Hunt, Reprint edn (Canada: Salem Press, 2011), p. 39-40.

Attfield, Robin, "Christian Attitudes to Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 44 (1983)

l'Aubespine, Madeleine de, *Selected Poems and Translations: A Bilingual Edition*, ed.

by Anna Klosowska, trans. by Anna Klosowska (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Baskin, Judith R, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Brandeis University Press, 2002)

Bellows, Henry Adams, Trans, *The Poetic Edda: Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes, Vols 3* (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, Reprinted Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1923) p. 1

Betty, Stafford, "The Growing Evidence for Demonic Possession: What Should Psychiatry's Response Be?" *Journal of Religion and Health* (44.1 2005) p. 13-30

Bird, Phyllis A., "Male and Female He Created Them": Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," 74 Vols, (*Harvard Theological Review*,1981) p. 129-60

Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic(Al) Realism* (Routledge, 2010)

Bryner, Gary C., "Theology and Ecology: Religious Belief and Environmental Stewardship," 49 Vols. (Brigham Young University Studies, 2010) p. 21-45

Byron, John, *Themes in Biblical Narrative, Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry*, 14 Vols (Leiden, NLD: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011)

Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 3rd edn (London: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Colbert, David, *The Magical Worlds of Philip Pullman: a Treasury of Fascinating Facts*. (Berkley Books, 2006)

Covington, Dennis, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, (New York: Penguin, 1995)

Coxe, Cleveland, *Ante-Nicene Fathers. 4 Vols: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Part First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Revised and Chronologically arranged with brief prefaces and occasional notes by A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885)

Dobratz, Betty A., and Stephanie L. Shanks-Meile. *White Power, White Pride!: The White Separatist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne, 1997)

Doyle, Arthur Conan, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (Bantam Classics, 2003)

Ellis, TA, *Gender in the Book of Ben Sira : Divine Wisdom, Erotic Poetry, and the Garden of Eden* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2013)

Euripides, and Edward P. Coleridge, *Scene Before Agamemnon's Tent in the Greek Camp upon the Shore of the Thracian Chersonese. The Ghost Of Polydorus Appears. The Hecuba of Euripides*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929)

Euripides, and Edward P. Coleridge, *The Hecuba of Euripides*, (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929)

Fallon, Nicole, "The cross as tree: The wood-of-the-Cross legends in Middle English and Latin texts in medieval England," (2009)

Fenster, Thelma S., et al. Poems of Cupid, God of Love: Christine De Pizan's "Epistre Au Dieu D'amours" and "Dit De La Rose", Thomas Hoccleve's "The Letter of Cupid", Editions and Translations, with George Sewell's "The Proclamation of Cupid" (E.J. Brill, 1990)

Flood, Gavin D., and Charles Martin. *The Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation* (Bg 15.1, N.p.: n.p., n.d)

Flood, John, "Defences of Eve." *Representations of Eve in Antiquity and the English Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2011)

Folkard, Richard, *Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics. Embracing the Myths, Traditions, Superstitions, and Folk-lore of the Plant Kingdom* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884)

Francomano, Emily C., trans. "Juan Rodríguez Del Padrón Triunfo De Las Donas / The Triumph of Ladies." *Medieval Feminist Forum*, Vols, 5 (Subsidia, 2016)

Freedman, H., Maurice Simon, S. M. Lehrman, J. Israelstam, Judah J. Slotki, J. Rabbinowitz, A. Cohen, and Louis I. Rabinowitz. *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices* (London: Soncino, 1939)

Goetz, Delia, Sylvanus Griswold Morley, Lucille Kaufman Weil, and Everett Gee Jackson. *The Book of the People = Popol Vuh: The National Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya* (Los Angeles: Printed for the Members of the Limited Editions Club at the Plantin, 1954)

Goff, Barbara E, *Euripides: Trojan Women* (London: Duckworth, 2009. N. pag)

Gordis, Robert, "The Significance of the Paradise Myth," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*, 52 Vols (1936) p. 86–94

Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

Grimm, Jacob, Wilhelm Grimm, and George Cruikshank, *Cinderella* (Franklin, NH: Hillside, 1969)

Harrison, Peter, "Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature," *The Journal of Religion*, 79 Vols (1999) p. 86–109

Harrison, Robert Pogue, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: U Chicago, 1993)

Harvey, Graham, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

Hesiod, and Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (London: Heinemann, 1964. N. pag.)

Hesiod, and Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Works and Days, Theogony, and The Shield of Heracles*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006)

Higgins, Jean M., "The Myth of Eve: The Temptress," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44 Vols (1976) p. 639–47

Historia Brittonum ed. and tr. J.A. Giles and Nennius. (*Project Gutenberg's History Of The Britons*, 2006)

Homer, S. H. Butcher, and Andrew Lang, *The Odyssey* (New York: Collier, 1961)

Jacobus, Duffy, E., & Ryan, W. G., *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. "The Finding of the Holy Cross" (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012)

Juhnke, Anna K., "Remnants of Misogyny in Paradise Lost," *Milton Quarterly*, 22 (1988) p. 50–58

Juvenal, Persius, Persius, Sulpicia, Gaius Lucilius, Lewis Evans, and William Gifford, *The Satires of Juvenal, Persius, Sulpicia, and Lucilius* (London: G. Bell, 1901)

Kay, Jeanne, "Human Dominion over Nature in the Hebrew Bible," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 79 Vols (1989) p. 214–232

Keenan, Rodney J., and J. P. Hamish Kimmins, "The Ecological Effects of Clear-cutting" *Environmental Reviews* 1.2 Vols (1993) p.121-44

Kelly, Water K. *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folklore* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1863)

Kenney, Theresa M., and Mary Dzon. *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha Es Et O!* (Toronto: U of Toronto, 2015)

Langley, Batty, *New Principles of Gardening Or, The Laying out and Planting Parterres, Groves, Wildernesses, Labyrinths, Avenues, Parks, &c. after a More Grand and Rural Manner, than Has Been Done before ; With Experimental Directions For Raising the Several Kinds of Fruit-Trees, Forest-Trees, Ever-Greens and Flowering-Shrubs with Which Gardens Are Adorn'd. To Which Is Added, The Various Names, Descriptions, Temperatures Medicinal Virtues, Uses and Cultivations of Several Roots, Pulse, Herbs, &c. of the Kitchen and Physick Gardens, That Are Absolutely Necessary for the Service of Families in General. Illustrated with Great Variety of Grand Designs, Curiously Engraven on Twenty Eight Folio Plates, by the Best Hands. By Batty Langley, of Twickenham* (London: Printed for A. Bettesworth and J. Batley in Pater-Noster Row, 1728) p. 126

Lanyer, Aemilia, "Eve's Apologie." *Salve Deus Rex Iudæ'Orum. Containing, 1 the Passion of Christ. 2 Eues Apologie in Defence of Women. 3 the Teares of the*

*Daughters of Ierusalem. 4 the Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie. With
Diuers Other Things Not Vnfit to Be Read.,* (Printed by Valentine Simmes for
Richard Bonian ..., 1611)

Lattimore, Richard, "Why The Devil Is The Devil," *Proceedings of the American
Philisophical Society*, Vols 106, 5 (Oct 11, 1962) p. 427-429

Lawless, Elaine, "Resisting Cultural and Religious Myths That Condone Violence
Against Women," *Western Folklore*, 62 Vols, 4 (Autumn, 2003) p. 237-269

Lewis, C. S., *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1943)

Lewis, C. S., and Pauline Baynes, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins,
1994)

Lewis, C. S., and Pauline Baynes, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York:
HarperCollins, 1994. N. pag.)

Lewis, C. S., *Prince Caspian: The Return To Narnia* (New York: Harper Collins
Publishers, 1979. N. pag.)

Lewis, Charlton T., *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*, 3rd edn (New York: Harper and
Brothers, 1890).

Lovejoy, Arthur O., *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1948)

Maltby, Paul, "Fundamentalist Dominion, Postmodern Ecology," *Ethics & the Environment*, 13 (2008) p. 119–41

McColley, Diane Kelsey, "Native Innocence." *Milton's Eve* (Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983)

Mead, G. R. S., *Orpheus*. (London: J.M. Watkins, 1965) p.14-15

Merchant, Carolyn, "Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture." (Routledge, 2013)

Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Barbara K. Lewalski (Blackwell, 2008)

Mynors, Roger A.B., and Publius Vergilius Maro, *Virgil, Georgics* II: 5 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994. N. pag)

Norris, Pamela, "Introduction: The Story of Eve." *Eve: A Biography* (New York: New York UP, 1999)

Oesterley, William Oscar Emil, *The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, in the Revised Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge: UP, 1913)

Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. Edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras. (Oxford University Press, 2016)

Peschel, Enid Rhodes, "Structural Parallels in Two Flood Myths: Noah and the Maori," *Folklore*, 82 Vols (1971) p. 116–23

Porter, Stanley E., *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters*(Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2016).

Ramsay, Boniface, 'Ambrose', *Series: The Early Church Fathers*, ed by Carol Harrison, edn (London: Routledge, 1997)

Roberts, Alexander, et al. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. (C. Scribner's Sons, 1903)

Roberts, Reverend Alexander and Donaldson James, *Writings of Irenaeus* 3, Chapter 22, Parts 3-4 (Aeterna Press, 2015)

Rollins, James, *Bloodline: Sigma Force, Book 8* (William Morrow, 2012)

Ronald Burton, Stephen Johnson and Joseph Tamney, *Review of Religious Research*,
Vols, 30, (June, 1989) p. 344-359

Rosenberg, Donna, "Northern Europe: The Creation, Death, and Rebirth of the
Universe," *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*
(Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Pub. Group, 1994) p. 206-13

Seaton, R.C. Ed. & Trans, *Apollonius Rhodius: Argonautica* Original Greek text with
side-by-side English translation. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA,
1912)

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (Gibbings
and Company Limited, 1897)

"Snake-Handling Cultists Resemble Other Groups," *The Science News-Letter*, 38 Vols,
7, (Aug. 17, 1940) p. 103

Spencer, Frank, *History of Physical Anthropology*, Volume 1 (Garland Reference
Library of Social Science, Routledge, 1997)

Sturluson, Snorri, and Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Prose Edda* (New York:
American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1916)

Takolander, Maria, *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground* (Peter Lang, 2007)

The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages. Edited by Richard Kenneth Emmerson., and Bernard McGinn. (Cornell University Press, 1993)

“The Dream of the Rood.” *The Dream of the Rood: an Old English Poem Attributed to Cynewulf*, ed. by Albert S. Cook (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments Translated out of the Original Tongues and with the Former Translations Diligently Compared and Revised by His Majesty's Special Command (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995)

Thomas, Neil, “The Celtic Wild Man Tradition and Geoffrey of Monmouths Vita Merlini: Madness or Contemptus Mundi?,” *Arthuriana*, 10 Vols (2000) p. 27–42

Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Return of the King: Being the Third Part of The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965)

Tolkien, J. R. R., *The Two Towers* (London: HarperCollins, 2012. N. pag.)

Toohey, Peter, *Reading Epic : An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Virgil, and Arthur S. Way, *Georgics of Virgil in English Verse* (London: Macmillan and, Limited, 1912. N. pag.)

Virgil, Robert Fitzgerald, and John Dryden, *The Aeneid* (New York: Macmillan, 1965)

Vogler, Christopher, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure For Writers*, 3rd edn (McNaughton & Gunn, Inc., Saline, Michigan : Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

Warner, Marina, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995)

Watts, Donald, *Dictionary of Plant Lore* (Amsterdam: Elsevier/AP, 2007)

Weyermann, Maja, *The Typologies of Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary, and Their Relationship to One Another*, 84 Vols, 3, (Anglican Theological Review, 2002)

Wicken, G.E., "The Baobab -Africa's Up- side-down Tree" 37 Vols, 2 (*Kew Bulletin*, 1982)

Wilhite, DE, *Tertullian the African : An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007).

Wimberley, Ronald C., and Libby C. Morris. "U.S. Poverty in Space and Time: Its Persistence in the South.' *Sociation Today* Vol 1, 2 (Fall, 2003)

Wiseman, Susan, 'Eve, Paradise Lost, and Female Interpretation,' *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, (Oxford University Press, 2012)

~

I hereby declare that this thesis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.

Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw'r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y gwaith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o'r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw'n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.

