

STRANGER THINGS

The Lost City
by Loren Rosson



Acknowledgments

This is a work of fanfiction, based on the Stranger Things TV series and *The Lost City* module for 1st edition Dungeons & Dragons. For decades I'd wanted to see a novel about *The Lost City*, which I consider the most inspired D&D scenario ever written. I had also wanted to write a portal fantasy - in the vein of *The Land*, *Fionavar*, or *Narnia* - but never quite had the right story to tell. Then recently I thought of the Stranger Things kids, and how each of them had a perfect role to play as strangers in the Cynidicean underworld.

I don't profit from this novel, and I dedicate it to those who inspired it: the Duffer Brothers, Tom Moldvay, Ken Rolston, and the creative folks at Pandius who fleshed out the world built by Moldvay and Rolston. I wrote it between March and July 2021.

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Volume 7: The Lost City

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"Generation after generation of Cynidiceans have lived out their lives underground. Though still human, their skin has become pale and their hair bone-white. Every Cynidicean wears a stylized mask, usually of an animal or human face. Some are made of wood, some of paper mache, and some of metal. They are decorated with beads, bones, feathers, and jewels. Most Cynidiceans have forgotten that an outside world exists, living most of their lives in weird dreams by taking mushroom drugs. The times when they seem normal, tending their fields and animals, are becoming fewer as their dreams replace reality. Their unusual costumes and masks only strengthen their dream worlds. A few Cynidiceans are nearly normal. These natives are trying to restore the worship of the old gods - Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras. They hope to stop the slow death of their society and regain the past glory of Cynidicea...."

-- Tom Moldvay, *The Lost City*

Part 1:

The Pyramid

Chapter One:

Games That Kill

Monday, August 1, 1983

"Will, get your ass down here!" shouted Dustin.

"I'm down here!"

"Well then go upstairs and come down again, and faster this time! Jesus Christ, we've been waiting on you. Did you bike to Chicago before coming here?"

Will took his seat at the gaming table, sweating and out of breath. *I almost killed myself coming over here, thanks for asking. And mom's going to kill me anyway.* Whatever had Dustin so excited, it had best be worth biking across Hawkins in 95-degree heat, an almost-collision with a car, and a guaranteed grounding. William Byers was having the lousiest day so far of his summer vacation. At least it was cooler down here in Mike's basement. His favorite place in the world.

He said hi to Mike and Lucas, who all but ignored him, though Mike slid him a can of Coke. They were fixated on three items spread out before Dustin on the gaming table: a folded poster, a silver chain necklace, and what looked like a scroll made of durable cloth.

"We're all here now, Dustin," said Mike. "What is this stuff?"

"Well, all-righty," said Dustin. "As you all know, I've been making frequent trips to *Rotten Gargoyle* since the new clerk has been there." *Rotten Gargoyle* was the gaming shop that fed their nerdy passions. Comic books and Dungeons & Dragons, mostly.

"That new guy is weird," said Lucas. "His breath stinks and he never showers."

"Yeah, but the manager left him in charge for the summer, so he's buying all the gaming products, and there's pretty cool shit we've never seen."

"Who cares?" said Mike. "Nothing competes with D&D."

Will agreed. He had no interest in any of the other role-playing games he'd seen on display at *Rotten Gargoyle*, except for the occasional *Gamma World* supplement. They'd played that post-apocalyptic nightmare a few times and had a blast. But it still wasn't *Dungeons & Dragons*.

"But I *am* talking about D&D," said Dustin. "The paraphernalia that guy is selling is incredible."

"Is that what this stuff is?" asked Mike, reaching for the silver necklace.

"Hands off, Wheeler," said Dustin, smacking him away. "Wait for *me* to show you."

Mike rolled his eyes.

Dustin drum rolled. "These - get ready - are playing supplements for *The Lost City*."

They stared at him.

"The module we played last month, remember?" said Dustin. "The pyramid in the desert? The underground city? The acid heads? The wacko religious cults?"

Will remembered all right. *The Lost City* had been their best campaign of all time. Mike had been in top form as dungeon master, the rest of them in rare form as players. (And Lucas in morbid form by the journey's end: his character had died brutally.)

"Yeah, we remember," said Mike. "What good is this stuff to us now?"

"It's not really part of the game," said Dustin. "It's for fans of the module who've played it already, and want something, well... a little more real."

"A little more *real*?" asked Lucas.

"Bear with me. The guy at *Rotten Gargoyle* showed me what this stuff does and it's amazing. But you need to have an open mind. It's psychic stuff. Ouija Board territory."

"Ouija Board territory?" said Mike, incredulous. "Are you serious?"

Lucas swore. "You called an emergency meeting for this load of crap?"

Will was getting annoyed too. He had biked over here in the sweltering heat and nearly got clipped by a car, right after his mother insisted on chores that couldn't wait. All for a voodoo stunt. Dustin was usually better than this.

"I thought it was crap too, until I saw with my own eyes," said Dustin.

"Show us or shove out," said Mike. "And this better be good."

"All right, all right," said Dustin. He grabbed the huge poster folded into four sections and unfolded it, holding it up in front of him. They all gasped.

"Holy shit," said Mike.



It was a painting of something terrible, and yet terribly familiar: the corpse of the queen who had once ruled the Lost City of Cynidicea, now an undead wight.

"Queen Zenobia," said Will, shuddering. He remembered in the game how the wight's touch had drained him a level. (It had drained his character a level, precisely speaking, but like many D&D addicts, Will had come to think of his game character as an extension of himself.) It would have killed him on the spot if he hadn't gained previous levels on the upper tiers of the pyramid. The painting made him feel uneasy. It resembled the module drawing Mike had shown them as they battled the wight, but it looked much more real, as if the undead queen was about to leap out of the poster.

"Yeah, the queen," said Dustin. "Mike had us shitting our pants when he role-played this bitch. How would you like to see her really come to life?"

Mike barked a laugh. "That'd be a good trick." Aiming for scorn but sounding unnerved.

"You're going to make Zenobia live?" asked Will.

"Technically a bad choice of words," admitted Dustin. "She's undead and can't live. By 'live' I mean, you know, animate - move, shriek, touch, attack -"

"Attack?" said Mike, startled.

"Of course," said Dustin. "You don't think I brought you guys here for *a load of crap*, do you?" He set the poster down on the table and grabbed the scroll, unrolling it. "When I read the incantation off this scroll, Zenobia will animate and come out of the poster."

Lucas scoffed. "You're saying that scroll has a magic *spell* on it?"

"I know, I know," said Dustin, flattening the scroll cloth on the table. "It sounds crazy. But the clerk did the same thing for me with a poster of a blue dragon. I kid you not, he took me into the manager's office and the poster was hanging on the wall. He had me stand in front of it about five feet, and then he read a spell off a scroll like this. It sounded creepy as hell and suddenly I was in a 3D movie. But it was more than visuals. The dragon was moving; its throat was making noises. And then it lashed its head out at me - I am *not* shitting you guys - and its jaws were wide open. I almost shit my pants."

"How long did it last?" asked Will. His annoyance had given way to a guarded fascination. He had actually once seen a Ouija board work, and he believed there were things unexplained by science. And Dustin was neither a fool nor a liar.

"Not more than two minutes," said Dustin. "Which was plenty. I wanted to buy the poster but the guy wasn't selling it. He offered me Queen Zenobia instead. It came with a scroll and this necklace. The scroll

has three incantations. The first one is called 'Black Passage'. It brings the poster to life. The second one is called 'Ashes to Dust'. You read it if Zenobia gets out of control; the spell banishes her or destroys her in some way. The third one is 'Zoombie'. The clerk said that a zoombie is a zombie with more awareness and mobility - smarter and can move fast, I guess - but also said that he didn't know what the spell was for, and it's probably wise to ignore it."

Lucas was shaking his head. "Magic doesn't exist, Dustin."

"Lucas, I saw what I saw."

"What's the necklace for?" asked Mike.

"Well, that's for one of us to wear - that will be me - while the rest of you stay close. Within fifteen feet, the guy said. The necklace will protect us from evil or harm from any undead. Which I guess makes the second and third spells unnecessary."

"I can't believe we're listening to this," said Lucas.

"I can't believe you waited for us," said Mike. "I would have tried this as soon as I got home."

"Believe me," said Dustin, "it was hard to sleep last night with this stuff lying there in my room. But I had to wait for you guys. Each of the spells works once a month. Once you read it from the scroll, the incantation is void for twenty-eight days."

"According to Stinky Breath," said Lucas.

"I have great faith in Stinky Breath," said Dustin. "You will too in a few seconds."

"Let's do this," said Mike, impatient.

"Here we go," said Dustin, donning the necklace. The medallion on it was a circle of glimmering crystal. "Mike, take down the Thing. Will, put Zenobia in its place. Lucas, try to be excited for Christ's sake."

Mike went over to the wall and began peeling down his poster of the Thing. Will looked for some tape in a desk under the staircase. He found thumb tacks instead, and used them to stick Zenobia where The Thing had been hanging for a full year now. Critics had panned the film as "nihilistic pornographic gore", and there were parents in Hawkins still banning their kids from watching it. Will had loved it. But the Thing was more disgusting than scary. What hung on the wall in its place now was genuinely unsettling. Queen Zenobia was like Regan in *The Exorcist* or the ladies in *The Evil Dead*. There was something about females taken over by the supernatural that utterly terrified William Byers, though he was at a loss to explain why.

"Gather 'round," said Dustin, holding the scroll. "And I need you guys to be absolutely silent. Not a sound, you understand? These words are weird and I practiced a lot of them last night. Don't break my concentration. Yes?"

They murmured obedience and positioned themselves five or six feet in front of the poster, two or three feet apart from each other.

Dustin began reading the incantation: "*Ama strobin pazarta...*"

The alien words tumbled and soon had a subtle effect: Will felt his limbs stiffen. In the poster - for a brief moment - Queen Zenobia's eyes flared. This didn't seem like trickery at all.

"... *tantir manook somanzar...*"

After a minute the air in Mike's basement seemed to darken. Will felt a chill pass through his abdomen, light but sharp. The wight queen now had a 3D appearance... and she moved suddenly, sitting up straighter in her coffin. *Ouija territory*. What the hell were they getting into?

"... *darheesha pikar danz derosiar...*"

As Dustin kept chanting, a horrified gasp came from Mike. Will tried looking over at him, but his head wouldn't turn from the image that was now badly frightening him. Zenobia was no longer confined by a poster boundary. The poster was gone - the basement wall was gone, for that matter - and in their place a tunnel of blackness at least ten feet high and wide. The wight had stepped out of her coffin and looked very real. Her eyes flared again, and at that moment Will knew they were making a terrible mistake. He opened his mouth to tell Dustin to stop... but it was too late.

"... *raman lagesh tandahar!*"

The spell finished and the world turned. Everything went pitch dark. Will screamed. He heard the others cry out but couldn't see them. The darkness was absolute; the kids were blind. The air suddenly felt cool and dry, not the sweltering humidity of an Indiana summer. *We're not in Hawkins anymore*. Will knew this beyond a doubt. *Jesus God, what happened?*

"DUSTIN!" roared Lucas. "What the fuck is going on?!"

"Put the lights back on!" yelled Mike.

"Oh Christ," said Dustin. "That wasn't supposed to happen. This is -"

There was a loud bang, and a crash against the floor. The boys screamed. It couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away.

"Hello!" yelled Dustin.

"Who's there?" demanded Mike.

"Will, are you with us?" asked Lucas. "Are you okay?"

No. Will was hyperventilating. *I am not okay.* "We're not in the basement, you guys. I'm scared -"

He was cut off by a long tormented scream. A scream that would fill months of his nightmares. *Lucas.* Will knew - knew with sickening certainty - that Lucas had just been killed.

"*Lucas!*" screamed Mike. "*What happened to you?!*"

Dustin was swearing fiercely. "Why isn't this motherfucking thing working?"

"*What thing?!*" yelled Mike.

"THIS thing!" shouted Dustin. "What else? It's supposed to protect us - oh!"

They were suddenly bathed in a bright light radiating from Dustin's necklace. The medallion was luminous. The kids blinked furiously as their eyes adjusted to the light... and then they screamed at what they saw.

Mike's basement was indeed gone. They were in a room of stone walls, maybe thirty feet long and wide, with an open coffin at the center. A stone slab lay on the floor; the coffin lid that made the crashing noise. Standing about fifteen feet away was their poster nightmare made real: Queen Zenobia, the undead wight. She clawed the air and growled furiously, held back from the kids by an unseen force: the necklace.

"*Lucas!*" cried Mike.

He lay motionless on the floor. Zenobia had evidently singled him out before the necklace's powers activated. That was disaster. A touch from a wight was instant death, unless you were high level. None of them were high level. They were kids, for Christ's sake; zero-level bitch-queen fodder.

Mike knelt over his friend, begging him to wake up. Dustin fell next to him, adding his appeals. He put his ear to Lucas's chest, listening. Mike cried, demanding that Lucas wake up. Will watched, unable to say the words. *He's not getting up, Mike. Ever again.* He began crying too. They had been transported to a real D&D world, their ultimate dream, and death was already mocking them.

"Oh my God," said Dustin, lifting his head up. He too was in tears. "He's dead. Lucas is dead."

Fifteen feet away, the wight snarled and bared her teeth.

Mike hammered his fists on the floor in rage. Then he turned and grabbed Dustin, pulling him up close. "*You fix this, you understand? You brought us here to die! What is wrong with you? WHAT is WRONG with you?*"

"Mike!" shouted Will. "Don't do this." *Please*. "We have to stick together."

"Together?" spat Mike, standing up. "Lucas is dead! Because of Dustin! That leaves you and me, Will. That's our 'together!'"

Dustin was picking up the scroll he dropped upon arrival. As he unrolled it, a shriek rent the air. They looked over at Zenobia. Her eyes burned with murder - but now also with fear. Will recalled Dustin's words: *The second incantation is called 'Ashes to Dust'. You read it if Zenobia gets out of control; the spell banishes her or destroys her in some way.* That was according to the clerk at *Rotten Gargoyle*. That slippery shit must have known the poster was a gate to another world where an actual wight was waiting. Psychic phantoms and Ouija spirits didn't require spells of destruction. Who the hell was that store clerk?

"Are you going to read the second spell?" asked Will.

"It's supposed to banish or kill her," said Dustin. "But who knows for sure. I mean, Jesus, all bets are off."

"I'm going to kill that fucking clerk," said Mike. "After I kill you."

"Mike, stop it!" said Will.

"Keep quiet, you guys," said Dustin. "I need to get this right." He began chanting the second incantation.

At once Queen Zenobia shrieked, throwing herself against the protective force. Whatever the spell did, she feared it with a vengeance. Will felt a surge of righteous fury. *I hope it blasts you into a billion atoms.*

"... ash dahg reyku mek grimbador kush..."

The words were harsh and grating. If "Back Passage" was chilling (it had sounded like that *Evil Dead* incantation), "Ashes to Dust" was an assault. Zenobia felt it like a rain of fire. She leaped around the room and screeched, trying to shake off the burning pain. Will and Mike relished her agony. As Dustin finished the abrasive chant, her howls spiraled into an ear-splitting caterwaul, and then all at once she dissolved, collapsing in a pile of dust. Her crown clattered on the floor. Mike yelled in triumphant rage. Will's anger fizzled out until he felt only emptiness. *Lucas*. This had to be a bad dream.

Dustin rolled up the scroll and squeezed it under his belt. "Thank God that worked."

Will walked over to Lucas's corpse. He knelt over and hugged his friend for a long time. When he was done, he looked up and Mike and Dustin. "How do we get home?" he asked.

"By reading that first spell again," said Dustin. "Presumably. But we have to wait a whole month. Shit!"

"We're not going home," countered Mike. "Not until we find a way to get Lucas back from the dead. Even if that takes more than a month."

"How do we do that?" asked Will.

"I don't know!" said Mike. "I mean, are we actually in the Lost City? Is that what happened here? Is this a real D&D world that we've come to? This room looks exactly like the way Zenobia's tomb is described in the module. How can there be an alternate world that replicates a D&D setting?"

"There's one way to find out," said Dustin. He pointed across the room. They all looked and saw a door. "You know the layout of the pyramid better than us, Mike. You were the dungeon master. And you remember all those modules by heart."

Mike walked over to the door. "If we're in the Lost City, then we need to find a cleric who can raise the dead."

"Is there a high-level cleric in the Lost City?" asked Will.

"None mentioned in the module," said Mike. "But the underground city wasn't fleshed out with detail. Just the pyramid."

"Which tier are we on?" asked Dustin.

"The fourth," said Mike. "I mean, assuming this is all true."

"It seems incredible," said Dustin. "But we did disappear from your house. We're in a place where magic works and the dead rise from their coffins."

"And kill people with their touch, you asshole!" slammed Mike.

"Mike, I will do whatever it takes to get Lucas back! He was my friend too! I had no idea this stuff involved anything real."

"Fucking store clerk," said Mike. "He's dead."

"So behind that door," said Will. "It leads to the false crypt, and then the king's tomb, right?"

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Alexander's coffin has the *plate mail armor +1* and the *sword +2*. We're too small for the armor, but that sword would sure come in handy."

"Forget it," Mike snapped. "You're forgetting the banshee in that room. Or do you want to get another one of us killed?"

"Maybe the necklace would protect us," said Will.

"I doubt it," said Dustin. "The clerk said this necklace protects against any undead, but a banshee isn't undead. That sucks. We need magic items if we want a hope of surviving this pyramid."

"Wait a minute," muttered Mike. He walked over to Zenobia's coffin and looked inside. "Dustin, get over here with the light."

Dustin came over, followed by Will. The light from the medallion filled the inside of the coffin. They saw the item at the bottom and remembered it from their game.

"Hell yeah," breathed Dustin. "The queen's scepter."

Mike lifted the long wand and examined it. "Your character had fun with this thing, Will."

How could I forget? The scepter functioned as a *wand of paralysis*, and Will the Wise had used it to paralyze a few creatures throughout the pyramid. There was only one problem. "It's useless to us. You have to be a mage or priest to use it."

"I don't know, Will," said Dustin. "I was able to cast two spells from that scroll."

"That scroll is exceptional, I guarantee you," said Mike. "It was obviously made to be read by people in our world. This wand is native to the D&D world. I mean, how do you trigger it?" He waved it around. "Will's right. It takes a command word that's known to spell users."

"Let me see," said Dustin. Mike handed it to him. Dustin looked it over and waved it a few times. "Shit," he said, handing it back to Mike.

"Keep it," said Mike. "You have a belt to put it in. In case we do find a way to use it."

"What's our plan here?" asked Will. "Are we leaving Lucas in this room?"

Mike looked down at his best friend's body, and the tears came again. Will cried too, knowing Lucas was gone for good. He wouldn't say it out loud, and he'd follow Mike no matter what, but it was a no-brainer: there was a thousand to one chance against them finding a high level priest who had a resurrection spell *and* who was willing to cast it for their benefit.

Then he saw that Dustin was crying, and they all stayed like that for a while, mourning Lucas Sinclair. *Mike doesn't hate you, Dustin.* He had to know that.

Dustin finally broke the ice: "Tell us what to do, Mike."

Mike wiped his eyes and stood up. "We're not leaving him in this room. We killed Zenobia but I don't care. I don't want him left in this crypt." Mike grabbed under Lucas's arms and lifted. "Give me a hand, Will. And don't touch that bitch's crown." It was still on the floor, not far from them.

Will moved to get Lucas's legs. Dustin came over to help.

"Don't you touch him!" snapped Mike. "Get the door for us." He and Will lifted the body.

Dustin backed off and did as ordered, walking over to the door and opening it. The light from his necklace revealed a hallway that went immediately right.

"You lead," said Mike. "You have the light."

Dustin nodded and went down the corridor. Mike and Will followed, carrying Lucas. The crystal shined bright light for twenty feet, and then dimmer light beyond. After forty feet the corridor turned right again, and then down another thirty feet to a dead end. *There's a secret door down there.* It was all coming back.

Will didn't like how life was imitating art. When they had played the Lost City last month, Lucas's character had died. Not from Zenobia (it was Will the Wise who almost died from her touch), but from a *flame strike* spell cast by the Zargonite high priest down in the city. Still, the similarities were close. And Lucas's character had stayed dead. There were no get-out-of-hell free cards in Mike Wheeler's campaigns. Will didn't expect one now either.

They stopped at the dead end, and Dustin searched for the door. "Our first real secret door, guys," he said, moving his hands along the wall and looking closely for cracks. "Thank God for this light."

"Hurry it up," said Mike.

"My arms are killing me," said Will, "I need to put him down." He rested Lucas's legs on the floor.

Dustin was muttering curses. "Son of a bitch. How do you find a secret door?"

"Kick the wall, you jerk," said Mike, impatient. "If you -"

"Ah!" Dustin leaned into a portion of the wall and it gave way. He led them into the false crypt of the king and queen.

This room was bigger than Zenobia's crypt, at least forty by forty feet, and was covered in bones that hid the floor. Two large sarcophagi gleamed with golden highlights. One was marked "Alexander," the other "Zenobia." Surrounding the sarcophagi were four wooden chests. There was a table with heaps of gold on it. Littered throughout the bones on the floor were a variety of broken objects: two smashed thrones, a broken chariot, smashed pottery, and torn clothing. Mosaics covered the walls, displaying dramatic (and traumatic) events. Images of war; rape; blood sacrifice. Mike knew these were historical episodes from the reign of Alexander and Zenobia. From over a thousand years ago.

"Wow," said Dustin. "Just as I remember you describing it, Mike. The money looks real."

In the game, Dustin, Lucas, and Will had been initially fooled by this false crypt. All the treasure on the table and in the chests - thousands of silver, gold, and platinum pieces, plus gems and jewels - was fake, and the corpses inside the sarcophagi weren't those of Alexander and Zenobia, rather the bodies of slaves.

"Clear the table, Dustin," said Mike, breathing heavily. "That's where we'll put him, Will."

Will nodded, and Dustin upended the table. The coins fell with a raining crash, and the table smacked on its side. Dustin returned it to its standing position, and Lucas's body was placed on top. They all looked down at him, and Mike touched his cheek. "We're going to get you back, Lucas. I promise."

"We need a plan for that, Mike," said Will.

Mike walked across the room to a door. "This door leads to the crypt annex." It was the huge hallway - and the only way into these crypts. They were probably the first people to get inside the crypts without first passing through the annex. "We need to go down the annex, and then through the secret door on the left."

"You said we're on Tier 4, right?" asked Dustin.

Will recalled the pyramid having five tiers. The first tier was the top of the pyramid that connected to the desert surface. The fifth tier was the lowest and connected to the underground city.

"Yeah," said Mike. "Tier 4. It has all the burial rooms, not just of Alexander and Zenobia, but all the nobles who lived during their reign. And a lot of nasty shit haunting those tombs. We want to get off this tier ASAP."

"Up or down?" asked Dustin.

"Down," said Mike. "To the underground city. I said the secret door, it goes to the hallway with the trap door in the floor, and the ladder going down to Tier 5. On Tier 5 we'll have to find the entrance to the city, and then look for a high priest who can raise the dead."

"Why not up to Tier 3?" asked Will. "We could ask for help from one of the cults." That's what they had done in Mike's game. Their characters had allied with the Brotherhood of Gorm against the Zargonites who ruled down in the city.

Mike shook his head. "Some of the cultists may be helpful, but none of them are high level. And outside the pyramid is just miles of desert. We have to go down. To the city."

"Then let's do it," said Dustin. "And pray we don't die like Lucas. Tier 5 is a bitch as I recall. Aren't the acid heads down there?"

"Yeah, well, we're steering clear of them," said Mike.

Will groaned. He had forgotten the whole drug culture of the Cynidiceans. The mushroom gardens. The fearsome masks and exotic costumes. The natives baked out of their minds, living their dreams and nightmares. *If we're stuck here for a month, acid might start to look attractive.* William Byers didn't want to become a drug addict.

They left the false crypt, and went to find the ladder down to the fifth tier.

Chapter Two:

Holy Possessor

Mike Wheeler felt numb descending the ladder. He'd lost a part of himself and wouldn't be made whole until Lucas was.

The conflict was too much to process. His ultimate wish had come true but it was a nightmare. He was sharing it with his friends, except his best friend who was killed by it. A D&D world was impossible, and yet it was real. When you were dreaming you couldn't be sure, but when you weren't dreaming you knew. And Mike Wheeler knew. He wasn't dreaming. The Lost City was real.

The logistics of it mocked logic itself. Had TSR's designers been to alternate worlds and repackaged their experiences as a game? Or was it the other way around? Did written adventure scenarios somehow call themselves into alternate existence?

They were in a portal fantasy like Narnia, but Cynidicea was no wonderland of talking animals. It was more like the portal world of The Land, from *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, where terrible things happened every other chapter. In the first trilogy of that series Covenant insisted the Land wasn't real and that he was dreaming, but Covenant was a mental case. Guilt and self-loathing defined him; he had raped the first woman he met in the Land, as thanks for curing his disease. He refused to take responsibility for himself. Naturally he'd insist he was dreaming. Mike Wheeler had no room for delusions.

He stepped on a hand and Dustin swore up at him. "Watch your step, Mike. There's a broken rung here."

"Did you hear that, Will?" said Mike.

"Yeah," said Will from above.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," said Will. "Did giants build this ladder?"

"No, just adults," said Mike, swearing inwardly. He didn't need a reminder of their puny sizes. Kids in the Lost City were about as safe as kids in the Vietnam War.

Dustin called up and said something inaudible.

"I can't fucking hear you!" yelled Mike.

"I said I made it! You have to hug one of the sides to make it to the next rung!"

Mike started his descent again. He knew that hating Dustin was irrational, but he couldn't help it. They were in an ocean of shit thanks to him, and they would all be joining Lucas in hell.

At the bottom was an empty square room, about twenty feet long and wide. If he remembered the module correctly, there were no traps or treasure here, just a secret door that led to an abandoned bedroom.

"Let's see if my searching abilities have improved," said Dustin.

"I think it's that wall," said Mike pointing. Dustin walked over and began searching.

Mike pictured the gaming map in his mind. They were in the southwestern area of the tier and needed to get to the huge chamber at the north end: the hall of mosaics. There was a trap door in that hall that led down to the underground city. It was a long way; they were kids in a murderous dungeon crawl. Death waited in every other room. If Dustin found the secret door, they would enter an abandoned bedroom, and from there a kitchen with giant snakes. After that a room where killer statues came to life, and beyond that a den of gargoyles. There was no way they were getting by a pair of gargoyles. This real-life game would be over in a snap.

"Hah," said Dustin, pushing open a section of the wall. "I am getting better."

"Well, we knew what we were looking for," said Will.

"True," admitted Dustin. "If you don't know that it's there, and exactly where to look, there's no way to find these secret doors. It's just like the game."

"Let's go," said Mike. "This should be the abandoned bedroom. Nothing dangerous. Don't get used to that idea."

They entered a room forty by fifty feet with a door at the far side. There was a bed, a table, and a desk with a chair, and items lying on each: on the desk a lantern, on the chair a bathrobe, and on the table something they

couldn't make out. Mike frowned. There was something about this room he should be remembering. Will moved towards the table.

"Hold on, Will," said Mike, grabbing his arm. "Don't go near the table."

"It's just the holy symbol," said Will. "Of Usamigaras."

"Yeah Mike," said Dustin. He was over at the desk, opening drawers.

"In the game we picked it up and nothing bad happened."

Mike released Will and they both approached the table. They saw the holy symbol and Mike remembered. It was a wooden carving of two intertwined snakes. Usamigaras was one of the old gods of Cynidicea, like Gorm and Madarua. The temples of these cults were in the pyramid's upper tiers, far from the reach of the Zargonites who ruled the undercity. The former resident of this room had been a priest of Usamigaras. Something nagged at Mike. *A priest...*

Will was turning over the holy symbol. "I liked the Magi, even though we joined the Brotherhood."

"The Brotherhood are solid," said Mike. "I mean it, Will. We're not asking the Magi for help."

"I'm not saying we should," said Will. But Mike knew he wanted to.

The Magi of Usamigaras were the most powerful of the three cults, but also the most internally divisive, and they had the least influence. Their leader was a sleaze. Full members were magic users, but other devotees included thieves and assassins, and of course it had its priests like the other cults. The Brotherhood of Gorm were the oldest cult with the most influence. Its warriors were all men; fearless and loyal to a fault. The Maidens of Madarua were the flip-side of that sexism: female warriors whose goal was a complete overturn of the patriarchy. In the game Will had been drawn to the Magi, but Lucas and Dustin overruled him, and they had thrown in with the Brotherhood. As dungeon master, Mike had approved.

"Better put it down," said Mike. He half expected the snakes on the holy symbol to come to life and sink their teeth into Will's hand.

Will tossed it back on the table.

"Nothing over here," said Dustin, closing the last drawer of the desk.

"Then let's move on," said Mike. "The next room is the kitchen with those pythons -" He broke off when he saw Dustin leaning on the chair.

"No, wait, Dustin - *stop!*"

It was too late. Mike had forgotten this nasty part, because in the game, none of the player characters had touched the robe draped on the chair. When he saw Dustin touch it now, he remembered: it was the robe, not the holy symbol, that contained the trap.

And a brutally unfair one.

Dustin. No.

Possession.

Dustin's body spasmed. Tremors filled his muscles. His face contorted - like an adult's on the brink of orgasm - and then he screamed and raised his fists. He closed his eyes, shuddering, breathing deeply, shaking his fists, trying desperately to wrest control of himself. Mike and Will shouted his name. Then Dustin froze. Slowly, he opened his eyes and lowered his hands... completely calm.

Will was shaken. "Dustin?" he asked.

Dustin my ass, thought Mike. They had just lost him. To a priest on a vengeance crusade.

Dustin's face smiled at Will. It was a kind enough smile, but Mike knew it wasn't their friend behind it. "I'm sorry, but I'm not Dustin," spoke Dustin's mouth. Will gasped. "An urgent matter requires that I borrow Dustin's body. Please forgive me. I intend your friend no harm, and I'll release him as soon as I can."

"Mike?" said Will, horrified. "What's going on?"

Mike swore. "What's going on is that Dustin is possessed. By the priest who used to live in this room." A priest of Usamigaras. Moderately high-level - seventh - if Mike remembered correctly. "He was killed by his brother and wants revenge. Isn't that right?"

Dustin's face looked astonished. "That's correct, boy. But there's no way you could have known that."

"Well, I did," said Mike. "*Boy.*"

"I'm no boy, boy."

"You are now."

"I don't remember this in our game," said Will.

"Your *game*?" asked the priest inside Dustin.

"That's because none of you touched the robe," said Mike. "That robe held the spirit of this cleric. His name is Dmitri or something, I forget. He was killed by his twin brother - another priest - who has a hideout on the other side of this tier." The shock on Dustin's face grew exponentially as Mike rattled off facts he had no way of knowing. "And he's about to tell us that he needs Dustin's body and our help so he can kill his brother."

"Who are you boys?" demanded the priest.

"Who are you?" retorted Will. "We want Dustin back."

"I am Demetrius Rhone," said the priest. "And everything your friend just said is true. And I want you both to explain how you know who I am, how I was killed, and the location of my brother's secret hideout."

"I'm Will and he's Mike," said Will. "And we play this game -"

"We explain jack shit to you, motherfucker!" said Mike. "Get out of our friend!"

"That's not happening," said Demetrius. "I'm sorry - Mike, is it? - but I made a dying wish that my spirit live on, and the condition of that wish is that I use the next available body to fulfill my vow. Otherwise my soul is cursed."

"What's your vow?" asked Will.

"I don't give a shit about his vow," said Mike. "He and the other cults in this pyramid can go to hell."

Will turned to him. "We should hear him out."

Of course we should. We should lie down and die while we're at it. "I guess we don't have a shitload of choice about it, Will. We can't exorcise this asshole."

"Please," said Demetrius. "Please do hear me out. My vow is to destroy my brother, Darius Rhone. That vow was interrupted when my brother caught on to me and killed me. I was able to preserve my spirit in my robe so that I could take over a body that happened by. It's taken over a year for someone to come into this room and actually touch the robe. I'm assuming that Darius is still hiding on the other side of this tier - behind the party rooms - and Mike has just confirmed that."

"Yeah, the party rooms," said Mike. There were mushroom addicts over there. Acid heads. Baked out of their minds. The Cynidiceans were addicted to psychedelics. "Why is killing your brother so important?" The module hadn't explained any details behind the fratricide.

"He's a priest of Zargon, but also a skilled manipulator and assassin. He wants to wipe out the cults of the old gods, but he prosecutes that goal indirectly - and very effectively. When I was alive, he was rumored to have at least one spy inside each of the cults. I can only imagine the damage he's done in a year's time."

"Is Darius the high priest of Zargon?" asked Will.

"No, that's Hazor," said Demetrius. "Unless there's a new high priest now. Hazor's powerful but not cunning; and not nearly as dangerous as my brother. And my brother avoids the city water supply. He's paranoid about purifying his food and drink with his prayers. So he's not a drug addict like most of the natives. That keeps his mind incredibly sharp."

"Wait a minute," said Mike, thinking of spells. "You and Darius are seventh level, right? Seventh level clerics?"

Demetrius blinked. "Excuse me?"

Shit. How to translate from game terminology. "I mean... what kind of spells do you pray?"

"I have a variety of prayers at my disposal. Healing and protective prayers, mostly, and I purify my meals too, like my brother. I was never addicted to mushrooms. What about you boys? I assume you're addicted to some degree, but to be honest, Dustin's body feels very healthy."

"We don't do drugs," said Mike. "We're not addicts."

Demetrius frowned. "Well, that's very rare. How have you managed that?"

"We're not from this world," said Will.

Demetrius raised his eyes.

He looks exactly like Dustin when he does that.

"We got transported here against our will," continued Will. "We want to get back home, but another friend of ours died. He was killed by the wight - the queen upstairs. We had to leave him up there. After we killed her."

Demetrius was stunned. "You destroyed the corpse of Queen Zenobia?"

"*Dustin* destroyed her," said Mike with pride. "With an *awesome* spell. Better than any of yours, I guarantee." Now that Dustin was a victim in jeopardy, Mike was done hating him.

"You're lying," said Demetrius. "You're boys, not spell casters. The wight would have killed you all."

"Do you have a *detect lie* spell?" asked Will.

Demetrius looked hard at Will. "No," he said. "That's not one of my prayers. But I know your friend Dustin is no spell caster. I can access his mind, and just gleaning its surface makes it obvious that he's no cleric or mage. Not even an apprentice."

"You have Dustin's memories?" asked Mike.

"Yes."

"Well then dig deeper, asshole, and you'll see we're telling the truth."

Demetrius frowned and closed his eyes. He looked like he was trying to meditate. Minutes passed and Demetrius's frown deepened. At one point he inhaled sharply. Finally he opened his eyes. He stared at Mike and Will for a long time.

Mike inclined his head. "Well?"

"Well," said Demetrius.

"Yeah," said Mike.

"I'm sorry about Lucas," said the priest. "That was horrible."

"We need to find a priest," said Will. "Like you, but a more powerful priest, who has a *resurrection* spell."

"Oh, I remember," said Demetrius scornfully, tapping Dustin's head. "Your 'brilliant' plan is to go down to the city and seek out a priest of Gorm to raise Lucas from the dead. Which proves in itself that you boys are from another world."

"Why is that?" asked Mike.

"The Brotherhood of Gorm considers resurrection a sacrilege. Did your 'gaming module' not cover that?"

Mike swore. Resurrection a *sacrilege*? "The module is light on details, especially like those. Do *any* of the cults believe in resurrection?"

"Yes, but it's a rare priest who's powerful enough to invoke such a prayer. I guarantee you none of the Zargonite priests or Madaruan priestesses have resurrection powers. I'm pretty sure no one from my cult either; the last cleric of Usamigaras who could raise the dead died over twenty years ago."

"Well shit!" yelled Mike, on the verge of tears. "We need Lucas back!"

"I'm sorry, Mike. And I'm sorry, Will."

"There has to be something we can do!" said Will.

"There isn't," said Demetrius bluntly. "Now I want you boys to follow me and do exactly as I say."

"Eat shit!" cried Mike. He wasn't giving up on Lucas in a million years.

"The first order of business," said Demetrius, unfazed, "is equipping ourselves. The gods have finally seen fit to pay off my dying wish, but with the body of a twelve-year old child. That's a hard shroom to swallow."

"Then swallow your own shit," retorted Mike, still in tears.

"I was obsessed with scatological insults at your age," admitted the priest. "They're psychologically gratifying."

Mike turned and stormed off toward the kitchen door. *Snakes be damned.*

"Mike," commanded the cleric.

Mike stopped.

"*Come back.*" It was a voice of ironfire. Dustin's voice still, but infused with compulsive power.

Against his will, Mike turned and walked back to where Demetrius and Will stood. It was a *command* spell. This piece-of-shit possessor had prayed a *command* on him.

"I understand your anger over Lucas, Mike, but I'm trying to save lives, including the lives of kids like Lucas. And you; and Will; and Dustin. Revenge isn't all I want. If Darius doesn't die, Cynidicea will. I know you don't care, because this isn't your world, but it's as real as your own. You

may treat our world as a game in yours, but I won't abide your feelings of alien superiority, and I will absolutely not stand for temper tantrums. Am I clear?"

"You're not my superior either," grated Mike.

"Oh, I am," said Demetrius. "But I'm not wasting time arguing the obvious. All that matters is that you do as I say, when I say it. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly, you Nazi," snarled Mike.

"Will?" asked Demetrius.

Will nodded.

"Excellent," said the priest jovially, clapping their backs. "We'll be the best of friends in no time, just as if I were Dustin. Now as I said, the first order of business is equipping ourselves. Dustin has already been endowed with our queen's scepter." He pulled it from Dustin's belt and examined it with admiration. "The royal *wand of paralysis*. Now that you have a priest inside Dustin, this wand can actually be put to use. You see what I mean? This is all turning out for the good."

If it weren't Dustin's face the priest was wearing, Mike would have punched it.

Demetrius returned the scepter to Dustin's belt. "And this necklace," he said, lifting the medallion to get a good look at it.

"It shines light in darkness," said Mike.

"Yes," admired the priest. "Handy in a place like this. We don't need a lantern."

"It also protected us from the wight," said Will.

"Once it was activated," said Mike. "She got Lucas before its powers switched on."

"I gathered that in Dustin's memories. The necklace probably had to recalibrate after crossing worlds. Your shop owner said it protects the wearer from undead, and extends that protection to anyone within fifteen feet. If that's true, which it seems to be, then this is a priceless defense against any undead creature. But we need a lot more." He let the medallion fall against his chest. "We'll start in my treasure room. Not much in there anymore, but I think a couple of items will help us out."

That was another encounter Mike hadn't run, because Lucas, Dustin, and Will hadn't found the secret door to it. But he remembered the creature lurking inside. "Isn't there a polymar in there?" he asked.

"You really do know this place," said the priest, walking over to his desk. "Yes, a polymar. But it answers to me. I put it there to guard my treasure." He opened the top drawer and grabbed a key.

"What's a polymar?" asked Will.

"A creature that reshapes its body into whatever form it wants," said Mike. "In the module it's lurking in the form of a tapestry, then surprises intruders by changing into an ogre."

Demetrius laughed. "It's a very effective watch dog." He pocketed the key and walked over to the north wall.

"Yeah, but will it recognize your scent?" asked Will. "In Dustin's body?"

"Who knows?" said Demetrius. "Only one way to find out." He ran his hand slowly along the north wall, stopped, and pushed. A secret door opened.

He does that just like Dustin. Mike wondered if Demetrius was subconsciously absorbing a part of Dustin's persona.

Demetrius led them into a twenty-foot square room that was vacant except for a wooden chest on the other side. The chest lay on the floor against the wall, under a huge tapestry of a desert scene.

"And there it is," said Mike.

"Stay here," said Demetrius. "I'm going to open it." He took the key from Dustin's pocket. The chest was padlocked.

If that tapestry turns into an ogre, we're all dead. Even Demetrius. He was an adult trapped in a kid's body. An ogre would pound him into jelly. Unless he had some offensive spells up his sleeve.

But no ogre appeared. The tapestry moved slightly at Demetrius's approach, but in the end must have recognized the spirit of its master.

The priest knelt down and opened the chest with his key. He looked inside and told Mike and Will to come over. They did so and looked over the priest's shoulder. There were thousands of silver and gold pieces, a bottle, a dagger, and chainmail armor. The dagger was a magic weapon, the chainmail enchanted as well, and the bottle obviously a potion, but Mike forgot what the benefits were.

Demetrius pulled a sack from the chest and gave it to Will. "Here. Take as much money as you want. I'll not be needing it again."

Mike nodded to Will. *If we can take gold back home with us, we'll be rich. Will's mother can buy a better house.*

Will knelt next to Demetrius and began scooping gold pieces into the sack.

"I will however be needing this potion," said the priest, opening the bottle cap and sniffing the mouth. "Hmm. Still fresh." He replaced the cap and told Will to put it in the sack.

"That's a *potion of invisibility*, right?" asked Mike.

"Indeed," said Demetrius. "It will be useful against my brother."

Not very, thought Mike. *A potion of invisibility* made you invisible only as long as you didn't attack anyone. Demetrius was aiming to kill.

"This gold is heavy," said Will. "I'm only taking 300 pieces." That was six pounds of weight and the limit of what his pouch could hold. There was loads more in the chest - at least 5000 gold and 3000 silver pieces.

"Good plan," said Mike. "Who gets the dagger? That chainmail is obviously too big for any of us."

"Take it," said Demetrius, handing it to him. The dagger had flared with light as soon as he picked it up.

Mike looked it over, marveling at the light and its practically non-existent weight. In D&D, magic weapons were light, and magic daggers and swords radiated light when their hilts were gripped. *I don't want a dagger, I want a sword*. He gave the dagger to Will.

"Wow," said Will, taking the blade. "Christmas came early. Is this a *dagger +1*?"

"I think so," said Mike.

"You guys need weapons too," said Will.

"We need a lot more than weapons," said Demetrius, closing the chest. "We need magic items that can rain destruction. You're kids and so am I now. We can't fight for shit."

"Dustin's scroll has a spell we haven't used," said Mike. "The third one. We have no idea what it does."

"Oh, I forgot," said Demetrius, fingering Dustin's belt. "I meant to check that out. I want to see this scroll." He removed the cloth from the belt. "A scroll that you know-nothing kids used to hop across worlds and blast our queen to smithereens. Which is impossible."

"You saw us do it," said Mike. "In Dustin's memories. And be careful with that thing. It's our way home."

"Home?" asked Demetrius. "Don't be so sure." He unrolled the scroll and began reading.

"What do you mean, 'don't be sure'?" asked Will.

The priest ignored Will's question. "As I thought. These are Zargonite spells." He read more and his eyes widened.

"What's wrong?" asked Mike.

Demetrius was staring hard at the scroll. "You boys have no idea who the shop owner was?"

They shook their heads.

"And you used the first two spells but not the third."

"You saw," repeated Mike. "The first one brought us here and the second killed Zenobia."

"You know so much and yet so little."

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"In fact, you really don't know your asses from your elbows."

"What the fuck, Demetrius."

"Mike, the solution to your dead friend Lucas has been staring at you from this scroll."

Mike felt as if the ground had shifted. "What?"

"The third incantation. It's a spell of resurrection."

"What?!" said Mike and Will.

"Yes. And though I would have never believed it possible, it's like the other two spells. It doesn't require a spell user to cast it. Any one of you boys could read the incantation to resurrect Lucas."

Mike was reeling. "The guy who sold it to Dustin said he didn't know what the third spell did. But he said it was called 'Zoombie', and that it had something to do with zombies that are smarter and faster than usual. We don't want Lucas raised into anything like a zombie!"

Demetrius laughed. "Yes, it's called 'Zoombie', but that's just a Zargonite swipe at crazy prejudices. As I said, the Brotherhood of Gorm thinks resurrection is sacrilegious. They call resurrected people zoombies, because to them a resurrected being is little more than a zombie - smarter and faster, as you say, to the extent they even seem normal, but to the Brothers they are spiritually deficient. I think it's a bullshit belief, as do my fellow Magi. Almost thirty years ago one of our priests raised someone from death, and she came back fine. Don't worry, boys. The Zargonites use the term 'zoombie' to mock the followers of Gorm. Not because their resurrection spells raise people into anything like zombies."

Mike couldn't believe he was hearing this. "Then what are we waiting for?"

"We have to go back for Lucas," said Will. "Up to Tier 4."

"Agreed," said Demetrius, putting away the scroll. "I'd give anything to meet the priest who created that scroll. And your shop owner."

"You think he's a priest too?" asked Mike.

"I have no idea who in Hell he is," said Demetrius. "But believe me, you don't want him running loose in your world. Magic and spells are seen as games to you people. That makes you vulnerable, if not outright defenseless."

Death diminished and it dignified. Mike felt the paradox looking down at his friend. Lucas Sinclair's moment of terror was immortalized, the

scream of a final breath frozen on dead lips. A wight's touch stripped the soul, leaving a shamed corpse. And yet Lucas also looked strangely beautiful; nobly defiant in the way of the innocent. He hadn't earned this road. Mike would have done anything to erase his path on it.

Now that erasure had come. But Mike didn't trust the miracle spell. *Zoombie*. Fears he couldn't name overrode Demetrius's assurances.

"Best if I do this," said Demetrius. He stood next to Mike by the table, flanked on the other side by Will.

Mike began: "You said -"

"Anyone can read these scroll spells and make them work, but the 'Zoombie' spell gets pretty dramatic. You have to put flare into it."

Flare. Whatever that meant. "You're the professional," conceded Mike. He didn't trust himself reading the spell anyway.

"Dustin did a good job with the other two spells," said Demetrius. "Pronunciation matters and your friend nailed it."

"He practiced a lot of the words, the night before," said Mike. He was growing less angry about Dustin's possession. The cleric was proving valuable to them. As long as he didn't own Dustin for long.

Demetrius nodded. "But as I said, this third spell relies on more than pronunciation. Now both of you stand back and keep silent."

"Wait a minute," said Mike. "I want to be absolutely sure of this. You're saying that Lucas will be raised *exactly* as he was before? That he won't be changed at all?"

Demetrius looked thoughtful. "Not changed at all? Well. Do you want the long answer to that, or the short?"

"Jesus, Demetrius!"

"Mike, listen. No one comes back from the dead unchanged. Passing through death leaves a mark on people, and how it does that depends entirely on the individual. Theologians have a lot to say about it, and we could discuss it for hours. But if you're asking whether or not Lucas will be a partial zombie, the answer is no. He won't be undead at all, I promise you. This spell doesn't animate, it resurrects."

"Well... then okay," said Mike. "That's all I care about."

"You sure?" asked Demetrius.

Mike nodded.

"Okay. Then both of you stand back."

Mike and Will gave him space. And then, for the third time, they watched as Dustin chanted from the scroll. Only not Dustin this time. *Don't fuck this up, Demetrius*. If Lucas came back resembling anything like a zombie...

The Zargonite words tumbled from Dustin's mouth. They sounded both similar and dissimilar to the words of the other spells - the sacred tongue woven with much different purpose. The first spell had been creepy; the second aggressive. This one was a shot of adrenaline. Hearing the chant was like getting an injection of B-vitamins and caffeine. It sounded unnerving in the extreme.

"Eyf fie tyne la-hief sola wosh barite..."

Mike held his breath. At his side, Will grabbed his hand, and Mike squeezed it back. They watched the ritual, willing Lucas back to life through their own prayers. *Please God*, thought Mike. *If you're even in this world. Please bring Lucas back.*

"... stahn my haer vesh o-lora hyme cryshar..."

Usamigaras was irrelevant here. Demetrius wasn't channeling power from his patron deity. Whoever read from the scroll was a mere instrument, a trigger for contingency spells that had already been prayed into effect by a Zargonite. Which meant that if Lucas returned from the dead, it would be through the "blessings" of a Cthulhu-like deity. Mike didn't like that idea, despite Demetrius's guarantees. *Please. Don't let him be tainted by Zargon. Please -*

"Maas taerikite! horbei! pringala-a-fine!"

The chant became frantic. Demetrius seemed almost taken over by the spell - the possessor becoming possessed. *You have to put flare into it.* That "flare" escalated for twenty seconds more, and then Demetrius was shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Bayglei-kam! Q'ozei! Q'ozei! Q'OZEI! Q'O'O'O'O'O-ZEEIIIIII!!!!"

Lucas suddenly sat upright, eyes wide. Will screamed in shock, and Mike stared with his hands in his mouth. *It worked.* Lucas lived. He gulped air as if he'd been drowning, but he lived. Mike shouted his friend's name, wanting to rush over and hug him.

Demetrius put away the scroll. He was sweating profusely. He put his hand on Lucas's shoulder and then looked back at Mike and Will, nodding. They joined him at the table. "Give him a few seconds," said the cleric. Lucas continued inhaling air but he was stabilizing. Finally he breathed normally and took in his surroundings. He saw Mike and Will crying, and said Jesus, he was fine, and why the hell was he sitting on this table? Mike reached over and bear-hugged him, unable to speak.

"Whoa, Mike," said Lucas. "It's okay." He pried Mike off... and then Will was on him. "What the hell, you guys? Was I out that long?"

"What do you last remember, Lucas?" asked Demetrius.

Lucas gently pushed Will away, and swung his legs over the table. "Nothing. I mean, it was dark. Completely. Then my arm felt like ice. And then my whole body... like my blood was becoming ice. And then... I don't know, I don't remember anything after that." His look turned hard. "You've got a lot of explaining to do, Dustin."

"Yeah, you don't know the half of it," said Mike. "But be nice to him. He's not even Dustin, he's a cleric inside Dustin. And he just resurrected you. You *died*, Lucas. You were *dead*."

"It's a miracle we got you back," said Will.

Lucas sputtered questions and Demetrius held up a hand. "We'll explain everything. But for now, let's eat. I have a prayer that will create a feast for us. I don't know about you boys, but living without a body for a whole year has left me starving. How about you, Lucas? Does death and resurrection work up any appetites?"

They stared at Demetrius, and then one by one began laughing. They were all famished. Especially Lucas.

Chapter Three:

Terror Gaze

It's fine if you don't look down.

Mike told himself that as he hugged the wall around the pit trap. It was twenty feet deep and filled with iron spikes, waiting to impale the brave and foolish. Mike and his friends were neither. They certainly weren't brave, though in their games they'd pretended to be. The past few hours had proven, with merciless severity, that they were galaxies away from the heroes of their fantasies. They were snot-nosed kids and scared a thousand percent shitless. But neither were they fools. They pushed forward on the path of suicide because it was literally the only path.

"Watch it, damn you!"

Mike missed a foothold and slipped, and was barely caught by Dustin's arm. The priest cursed again and yanked Mike to safety. Then Mike did look down - and almost fainted. Those spikes would have killed him. Messily and painfully. For the fifth or sixth time in the last hour, he wanted to be home and out of this nightmare. His eyes teared thinking of Nancy and baby Holly. *I won't ever see them again.* Yesterday that idea would have filled him with joy. Now he wished he could hug his sisters and say how much he loved them.

"You're almost there," said the priest, releasing his arm. "Watch where you reach and step. I'm right behind you. Go."

It was Dustin's possessor who kept them alive, who had made Lucas alive, who made the most of being alive after a year of dormancy. Demetrius was a bona fide hero, though it chafed Mike to admit it.

"How old are you, Demetrius?" Will had asked during their feast in the cleric's bedroom. They had returned there after Lucas's resurrection and taken mugs and dishes from Demetrius's desk. The cleric's spell had created a repast that put a Karen Wheeler Thanksgiving dinner to shame.

"I was thirty-seven when Darius killed me last year. He and I are the same age, so he's thirty-eight now."

"Did you live up in the temple or down in the city?" asked Will.

"In the stronghold, down in the city. I served with a priestess under the Magi's high priest. We were exorcists and healers for the Usamigaran community."

Mike remembered the division of labor: the temples of the old gods were up on Tier 3 in the pyramid, while the communities of their followers lived in the city strongholds. The strongholds were led by priests like Demetrius. The temples were run by magi (for Usamigaras) or warriors (for Gorm and Madarua), far from the Zargonites who controlled the underground.

"Is this a roast pork?" asked Lucas, shoving meat drenched with gravy into his mouth.

"It's manyan," said the priest. "From a grubel."

"What's that?" asked Lucas, licking his fingers.

"You don't have grubels in your world? Their like small piglets, but the meat's more tender."

"It's good," said Mike, his mouth full. He was eating ravenously.

Lucas poured himself more water from a pitcher. "I just realized this you guys, but you probably know by now. We're not speaking English."

"What do you mean?" said Mike. "Yes we are... oh, shit, we're not." He heard it as soon as Lucas called attention to it. An alien language rolled fluently off their tongues. They were *thinking* in English, but the words automatically translated in the output.

"I'd wondered about that," said Demetrius. "It's why I didn't believe you boys at first, when you said you were from another world. Our native tongue is evidently a conferred benefit of the 'Black Passage' spell on that scroll."

"That's incredible," said Will.

"It's trippy," said Lucas.

Mike laughed. "Hey Demetrius," he said, around a mouthful of red lentils, "if I call you a 'worthless motherfucking piece of shit', am I pronouncing that right?"

"For the record," said Demetrius, devouring his last chunk of manyan, "you're speaking flawless Cynidicean. But 'fuck' isn't vulgar for us, as it apparently is for you. 'Worthless shit', on the other hand, is extremely offensive." He wiped his greasy hands on Dustin's pants, and swallowed a mug of water in two gulps. "Now. We need to move on. Take a few minutes to rest."

They had piled onto Demetrius' bed for a nap that lasted twenty minutes, before the cleric prodded them awake. Then they had set out on the quest for Darius, proceeding through rooms that would have murdered them if not for priestly protection. In the kitchen, two giant rock pythons: Demetrius prayed a *snake charm* spell, and they rushed past the pythons to the next door. In the living room, two statues, programmed to attack guests when the entry door shut; Demetrius and Mike knew the trap and so jammed the doors open. Then came the room of the gargoyles. Mike's bowels had churned at the sight of them: winged demon-like humanoids that could tear warriors to pieces. Demetrius had used Zenobia's scepter to paralyze each gargoyle; the creatures would be immobile for an hour.

From the gargoyle hoard, Demetrius had acquired a weapon: a *mace +1* (Mike remembered the bonus from the module) and a scroll of *dispel evil*, which was a very powerful cleric spell. As a magic weapon, the mace was light enough for Dustin's arms to lift, though too long to swing effectively. Demetrius was physically a child. His years of fighting experience were stifled in the body of Dustin Henderson.

The gargoyle room had forced them all to face their inadequacies. They couldn't rely forever on Zenobia's scepter. It had few charges to begin with, and after zapping the gargoyles probably had less than six shots left. Darius might not even be paralyzed by it; as a high level priest, he had good saving-throw odds.

"There's no way, Demetrius," Mike had said, watching him struggle to swing the mace. "You're a kid like us, when it comes to fighting."

"We're useless," agreed Lucas. "Your brother and his bodyguards will slaughter us."

"Six hobgoblins," said Will, referring to Darius's bodyguards. "We can't fight them. And that *dispel evil* scroll is useless against them." *Dispel evil* was powerful, but it worked on enchanted beings, by banishing them to their home plane. It would have worked on Zenobia. Not on orcs and hobgoblins.

"I know you're bound by your vow," said Lucas. "But this party is a joke."

"We need, like, a mega-powerful artifact," said Mike.

"Like *Daoud's Wondrous Lanthorn*," said Will.

"Who the hell is Daoud?" asked Demetrius.

"A wizard who created this --"

"Never mind!" Demetrius put down his mace and swore.

"I'm sorry, Demetrius," said Mike. "We can't survive this pyramid."

Demetrius began pacing the room. He went back and forth, passing close to the paralyzed gargoyles.

"Demetrius," repeated Mike.

"Yeah, I'm thinking," said the cleric. He paced more and then stopped suddenly. "Oh," he said. "Well, there's that."

"What?" said Mike. "Do you have something?"

"Tell us you have something," said Lucas.

Dustin's eyes stared ahead. "Yeah," said the cleric finally, clearly not liking what he was thinking. "Yeah, I have something."

"An artifact?" asked Mike.

Demetrius looked at him.

"Where is it?" asked Lucas. "Where do we go?"

Demetrius stood up. "The lower levels. Tier 8."

Now, having barely navigated the pit trap, Mike wondered at the obduracy - and outright stupidity - of priests under vows. Here they were, powerless to take on Darius and his hobgoblins, so naturally they were going down to places far worse.

Zargon is down there too. Jesus, we've gone from crazy to insane.

The Cthulhu-like god made the bottom tenth tier his home. Tentacled, horned, and bloated, rising thirty-five feet tall. They weren't going that deep, thank the old gods, but all of the lower tiers were death zones. Even worse, Mike didn't know much about them. The rooms were barely detailed in the gaming module, left mostly for the dungeon master to flesh out. He didn't know their secrets. What he did remember was enough to know this was a fool's errand: there were wraiths, golems, minotaurs, medusae, mummies, trolls - even a goddamn thessalhydra.

Damn you, Demetrius.

They walked down a corridor over two hundred feet long, putting the pit trap behind. Ahead was a secret door that led to a room with stairs descending. For all his fear and fury, Mike had to admit he'd love to see a thessalhydra. He was pretty sure he remembered it being on the eighth tier. A beast like that would at least provide a death worth dying. But Demetrius wouldn't confirm the hydra's location. Demetrius had gone utterly silent. His looks told everyone to shut up.

He hates this plan, whatever it is.

They went down the stairs and were able to bypass most of the sixth tier. From an empty room the priest led them down a corridor into another

room with a trap door in the floor's center. He opened the door, and they saw the ladder to the seventh tier.

"Me first," said Demetrius, "in case something nasty happens. But I think we'll be okay. Will, you next, and I want you to take out some of the gold you took from my chest. We'll need it. Lucas, you after Will. Mike, watch our backs."

"What we do we need gold for?" asked Will, digging into his pouch.

"There are two hell hounds waiting below, by a mountain of coins."

"Hell hounds?" asked Lucas. "Are you serious?"

"Those things breathe fire!" said Mike.

"Calm your bowels," said Demetrius. "I've never been down here, but I have it on good authority that the hell hounds will let you keep going down the ladder to Tier 8 if you throw a few coins on the treasure pile. It's the 'password', so to speak."

"Assuming that nothing's changed in a year," said Lucas.

"Mike?" asked Demetrius. "What does your game say about the hell hounds?"

"I don't remember," said Mike. "I only skimmed the lower tiers, and they weren't that detailed anyway."

"Here you go, everyone," said Will, giving them five gold pieces each.

"And here we go," said Demetrius, disappearing down the ladder. They were left mostly in darkness as the necklace light trailed him.

"He'd better be right about this," muttered Lucas.

"Fucking hell hounds," said Mike.

"Do you think we --?"

Will was cut off by a shout from below. They all peered down the ladder hole. The light from Demetrius's necklace shone upwards. "Get your asses down here, boys."

Will went down, followed by Lucas and Mike. They found Demetrius in a hexagonal room about fifty feet long and wide, with three doors, and a mountainous pile of treasure on one side. They froze when they saw the hounds: a pair of red-brown hyena creatures with flaming red eyes. The beasts sat about twenty feet from the ladder, staring at the intruders, their soot-black tongues hanging from canine smiles. They reeked of smoke and sulfur.

"Stay calm," said Demetrius softly. Mike wasn't sure if he was talking to them or the hounds. "Take your coins and toss them into the pile. That should allow us to keep going down."

"Yeah?" whispered Mike, sweating. "And what's down in the next room?"

"Nothing, I think," said Demetrius. He walked ahead a few steps and tossed his gold pieces on the treasure pile. There were coins of three colors in the pile: copper, silver, and gold.

"Do we need silver and copper too?" asked Lucas.

"No," said Demetrius. "The kind of coinage doesn't matter. You could be cheap and just leave copper, but all we have on us is gold."

Everyone else threw their gold onto the pile. Mike noticed the hilt of a glowing blade sticking out of the treasure. *Magic sword. I want it.* He looked at the hounds. They were still smiling fiendishly. Getting the sword was a fantasy.

"I'm shitting my pants right now," said Lucas.

"We're okay," said Demetrius, eyeing the hounds, "and I think we're good to go. Reverse direction this time. Sorry, Mike, I'm sending you first, but the room below is empty (I think), so you should be fine. I want to go last, in case these hounds decide to charge us at the last second."

Will was looking at the walls. "Look at the paintings," he said.

Mike paused on the ladder and looked. The necklace light shone on images showing various stages of natural death: embalming procedures, funerals, graves, and mourning processions. "Yeah, Will. Totally. Let's go."

They proceeded down the ladder into a square chamber that looked empty. It had two doors, and the ladder stopped on this tier.

"I'm going to have nightmares from those hounds," said Lucas, as Will and Demetrius stepped off the ladder.

You and me both, thought Mike. *And we have to come back this way.*

Will was looking up. As in the room they came from, paintings covered the walls and ceiling. Here they showed a group of dead spirits in a ferry boat crossing an underground river. "This is cool."

"I've already died, thank you," said Lucas.

"Were you anywhere like this?" asked Will. The underground river was like something out of Dante's *Inferno*.

"Don't remember," said Lucas. "And I don't want to."

"Were these burial rooms at some point?" asked Will.

"Sort of," said Demetrius. "The lower tiers were originally built to show the journey of the spirit after death. Not the sixth tier - those rooms were slave quarters - but below that, all the rooms were designed for ritual purposes. Tier 7 is about the funereal aspects of death. Tier 8 is about crossing the underworld. And Tier 9 is about judgment of the soul."

"None of that sounds Zargonite," said Mike. It sounded like the Egyptian mythology from his world, not the nihilism of Cthulhu deities.

"Of course not," said Demetrius. "Zargon came after. He's been the ruling god of Cynidicea for 1182 years now. Since the year Alexander and Zenobia were assassinated. They were the last monarchs of Cynidicea. That's when the Zargonites took control. This stuff --" the priest gestured around the cavern walls -- "goes back six or seven hundred years before that. When the old gods were on the rise."

"1182 years is a long time," said Will.

"Yes, my friend, it is," said Demetrius.

"It's forever," said Mike. "How have the old cults survived that long?"

Demetrius smiled coldly. "Some beliefs aren't subject to erosion. Or eradication. The Zargonites will fall. Some day. And the stuff you see on these walls will be the way of things again."

That may require killing the Zargonite god. Whose lair isn't that far below us now.

"Mike, isn't Zargon on the bottom tier?" asked Will, as if reading Mike's mind.

"Yes," said Mike bluntly. "Have you ever seen him, Demetrius?"

"No one sees Zargon and lives," said the priest. "Only the Zargonite high priest goes down to the tenth tier."

"Zargon never leaves his chamber?" asked Lucas.

"Only once a century," said Demetrius. "During a centennial feeding."

"What's a centennial feeding?" asked Mike.

"A topic for a later discussion. We need to move."

He led them through one of the doors and into a hallway that went ahead a short distance and then branched left and right. He took the right corridor and they followed him down to a door, where he paused and turned to face them.

"All right, listen. What we need is inside this room. I'll go in first and you guys follow, and stay very close. I mean it. Don't get any farther from me than fifteen feet. You may see a shadowy fog-like creature inside. If you do, get a good look at it. Make sure it doesn't drift towards you. But if you hear me say "drop" at any point, then fall to the floor face down. Is that clear?"

It was not clear. Not in the least. What were they trying to accomplish in this room? What was the fog-like creature? Where was the artifact? Why should they fall to the floor instead of run away? The boys fired questions, talked over each other, and demanded that Demetrius explain himself for a change.

"Keep your voices down!" Demetrius hissed. "There are things on this tier you don't want coming to find you!"

Mike had to agree. The dungeon-master in him knew they were behaving like babbling idiots. Still, they needed more details.

"No," said the priest. "It's better this way. I'm trying to keep you guys alive, and I need you to do exactly as I say. Will you trust me?"

It's he who doesn't trust us, Mike suddenly realized. He thinks we'd refuse to go in the room if he told us what's in there. What the almighty fuck is behind that door?

"I trust you, Demetrius," said Will.

"Thank you, Will."

Mike looked at Lucas, who nodded reluctantly. "Fine," he said, facing the priest. "Stay close to you, keep an eye on the fog-creature, make sure it doesn't drift close, and fall face down to the floor if you say 'drop'."

"We're trusting you, Demetrius," said Lucas, in a warning tone that didn't bespeak trust at all.

"Thank you boys. Ready?"

They nodded.

Demetrius swung open the door and looked inside. Mike tried desperately to see into the room, but Dustin's body was blocking the doorway. Then Demetrius marched straight in. They boys followed behind, maybe six or seven feet, and then fanned out a bit when they got inside. It was a huge room with almost nothing in it. Paintings covered the wall and ceiling, showing spirits who waited on the bank of a bloody river. Across the room was a golden chest lying on the floor.

Then they saw the fog-like creature.

It was a human-shaped form, translucent and wispy, that seemed to form out of nowhere in the center of the room. It looked like a man; a native Cynidicean. Was he a dead spirit? *Get a good look at it.* Mike followed Demetrius's orders, looking hard. The figure's eyes were a burning crimson. Its gaze -

NO!

- its gaze went through Mike and filled him like fluid. Terror was suddenly living inside him; panic pounded his heart. His muscles contracted then expanded. He heard his clothes rip; felt them rip, and his arms and legs expand to obscene lengths. Lucas and Will were screaming, and he joined them to reclaim his sanity and being.

Almost at once, through their hysterical shouting came Demetrius's shout:

"DROP!"

Mike threw himself forward, against the kick of his fear and corrupted flesh. The shock was so great that he blacked out as he hit the floor.

He came to almost right away, and called out hoarsely to his friends. Screams still filled the cavern. Mike Wheeler didn't know what the hell was going on, but he knew one thing: he wasn't himself anymore. He was a long humanoid with long hair and a deep voice he didn't recognize. He was unnaturally terrified - under a fear spell of some kind. He cowered on the floor and yelled at the fog creature to leave him be.

"Don't look at it!" Demetrius was yelling in an altered voice of his own. *"Close your eyes!"*

Mike didn't need to be told that. He cringed and hugged the floor in his elongated form, unable to stop caterwauling.

Lucas and Will kept wailing too, and Lucas sounded outright mad; his howls ricocheted off the cavern walls like an aerial bombardment. His voice sounded throaty and bottomless. Will sounded more familiar. Demetrius was the only one who had self-control. Dustin's voice (and his body, presumably) had undergone a change, but his possessor was somehow immune to the fear that pulverized the rest of them.

Mike heard chanting. It was Demetrius, praying a spell. His holy words were barely audible against the screams, but they worked to a swift purpose. In less than a minute everyone's terror dissolved. Mike cried his own prayer of thanks. *Remove fear*. That first-level spell, so basic and mundane, felt to him like salvation. He could breathe normally and think again. He uncurled himself on the floor, turned over, and -

"Keep your eyes closed!" yelled Demetrius. *"Don't you dare look at that thing again! It's a ghost!"*

Mike caught himself in time. A ghost? A *ghost*? That was worse than bad news. That was -

Lucas called out: "Then what are we supposed to do?"

Mike suddenly wondered: Lucas's voice sounded deep and resonant... and mature and baritone... like...

Demetrius, you asshole.

... like an adult's.

You cannot be serious.

He examined his new body by peeking and not looking beyond it. He felt himself over with his hands. There was no question: he was still human. They hadn't been shape-changed or polymorphed into humanoids; they'd been aged into adults. Because...

Because looking at a ghost did that to you.

Bloody asshole.

Mike recalled ghosts with vivid clarity from the D&D Monster Manual. They were spirits of people so terrible in life that they had been "rewarded" with undead status - the very worst and most powerful of the undead, aside from a lich. A ghost's mission was to complete some unresolved task from life, whether revenge, fulfilling an oath, or relaying a message to someone. But that mission was often thwarted by the restriction of locale, since ghosts haunted a particular area and never moved from it. You could "kill" or dispel a ghost (if you were powerful and very lucky), but usually all that did was banish the creature to the ethereal plane for a limited time. It would return to its haunt eventually - days later, weeks later, whatever. It took a cleric's *exorcism* (which took hours to cast) to kill a ghost permanently. Shy of that, the best way to deal with a ghost was to run your sorry ass away from it. It attacked one of two ways, either by possession or by touch, the latter of which aged a victim ten to forty years. The necklace Demetrius wore would have kept them protected from these direct attacks, just as it had protected them from the wight of Queen Zenobia. It was still protecting them now, as they lay helpless on the floor.

But the necklace was apparently useless against a ghost's gazing power. Mike remembered: the mere sight of a ghost caused fear, and also aged a victim by ten years, though high-level clerics were immune to the fear part. That's why Demetrius had been able to keep his wits and *remove fear* from the rest of them.

Where was the ghost now? Surely still fifteen feet away, close by.

"Demetrius!" yelled Lucas. "We can't just lie here blind!"

"Shut your pothole!" said Demetrius. "And do exactly as I say!"

"I'll shut your pothole!" said Lucas. "Mike! Will! Are you guys all right?"

"Yeah!" called Will. "I'm fine."

Mike cleared his throat. "Yeah. Fine. Just swell. Demetrius, you put us in a load of shit here." His adult voice sounded foreign; it may as well have been humanoid. He was now, what, twenty-two years old?

"Your shit will get deeper if you don't pay attention!" said Demetrius. "I want you all to stay on the floor with your eyes closed. Don't open your eyes or stand up until I say."

"Why?" asked Will.

"Because we'll keep aging ten fucking years every round we see that ghost!" shouted Mike.

"Exactly!" said Demetrius.

There was a long pause from everyone.

"Motherfucker, Demetrius!" yelled Lucas. "This was your goddamn plan?"

Of course it was. This was his solution to the problem of their feeble twelve-year old bodies. They had assumed he was after some magical artifact that could rain fire, when all along he intended to throw them into a fire.

"You're an asshole, Demetrius," said Mike. "If we get out of this, I'll kill you."

"If we get out of this, you'll thank me. Now shut your yap. I'm going to try and dispel this fucker. That scroll I took from the gargoyle room? That's when I got this idea."

"To rob us ten years of our lives?" asked Lucas.

"To *save* your goddamn lives," retorted the cleric. "Now shut up, all of you. I need to concentrate to get this right."

"You need to do more than concentrate," said Mike. "You need to see what you're trying to dispel. Not to mention read the scroll."

"You'll have to open your eyes," agreed Will.

"I know that! But I don't have to look directly at the thing's face. I'll try to be circumspect."

They kept quiet on the floor as he chanted from the scroll. It was a sonorous prayer, channeling cryptic forces. Despite his outrage at being so shamelessly manipulated, Mike was feeling better about the situation. *Dispel evil* was a mighty spell. If it worked it would banish the ghost to the ethereal plane, for days if not weeks. He wished he could open his eyes to see the fog-like bastard as he got vaporized. Then he almost shat his pants as Demetrius screamed.

"Demetrius!" called Lucas. "What the fuck is going on?"

No answer.

Mike's voice quavered. "Demetrius? Are you still there?"

More silence, and then the cleric finally gasped. "Yeah... yeah, it's gone. You guys can get up and look now."

They stood and opened their eyes - and stared at themselves, stunned. Their clothes had ripped to accommodate older bodies. Just like Bruce Banner. Mike couldn't believe how tall he was. He towered close to six feet. His feet were in agony; his kiddie sneakers mangled his toes. They all needed new clothes and shoes...

... all of them, that is, except one.

"Uh oh," said Demetrius. "This complicates things."

What --?

Three heads turned and looked down at Will.

Oh, great.

William Byers hadn't aged a day. He was still a twelve-year-old boy.

"Jesus, Will," said Lucas. "How did you manage to not look at that thing?"

"I did look at it," said Will.

"Then how -?"

"He made his saving throw," said Mike.

"He made what?" asked Demetrius.

"His saving throw," said Mike. "He... resisted the ghost's aging effect. He was lucky."

"No, he was unlucky," said Demetrius. "Why do you think I brought us down to this shithole? Looking at a ghost is the only way I knew to age us into adults."

"You're an asshole," Mike repeated. "But you dispelled it too fast. You could have had Will look at it again. He would have had to make another saving throw."

"Your language is bizarre. But I had no idea Will hadn't aged. Even if I'd known, there was no way I was taking the chance that thing would possess any one of us. I knew it couldn't touch us, but I wasn't completely sure about its possession attacks."

"You're one to talk about possession," said Lucas.

"What about my opinion?" said Will. "I don't want to be ten years older. What if you guys never change back?"

"I would have given my left nut to skip over my teenage years," said Demetrius. "Sorry, but we need adult bodies. Now you're going to be baggage on the rest of us."

"Hey, fuck you," said Lucas. "You're baggage on our friend Dustin. And you had no right doing this to us without telling us first."

"I agree," said Mike. "He should have told us. But he's right. We need to survive this place, and as kids we didn't have a prayer."

"*Thank* you, Mike," said Demetrius. "And if it makes you all feel any better, I was aged twice. When you heard me scream just now? I couldn't avoid another look at the fucker to complete the spell."

"You mean you're *thirty*-two years old?" asked Will.

Yes, thought Mike. Now that he mentioned it, Dustin's body did look older than Mike's and Lucas'.

"Why would that make us feel better?" asked Lucas. "That body isn't yours. It's our friend you shafted, you jerk."

"All right, Lucas," said Mike.

"Twenty years of Dustin's life!" yelled Lucas.

"Then here's something that *should* make you all feel better," said Demetrius. "Our rewards: that chest over there in the corner. It's bound to have things we can use."

"I'll bet it's trapped," said Will.

"Why?" asked Demetrius.

"I don't know. It's a ghost's lair. Mike, what did the module say?"

"As I said, I don't remember much about these lower tiers. I didn't use them in our game."

"Yeah, 'cause we would have died," said Lucas. "Fucking ghosts."

"No matter," said Demetrius, "I have a spell that will find any traps."

"Cast away," said Mike. "I need to take a piss and take off these fucking shoes."

"No shit," said Lucas, already sitting down and removing his sneakers. Demetrius kicked off Dustin's footwear, and then walked barefoot to the other side of the room. Will followed him.

Mike left the room, through the door on the right wall. It led to a dungeon corridor which he used to relieve himself. As he pissed on the floor he admired his adult cock. It was long, like the rest of his lanky body. When he finished, he stroked himself a bit, feeling an unexpected desire. His cock began to stiffen. Then he swore, hurriedly tucking it back inside his shredded pants. He returned to the room.

Demetrius had pronounced the chest free of traps. It was open and everyone marveled at its contents. Lucas was trying on a helm, and Will was holding a bottle. Demetrius lifted a sword from the chest as Mike walked in. The blade shed a light as bright as Demetrius' necklace.

Fuck yeah, thought Mike. A magic sword. He wanted it.

Demetrius was already handing it to him. "A long sword to match your long arms. And long legs. Gods, you grew like a giant."

Mike took the sword and for a moment thought it was a toy. Not only did it give off light; it *was* light, not at all weighty like a serious weapon. Of course, that's how magic swords were in D&D. Just like the mace Demetrius had taken from the gargoyle room. That was part of their benefit. Mike needed that benefit. He was an adult now, yes, but still an inexperienced weakling. He couldn't have wielded a normal sword effectively.

"How does your helm feel?" he asked Lucas.

"Light," said Lucas. "Really nice. Magical obviously."

"Will?" said Mike. "Is that a potion?"

"Healing potion," said Demetrius. "I opened it and sniffed. It's the standard healing concoction made in the under city."

"Sweet," said Mike, swishing his sword in the air. "We scored well here."

"And finally," announced Demetrius, "a *bag of holding*. I owned one of these before I was killed. Big on the inside, small on the outside. It'll hold up to 50,000 coin pieces and weigh only 25 pounds when you carry it. Here you go, Will. You're our treasurer. Load it up."

"How much money is there?" asked Mike. A *bag of holding* was very convenient indeed.

"See for yourself. I estimate about 12,000 silver pieces and 5,000 gold. And a nice piece of jewelry -- got to be worth at least 1,000 in gold."

Will scooped the mountain of coins and jewelry piece into the bag of holding, and then dumped in the 300 gold pieces he'd already been carrying.

Mike couldn't stop examining himself. "Christ, look how huge I am."

"You're tall but not huge," said Lucas, "You're wiry, dude."

"I can kick your ass in a sword fight," said Mike, swishing his magic sword through the air.

"Give me a sword," said Lucas. "And we'll see."

Mike ran his finger over the glowing blade. "Well, we need to find you one. These magic swords are awesome, they hardly weigh anything."

"All right, you guys," said Demetrius. "We need to move on."

"We'll move when we're ready," said Lucas.

"We'll move now," said Demetrius. "There are things almost as bad as ghosts on this tier."

"Yeah," said Mike, "I think there's a thessalhydra. I want to see it."

"A thessalhydra?" asked Will. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes, he is," said Demetrius.

"C'mon, you guys," said Mike. "It's a thessalhydra. Eight fucking heads."

"That's a magic sword you're holding," said Lucas, "but probably not a vorpall sword of hydra-slaying."

"Moron, I don't want to fight the fucker, I want to see it."

"No," said Demetrius. "Now listen to me. We're going back the way we came, and I want you both - Mike, Lucas - to get your fighting hands dirty."

"I still need a weapon," said Lucas.

"And we need shoes," said Mike. They were all barefoot except for Will. "Clothes would be nice too. We're half naked in these tatters."

"I think I know where we can pick up some shoes and clothes that fit," said Demetrius. "When we get back to Tier 5. There's an old cleric's

quarters not far from where Darius hides out in the party rooms. As for a weapon, Lucas, remember the sword sticking up from the coin pile guarded by those hell hounds? We're returning that way next: Tier 7."

"Yeah," said Mike. "That's got to be a magic sword. We'll get it for you, Lucas."

"Those hounds will kill you, Mike," said Will.

"No they won't," said Demetrius. "Mike and I will each take on a hound as Lucas gets the sword out of the pile. When you have the sword, Lucas, help Mike. Between my mace and my prayers, I can take on the other hound alone."

"Those hounds breathe fire," said Lucas.

"I have a *fire resistance* spell that I'll cast on Mike."

Which puts Lucas most at risk. "Fuck that." Mike handed Lucas his sword, and Lucas's eyes widened. "You already died once, I'm not letting it happen again - no, shut up, Lucas, take the sword. This cleric is going to give *you* the fire resistance, and *I'll* go for the sword in the treasure pile."

"It's up to you guys," said Demetrius.

Lucas took the sword from Mike, nodding. "Okay. I'll kill the bastard before he has chance to breathe on you."

Mike wasn't counting on it. He made a mental calculation. Hell hounds were vicious creatures in D&D, 5 hit dice creatures, with around 25 hit points a piece. He knew that Demetrius had 31 hit points, so Dustin's body was in good enough hands. But he and Lucas were wholly inexperienced. They couldn't possibly have more than 3 or 4 hit points each. Will probably had a single hit point, and with his puny child's strength was ineffective for dealing out damage.

Will began: "I've got the dagger --"

"Don't even think about it," snapped Mike. "You don't come in the room until we're done." He looked down at Will. *Was I really that small only minutes ago?* You didn't realize how vulnerable kids were until you were no longer one.

They retraced their steps to the ladder room, where Mike told Will to stay unless a wandering monster intruded. Demetrius intoned a spell, laying his hands on Lucas's head, bestowing the benefit of fire resistance. The three new adults then climbed the ladder.

The hell hounds were waiting. They were ugly fuckers, and their predatory smiles promised the same misery as before. Mike had eyes only for the sword hilt protruding from the treasure pile. He could see the blade glowing. It was magic all right.

"I'm ready when you guys are," he said.

Demetrius and Lucas nodded, drawing their weapons. The hounds growled, perceiving the clear threat, and rose to attack as Demetrius and Lucas charged. The beasts leaped angrily to evade the swinging weapons. Lucas' sword missed by a mile. Demetrius' mace smashed the other hound's head; the beast scrambled back yowling, but was far from incapacitated.



Mike ignored all of this as he rushed for the treasure pile. He fell on the pile of coins and grabbed the sword hilt, yanking with all his might; it barely budged. He heard what sounded like a roar of flame and Lucas scream. Mike swore ferociously, hoping the spell kept Lucas safe, and kept pulling, ignoring the melee around him. The sword was buried deep; finally it started to slide. Mike yanked again -- and suddenly flew

backwards as the sword came free. He fell on his ass and dropped the sword, which spun across the floor. He cursed again, scrambling to his feet -- and then heard Lucas shout his name. His bowels turned to liquid when he saw the hound right in front of him. It had made him a priority, bounding away from Lucas the moment the sword was removed. Its jaws gaped open like a furnace, and Mike knew he was about to be cooked.

"Kill it, Lucas!" yelled Demetrius. He had slain the other hound but his torso was savaged, and he was too far away to help.

Lucas acted fast but not fast enough. As he hacked the hound from behind, Mike was smacked by a tongue of flame. He fell to the floor, in more pain than he'd ever experienced. Crying for help, he cursed this alternate world and the game of Dungeons & Dragons, and prayed that Gary Gygax would roast in Hell and feel as Mike felt right now. Through his agony he thought he heard the hound making dying noises, and Lucas shouting in triumph. Mike rolled on the floor, screaming, begging... and then someone was over him, smothering him and pounding out the fire.

"You're okay... you're going to be fine, Mike." It was Demetrius, whose priestly powers he needed desperately, otherwise he was *not* going to be fine. The fire was out but he had burns ranging from first to third-degree. The torment was searing and Mike cried like a child. His first real D&D combat had smashed him.

Lucas gasped at the sight of Mike. "Heal him, for Christ's sake!"

Demetrius was already reaching into his pouch. He popped the lid of the healing potion and held the bottle to Mike's blistered lips. Mike reached for it but Demetrius pushed his hands away. "Slowly," he said. Mike slurped greedily. The liquid bubbled and tasted like club soda with a dash of strawberry and something indescribable. It effervesced in his throat, and Mike felt the pain in his body compress and then start to fade. He murmured for more, still crying, and Demetrius kept pouring. Now Mike's tears were of relief. As he chugged, he felt the burns over his body evaporate, as if the air were peeling away his pain. His veins filled with vitality, and by the end of the bottle Mike Wheeler was a healed man.

"Holy shit," said Lucas. "Why doesn't our world have magic healing?"

Because our world sucks, thought Mike, forgetting that he had thought the opposite only moments ago. He sat up and gave Demetrius a hug.

"Don't thank me," gasped Demetrius. "Thank the potion. I saved my spells very selfishly, to heal Dustin's body."

Mike pulled away and saw the blood seeping. The hound had bitten a chunk from Dustin's left side. "Well then Jesus, dude, get to it."

Demetrius knelt on the floor and invoked a spell - the *cure wounds* in every cleric's repertoire of prayers - and as his body began to heal, Will's head appeared from the ladder below. Lucas told him to get his ass up into the room. They all took a few minutes to rest and rejuvenate, grateful for their lives. Will went over to the mountain of treasure and began scooping it all into the bag of holding. Mike looked at the slain hounds, feeling his anger rise. He had hated feeling so helpless. But he was glad he let Lucas have the fire resistance.

"It's almost ten thousand coin," said Will, loving his job. "Maybe nine."

"Give us an inventory," said Mike.

"We have a total of about 5,000 copper, 15,000 silver, and 6,300 gold."

"And that bag can hold plenty more," said Demetrius. "Now listen up. We're going back up to the fifth tier, and I'm going to kill Darius. Mike, you said he has a guard of six hobgoblins, and that sounds right. You and Lucas are going to kill those hobgoblins while I deal with my brother."

"Excuse me?" asked Mike.

"That's three hobgoblins on each of them," said Will.

Lucas was shaking his head. "You're dreaming. We may be adults and have magic swords, but we're not warrior trained. You saw what just happened here."

"I'd try one hobgoblin with my magic sword," said Mike. "But three is suicide."

"If you'd all shut up and listen," said Demetrius, "you'll see that I'm not stupid. You're going to take on two hobgoblins each, not three, and at a big advantage."

"Seriously," said Mike.

"Dead serious. I'm going to drink my *potion of invisibility*, and enter Darius's room before you. You'll both charge in once you hear the fighting begin and my invisibility is canceled. By that time I'll have paralyzed two of the hobgoblins with Zenobia's scepter. And you guys will be maniac fighters - berserkers - worth twice what you are now."

"How's that?" asked Lucas.

"You're going to eat something I hope to find in the room of the acid-trippers."

"Whoa," said Lucas. "I'm not eating any mushrooms!"

"You'll eat what I tell you, if you want to survive."

Lucas looked ready to explode.

"Hold on," said Mike. "Even if we become psycho killers, how can you guarantee to do all that? Darius is a powerful priest like you. He might spot you right away, invisible or not."

"Welcome to the world of risk," said Demetrius. "When you run your 'D&D games', do you dumb them down for babies? Or do the dice you roll actually matter? You're adults now, you've grown a pair of balls. Use them."

Mike choked back a furious reply. *If you weren't inside Dustin's body, I'd kick your smart-ass mouth until your teeth fell out.*

Chapter Four:

Mushroom Madness

"That trap is pretty obvious," said Demetrius.

"Yeah, if you're looking for it," said Mike.

It was a pressure plate in the floor twenty feet before the door, easily spotted in a stop and search. If you stood on the plate, the walls ahead of you - ten feet before the door - would crash together and then fly back apart, which triggered an alarm bell down in Darius' room. It was also a deadly trap for those coming *out* the door who forgot about it: stepping on the pressure plate would then kill anyone who followed ten feet behind. The Cynidicean natives would obviously know to walk around the plate, but Mike wondered about casualties. Behind this door was the recreational complex where people came to get baked out of their minds.

"Shrewd bastard," muttered Demetrius.

"What?" said Will.

"My brother. He was no dummy, making this area his hideout. Last place anyone would look."

"I'm guessing he's not the party animal," said Mike.

"He despises acid-heads. He's not even a minor addict. He purifies what he drinks from the common water supply. He's one of the few Zargonites who has a clear head."

"Well, let's do this," said Lucas. "After a ghost and hell hounds, party rooms with drug-heads should be a cakewalk."

They had returned to the fifth tier, and gone through a chapel, and then down a corridor to the abandoned quarters Demetrius had mentioned. Mike, Lucas, and Demetrius had found clothes and footwear for their adult bodies and now looked like "proper" exotic Cynidiceans, though they refused to wear masks. Then they backtracked to the corridor that took

them where they were now. Mike remembered this encounter area with immaculate clarity. The first room was a lounge: a hang out joint for acid heads. Inside the lounge were two doors: one leading to a ball room, the other to a gambling room. In the gambling room was a secret door that led to Darius's chambers; his secret hideaway.

Mike expected things to get interesting now. If Lucas was expecting a cakewalk, he'd either forgotten or didn't take seriously the D&D torments Mike had inflicted on him in these rooms. Acid heads were unpredictable, and sometimes dangerously so.

"Follow me," said Demetrius. He led them around the pressure plate - an easy feat, unlike hugging the walls above the pit trap - and through the door. They entered the lounge and stopped at what they saw.

"Whoa," said Lucas.

The lounge was huge, at least fifty feet ahead and eighty feet wide. Ten people sat in divans about thirty feet ahead, in a semicircle facing the entry door. A coffee table had trays of food, and glasses of water and wine. Behind them to the right, against the far wall stood a line of desks. The people on the couches were robed and masked. Their masks were fearsome animals, covering the whole face except the mouth. Some of these men and women were eating off a tray and drinking; others stared straight ahead at the intruders without seeming to register their presence.

"Hello there," said Demetrius, waving his hand.

A woman in a wolf mask turned from her food tray to look casually at Demetrius. She promptly lost interest. A man in a bird mask sat up straight and stared raptly at the intruders. The other eight Cynidiceans may as well have been comatose. One of them screamed at the ceiling.

"God, it's just like our game," said Will.

"Yeah," said Lucas. "You role played these stoners pretty well, Mike."

"Think we should join them?" asked Mike, trying for levity. He was trying to see the food on the trays, which had to include mushrooms. The drugs were cultivated down in the city, in gardens the size of two football fields.

"You and Lucas will be tripping on something else," said Demetrius. He led them further into the room and stopped. "Do not, and I mean *not*, eat anything on those trays if you're offered." Now they were close enough to see the food on the platters: crackers, cheese, pickles, and, yes, plenty of mushrooms. Most of the shrooms were dark blue, though some were yellow-and-orange spotted, and one was red-and-white spotted. That one was on the wolf lady's tray.

"Dark blue is your everyday acid trip," explained Demetrius. "The most common shroom in Cynidicea."

"How many kinds of mushrooms are there?" asked Mike. The Lost City module hadn't gone into any detail about the drugs.

Demetrius laughed. "At least thirty, maybe even more. Most of which you'd be wise to avoid."

"What are the yellow and orange ones?" asked Will.

"Those make you sex crazed," said Demetrius.

"Oh brother," said Lucas.

"The red-and-white spotted is rare," said Demetrius. "It alters your senses entirely. You end up seeing sounds, hearing sights, smelling touches - or any recombination of those."

"I'm not taking anything that fucks me up that way," said Lucas.

"Of course not," scoffed Demetrius. "I need you guys effective, not hallucinating. We need the amphetamine shrooms, but they're locked away in those desks." He lowered his voice. "There's a key hidden in one of the unlocked drawers. Stay here, I'll be back." He crossed the room and walked around the divans. The acid heads ignored him. At the far wall he began trying desk drawers.

"That's the door we want, right?" Will was pointing to the wall on their right.

"Yep," said Mike. "It goes to the gambling room, which leads to Darius' hideout."

"What about that door?" asked Lucas, pointing left. "Did we go through that one in the game?"

"Yeah," said Will. "The ball room. Remember we -"

"Uh-oh," said Lucas.

The bird man had risen from his couch and was walking toward them. His eyes were fixed on Will.

"Hey," said Mike. "Can we help you?"

The bird man ignored Mike and peered down at Will through the eye-holes of his mask. "Are you the fiddler?"

"The fiddler?" asked Will.

"Ignore him, Will," said Lucas.

The Cynidicean rubbed his groin. "Are you here to *fiddle with me*, you handsome runt?"

"Hey!" said Mike. "Get lost."

The bird man opened his robe and let it fall to the floor. They all gasped. Through tatters in his loincloth bulged a fully erect penis. "I want that boy to *fiddle with me*, do you hear!" He hopped left and right, not



taking his eyes off Will.

Mike couldn't believe his eyes. As dungeon master he had gone wild in role-playing these acid heads, and made them do crazy things. But this was X-rated land.

Lucas stepped in front of the bird man. "Tough shit for what you want. Back off."

The bird man cawed, skipped backwards, and then jumped back close to Lucas. He tore off his bird mask and threw it violently aside. A wild-looking face stared at them. He was in his twenties, white-haired, red-eyed and completely baked. His gaze went from Lucas to Mike, and then lingered again on Will, smiling. Mike didn't like that smile.

Demetrius called from across the room: "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," said Will, shaken.

"No!" said Mike and Lucas.

"Hang onto yourselves," said Demetrius. He was rummaging through a desk drawer and seemed to find something.

The bird man shucked to the left and shucked to the right, tearing off his loincloth, and dodging Lucas in order to address Will: "I want you to FIDDLE with me, boy!" His penis was a huge exclamation point. Lucas blocked him and told him to shut up. The man fainted one way and then leaped the other. "FIDDLE with me, you sweet sugar!" He was stroking his erection now. Mike was appalled. If that pud got any harder it would burst.

Lucas was fed up. He told the man to put his robe on and sit back down. The man frowned, crestfallen. Then he giggled and slapped Lucas across the face. Lucas batted away his hand and gave him a final warning. The man put his face in his hands, pretended to cry, and made weird noises; then he looked up deviously. He leaned forward at Lucas, opened his mouth, and exhaled a cloud of white powder. Before Lucas could react, he was choking. He gagged and fell to his knees.

Mike yelled in outrage and rushed without thinking to help Lucas. The bird man saw his opening: he leaped forward and snatched Will's arms. Will protested as the man pulled him into a lover's embrace - and kissed him wetly on the lips. Will gaped in shock. The man kissed him again, forcing his tongue deep into Will's mouth. Will gagged, terrified out of his mind. Then the man grabbed Will's fingers, caressing them one by one while ranting nonsense in Will's face:

"These are your FINGERS, sweetie be-DINGERS! Rub them HERE, little DEAR!"

From Lucas's side, Mike saw Will's hand being forced to rub the man's phallus. Mike went nuclear. He abandoned Lucas and charged the man, tearing him off Will. Full of rage, he drew his sword and swung. The man was decapitated in a clean stroke. The head went flying as the body fell. Mike's fury didn't abate; he hacked at the headless corpse non-stop.

Demetrius was running across the room, enraged. *"What the hell is going on here!!!"*

Mike kept hacking, swearing furiously. The image of Will being molested was overwhelming; on some level he felt violated himself. He (and Lucas) had been thrust into adulthood as no human being ever should. At twelve years old he had barely understood the concept of sexual assault. Now he was in a body chock full of sexual urges, with no idea how to process them. The bird man's indecent exposure had sickened him, confused him, and even aroused him against his will. He hated himself, and his hate needed an outlet. A child molester qualified.

"Stop it, you idiot!"

Mike barely heard Demetrius and kept bringing down his sword. The floor was a gore-streaked mess. It was about to get messier. Then suddenly he couldn't move; he dropped his sword, paralyzed. *Hold person*. The cleric had cast that spell on him. Mike couldn't even speak.

"Okay now?" asked Demetrius.

Mike's rage slowly subsided and he became aware of his surroundings. The acid heads were much as before: most of them sprawled on their couches, oblivious to the carnage. One was standing. He wore the mask of a honey bee, and was gazing at the intruders curiously. Mike heard Lucas retching behind him. The bird man had blown a toxic powder in his face. Hopefully not deadly.

At his side Demetrius asked again: "Are you calm? Blink twice if yes, and I'll cancel the spell."

I'll cancel you, asshole. But he blinked twice and was released.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" demanded Demetrius. "Are you a barbarian?"

"He was molesting Will!" shouted Mike.

"He was high on acid, dumbass!"

"You think that's an excuse?" said Lucas. He was on his feet now and wiping his mouth.

"I'm not justifying!" said Demetrius. "But he didn't deserve to have his fucking head chopped off! He was probably a decent enough guy." He looked down at the corpse. "What a fucking mess."

"Are you okay, Lucas?" asked Mike.

"Never mind me," said Lucas, coughing.

That left Will, who was still in shock and couldn't find his voice.

"Hey," said Mike, coming over to him. Will yelped and jumped back. It took minutes for Mike to talk him down. At one point Will threw up. The poor kid was still twelve. Sexual coercion on top of watching his friend decapitate a human being had traumatized him. It ended with Mike hugging him and Will crying against his shoulder. *Jesus, this is fucked. We need to get home. Especially Will.*

There was a buzzing noise, and Mike and Will stood up. The bee man had come over to them, holding a jar with a spoon in it. Lucas had his sword drawn, but Demetrius told him to put it away. The bee man offered the jar to Lucas. It was full of sparkling honey.

"Go ahead and eat it," said Demetrius. "It's from the bee nests up on the second tier. It has curing powers that should neutralize any poison you inhaled."

Lucas grabbed the spoon and fed himself a huge glob of the honey. He began feeling better at once, and he thanked the bee man. The bee man snatched the jar back as if mortally insulted. He spat on Lucas' feet, and then "flew" off, buzzing around the room in a mad sprint.

"All right," said Demetrius. "Everyone with me, back to the desks. You're the most fucked up novices in the world. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Mike couldn't argue. As he walked by the mess he made, it started catching up to him. *Jesus, I killed a man. Murdered him.* He stopped and threw up on the corpse. Everyone turned and stared.

"All three of you," said Demetrius, shaking his head. Lucas from poison; Will from trauma; Mike from doing the unspeakable. "Please get your shit together. We're this close to the end."

Yeah, your end. Mike wanted Dustin back more than anything.

At the desks, Demetrius resumed his search. He had left a bottom drawer open, filled with pouches and boxes. He examined their contents. Mike saw mushrooms of at least a dozen different colors.

"What color do we need?" asked Lucas.

"Blood red," said Demetrius.

A scream of pure agony filled the room. They looked over at the couches. The wolf woman was on her knees, trying to fend off a phantom assault.

"Anyway," said Demetrius. "They should be in here somewhere."

"Blood red will make us go berserk?" asked Lucas.

"Berserk like Mike when he killed that poor sod. Except your heads will be clear. You'll be able to think straight - even sharper than you usually do. You'll be driven by rage but not blinded by it. Or at least not too much. Hopefully." Demetrius stopped suddenly as he peered into one of the pouches; he reached in and pulled out a handful of shrooms. They were blood red. "Score!" He tossed one at Mike and another at Lucas. "Eat them now. It takes ten to forty minutes for the effects to kick in. We'll strategize in the meantime."

Mike examined his mushroom, turning it over. He looked at Lucas. "You ready for this?"

Lucas glared at Demetrius. "If I get berserker flashbacks for the rest of my life, I'm taking you with me to Hell." He bit off half his mushroom and began chewing.

Mike shoved the whole thing in his mouth. He expected something nasty and bitter, but it didn't taste that bad. Pretty good actually; a bit earthy.

"Chew them up good," said Demetrius. "Let your bodies process it. Ah-hah!" He had found another pouch. He emptied into his hand two mushrooms that were light pink.

"What kind are those?" asked Will.

"Piggy pink," said Demetrius. "Otherwise known as comedowns. They're the strongest sedative grown in the city. Mike and Lucas will need these to come down from berserking after we take care of Darius. Otherwise they'll be raving psychos for a long time - anywhere between six to fifteen hours."

"Give them to us," demanded Lucas, holding out his hand.

"I think not," said the cleric. "They stay with me until Darius is dead." He pocketed them in his belt pouch. "Now, in the time we have to kill, let's check out the ball room."

They crossed over to the left door. Most of the acid-heads were still staring off into space. None had reacted to the headless corpse. The bee man was standing - "hovering" in the air, as he believed - buzzing frantically and flapping his arms. The wolf woman who had screamed was still kneeling on the floor, crying now. Mike wondered what sights she heard and sounds she saw. At the door, Demetrius opened it and they passed through.

They walked in on a masked ball. Nine men and women in costumes were either dancing, talking, or drinking. Those who danced had invisible partners. Those who talked spoke to themselves. Those who drank had

empty glasses. Mike caught snatches of "conversation" that made no sense. *Christ, these poor folks.*



"I'm going to get a drink," said Demetrius. The others looked at him. "That was a joke," he said. "Honestly, guys. Walk around, meander, have a dance with your wettest imagination. We've got some time to kill before you two become killing machines."

Lucas and Will started onto the floor, careful to give the dancers their space. The costumes were stately and the masks more fearsome than those worn in the lounge. One was a vampire that looked too real for Mike's comfort. He tried feeling any change from the mushroom, but so far nothing.

"I envy them," said Demetrius, hanging back with Mike.

Mike turned to him. "What?"

"These fools. Real friends are a pain in the ass. I prefer imaginary ones myself. When you're tired of them, you can switch them off."

Mike wasn't sure these people could do that. The mind could become a prison when you faded from reality. "Is that why you became a cleric?"

Demetrius laughed. He sounded just like Dustin. "Usamigarus doesn't require chastity from his priests. We're as sexually libertine as the Zargonites. Only the clerics of Gorm are celibate. I guess your 'module' didn't cover that."

"What about the Maidens of Madarua?"

"Their priestesses have sex - even homoerotic sex - but it's carefully regulated. They're not tight-asses like the Brothers of Gorm, but not exactly libertine either."

"Oh shit," said Mike.

"What?"

"That."

Out on the floor, a regal dancer wearing a crown had ditched his invisible partner and glided up to Will. The king asked Will a question Mike couldn't hear, and Will, looking apprehensive, paused and then nodded. He reached up and let the king take his hands, and the two began a slow waltz.

Mike swore. *Lucas, where the hell are you?* He looked around and saw Lucas at the bar. The vampire had disengaged from an imaginary conversation and was now pouring Lucas a fantasy beverage.

"Enough of this shit," said Mike, fingering the hilt of his sword.

"Enough of *your* shit," retorted Demetrius. "Put it away. That guy is no threat."

Mike's blood was starting to boil. What kind of a homo pervert liked dancing with boys? He restrained himself as Demetrius ordered, but watched the king closely for any signs of predation.

"Gods, but you're paranoid," said Demetrius.

"Did you or did you not see the guy who tried to rape Will in the lounge?"

"I was groped as a kid," said the cleric. "It happens."

Jesus. "In my world it's a serious offense. Kids are scarred by sexual assault."

"Kids are obviously mollycoddled in your world. Worst thing you can do is pander to kids and spoil them. They crave discipline. My brother and I - Hey! You go, Will!" Demetrius was applauding the floor performance.

Mike felt his fury rebuild. The king had picked up Will and was holding him in the way couples do when slow-dancing. Will's legs wrapped themselves around the king's waist, so their heads were level. Then the king pirouetted, leaped high in the air, and propelled them both around the room in a dance that was foreign to Mike but stunningly graceful.

Mike had no room for graces. Nor for his best friend who sat uselessly, yakking with a vampire. Nor for Will himself, who despite his traumatic ordeal seemed to be enjoying the hell out of this little ride. Mike's temple throbbed; his fists felt like bricks; he burned to deal damage to someone. He drew his sword.

Demetrius shouted but Mike ignored him. Blood rushed in his ears. His steps felt light and quick as he moved across the dance floor. His sword felt light, even for a magic sword; almost like plastic. Things looked clear, impossibly clear, as if he had 20/10 vision: the heightened colors of the dancers' costumes, the transparent happiness on Will's face as he spun in the king's arms, the lines and curves of the king's mask ... *oh, I'm going to cut his majesty open -*

He was tackled from behind and brought down. Demetrius, damn him. The cleric grappled Mike with Dustin's arms, cursed him through Dustin's mouth. Mike had had enough of this possessor. He felt like he could throw a mountain off his back; he bucked and sent Demetrius flying. He picked up his fallen sword and stood up, whirling to confront the cleric... and then was slammed from behind again. He fell, again, and was restrained successfully this time. Lucas. Damn *him*.

"Get off me!" yelled Mike, furious.

Lucas ground him into the floor. "Stop it, Mike."

"I said get off, Lucas! I'm not kidding."

Lucas didn't budge. How had he gotten so strong? How had they both gotten so strong?

Footsteps shuffled, and a lilting voice spoke down to him: "I intended your son no harm."

Then Will: "He's cool, Mike. It's okay."

Mike tried turning his head to see. *My son? Jesus Christ*. He gave up fighting, and Lucas hauled him to his feet. The Cynidicean with the king mask was standing there, looking almost apologetic. Most of the other dancers were still waltzing, oblivious to the altercation they had to step around. It was as surreal as the way Mike's head felt right now.

"We're sorry for crashing your party," said Demetrius. "Our friend here is overprotective of... his son."

The Cynidicean smiled and curtsied without a word, and then faced Will to bow even lower. Will beamed. The king turned and rejoined the dance, locking arms with an imaginary partner.

Everyone looked at Mike.

"All right," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm fine now. I just - I don't know why I acted like that. I can't get that bird man out of my head." He still wanted to beat the shit out of someone. His ears thundered with blood. Then he realized: "Jesus, I think I'm going -"

"Berserk," said Lucas. "I'm feeling it too. I wanted to smash someone. I almost pounded your head into the floor. I'm dying for violence."

"Excellent," said Demetrius.

"No, not excellent," said Lucas. "I don't want to become a psycho."

"That's exactly what you're going to become," said Demetrius. "We talked about this. You're going to murder a guard of hobgoblins."

"Then let's do it already," said Mike. "We're ready. Right, Lucas?"

Lucas swore, breathing heavily. "Let's get it over with."

"Back to the lounge," said Demetrius. "And through the other door."

"The gambling room," said Mike.

"Yes," said Demetrius. "And the people in there will leave us alone, as long as we don't provoke them or steal any money. Believe me, there's shitloads of it in there. Will, you can join a table and play cards, while the rest of us look for the secret door to my brother's room."

"Uh, no," said Mike. "I know I lost control just now over nothing, but we're not leaving Will alone with any Cynidiceans."

"Then what do you suggest?" asked Demetrius. "He's not coming with us into Darius's room."

"Mike, is the gambling room even dangerous?" asked Lucas. "When you put us through the module, I don't recall there being a drug party in there, like in the lounge. It was more like this room."

"Most Cynidiceans are baked during any part of the day," said Mike. "These people" - he gestured at the dancers and drinkers - "are plenty out of touch. The acid is in the water supply so everyone's addicted. But they're strangers anyway. I don't trust Will alone with any stranger, baked or not."

Will was tired of being a burden. "Don't worry, I'll be fine at the tables. I've got all this money to spend." He jingled the bag of holding.

"You should be fine," agreed Demetrius. "But just to be safe, I'm going to cast a *sanctuary* spell on you before I go into Darius's room. That will keep you safe from any harm - at least for a while - as long as you don't break the spell by attacking anyone, which you obviously won't."

Mike didn't like it, but he saw no alternative.

They returned to the lounge, where one of the acid-heads was singing. He wore a jackal mask and sat on the floor beside the wolf woman, who lay supine and was stripped naked except for her mask. The jackal "played" one of her legs and vagina like a banjo, while shouting vulgar lyrics. *Is she hearing the song or seeing it? Is she feeling those strokes on her twat or smelling them?* It didn't seem to matter. She was on a high plane of ecstasy. Mike felt his groin stir. His berserker state was growing and fueled sexual desires that were new to him.

They crossed the lounge and entered the casino. It was a large sixty by sixty foot room, full of tables and gambling action. Twelve masked Cyndiceans played cards and dice games, cheering and punching the air whether they won or lost. In the center of the room was a wheel of fortune, run by a man in a devil mask. Mike gaped as the money changed hands. There was loads of it - silver, gold, gems, and jewels - piled carelessly at the elbows of their owners. It was enough to make him rich back home. But he remembered: these gamblers were friendly, but would murder thieves in a flash.

There was a card table with an empty seat, and Lucas motioned to Will. Will nodded and got out the bag of holding. Mike studied the table. Two men (a camel and a snake) and a woman (a vulture) were pondering three cards turned face up. They each had two cards face down, which they peeked at occasionally. There was already about 200 gold pieces in the pot. The camel checked; the snake raised 40 gold pieces; the vulture called; the camel folded. The vulture - evidently the dealer in this hand - took a card from the deck and flipped it over, adding it to the three face up. To Mike this looked like a version of poker that his mother and father played.

"No limit hold 'em," he muttered.

"What?" said Demetrius.

"We call this game No Limit Texas Hold 'Em," said Mike.

"Interesting. Here we call it Bluff or Cry. If you wait for good hands in this game, you're cooked. Is Will a good bluffer?"

Mike snorted. "Will's an open book. He can't bluff to save himself."

"Oh. He'll lose his stacks pretty fast. Lucas, get over here! Let's roll."

"Hold on!" Lucas was making sure that Will was welcome at the table. When the camel, snake, and vulture saw Will's mountain of money - and his immature age - they smiled and welcomed him with looks of rapture.

Fucking sharks, thought Mike. He was bottling his drug-induced rage, but it was getting hard now. He needed to attack someone.

Lucas joined them. "He'll be fine... probably. He'll lose all our money, but who cares. There's plenty more in this pyramid."

"I'm going to cast *sanctuary* on him and then look for the secret door," said Demetrius. "How are you both feeling?"

"Itching to use my sword," said Lucas. "Everything around me seems slower."

"Yeah," said Mike, panting. "Those shrooms work." Everyone in the room seemed to be moving at half speed; and his vision was impossibly clear: 20/10 vision, maybe even 20/7.

"When I find the secret door, I'm going to drink the *potion of invisibility* and go through, and leave it open a crack. At that point go over and wait. When you hear the shit hit the fan, come charging through."

"Roger that," said Lucas.

"Yeah," affirmed Mike. "But don't bother blessing Will with your prayers. The players will think you're casting a spell to help him cheat."

Demetrius agreed and then left them to search for the door. Mike and Lucas waited, watching the poker table. Will was anteing up and looked confident. Mike shook his head. *They'll eat him for breakfast.*

"Can you believe this is us?" asked Lucas.

Mike turned to him. "What? Oh... well. I'm thinking we're in a dream most of the time. But I know we're not. Imagine if Nancy could see us like this. Or how about Erica?"

"Nancy would shit her pants," laughed Lucas. "Erica would just think that we're grown-up nerds."

"And our parents! Can you imagine?"

"Mike, do you think we're going to see our families again? Even if we survive these hobgoblins?"

"Well, yeah. Demetrius said he'd let Dustin go."

"I hope he was telling the truth," said Lucas. "But even if he plays fair, we can't go back like this. We're ten years older. Everyone in Hawkins - hell, everyone in the country - would lose their shit."

There was a sudden crash from Darius's room. Followed by furious shouts.

"That's us," breathed Mike. "You ready?"

"Hell yeah. Let's kill some hobgoblins."

"Yell at the top of your lungs as we rush them."

"Loud as a motherfucker."

And with that, the die was cast. Mike Wheeler and Lucas Sinclair surrendered to the rage burning inside them, drew their swords, and burst into Darius's chamber screaming.

Mike didn't pause to register what was going on. He noticed Demetrius confronting a middle-aged man, but ignored them. The hobgoblins were closer and he rushed them like a lunatic. He heard Lucas do the same. Two hobgoblins were immobile, courtesy of Zenobia's scepter. Their yellow eyes burned with fury. The other four had been closing in on Demetrius. Now they spun in outrage to face two reckless maniacs.

Mike was on the nearest one before it could raise its war cleaver. His sword slashed deep into the hobgoblin's shoulder and neck, bursting an artery. The creature fell back in astonishment as much as pain, roaring an alien obscenity. Mike's arms moved like lightning, his muscles feeling like rocks, and he whirled the sword again and sent it most of the way through the goblin's neck. It fell and died on the spot, having made not a single counterattack.

"*Yeah!*" bellowed Mike, looking down at the corpse in triumphant rage. "You wretched piece of -"

Something heavy and sharp slammed into Mike's back. He bellowed and spun to see another hobgoblin brandishing its war cleaver. It had dealt Mike a blow that would have put most opponents on the defensive if not the floor. It was readying for another strike, but to Mike its movements were slow; clumsily slow. He saw and felt everything as if the world itself had slowed down. Blood ran down his back, but he felt galvanized - empowered - by his injury. He exulted in the pain. If Mike had to guess, he would say that in D&D terms the berserker drug had inflicted him with a masochism that caused wounds to *add* to his hit point score instead of subtract from it. Or at least, as long as the wounds weren't fatal.

Whatever the mechanics of the drug, Mike was strengthened, not weakened. He threw himself against the hobgoblin, swinging and swinging; it fell back in disbelief. On his third stroke Mike sliced open the creature's weapon hand. The war cleaver fell to the floor, and the hobgoblin barely evaded a fourth stroke that would have taken its head off. Mike's sword cut this way and that as the hobgoblin continued backing away (so slowly, it seemed) with its arms raised. With each stroke Mike shouted:

"Die, you fucker! Die, you fucker! Die, you fucker! Die, you fucker!"

The hobgoblin was furious. This absurdly inexperienced fighter was clobbering him - beating him backwards on the sheer force of rage. As he bled from a deadly back wound. And wasted breath on vulgarities. The creature stumbled, and Mike's sword found its mark, cutting deep - and deep again - and then leaving the hobgoblin dead. Mike went on hacking the corpse:

"Die, you fucker! Die, you fucker! Die, you fucker! Die, you --"
"MIKE!"

It was Lucas, telling him to stop. He ceased and looked around, trying to let his head clear. Two more hobgoblins lay dead, thanks to Lucas. His arm had been scratched but nothing more. The two friends looked at each other and smiled, reveling in their blood lust. Then they turned to the far side of the room.

Twenty-five or thirty feet away, Demetrius and Darius were pulverizing each other, one with a mace, the other a flail. Mike and Lucas began moving toward them. As they passed the two paralyzed hobgoblins, Mike whirled his sword and decapitated one; Lucas ran the other through. Darius saw them close the distance and hesitated, indecisive. Then he dropped his flail on the ground and raised his hands. "Fine," he said to his brother. "I surrender."

Demetrius kept his mace raised. "Surrender?" he scorned. "You admit no such concept." Mike saw that Dustin's body had taken a pounding: bruises covered his body, his ears were bleeding, and he struggled to breathe. From an evil priest spell. But Darius was hurting too. His robe had enough blood on it; Demetrius's mace had proven itself.

"I admit defeat when it's evident," said Darius. And it was. Against each other alone, the twin priests were evenly matched. With psychos Mike and Lucas on standby, it wasn't a contest anymore. "As I've told you before, brother: pragmatism. Zargonites are that above all."

"Zargonites are assholes," said Demetrius, "and you the biggest one."

"Allow me to leave," said his brother. "I'll depart the city. Go into the desert. You'll never see me again."

"Seriously?" asked Demetrius.

"I'm dead serious."

Demetrius looked hard at Darius, then held out his hand.

Darius frowned. "What?"

"Your flail," said Demetrius. "Give it to me."

"Of course." Darius picked up his flail and handed it over. Mike and Lucas watched him carefully.

Demetrius took the weapon, sheathing his mace. He looked the flail over, and gestured to the door. "Then go ahead. You have eight hours to leave Cynidicea. And give my regards to Hazor. I assume he's still alive and running the temple?"

Darius smiled. "He is. And if you ever reconsider your allegiances, go see him. You're wasted on the old gods."

"You may be right," said Demetrius. And then, as his brother turned to go - and with a sudden swiftness that took even Mike and Lucas by surprise - Demetrius whirled the flail and smashed the back of his brother's head.

Brains and gore showered them all as the priest's head burst like rotten fruit. Darius's body fell and thudded at Demetrius's feet.

"Shit!" yelled Mike.

"What the fuck, Demetrius!" said Lucas, poleaxed by the priest's treachery.

Mike was stunned too, but in a good way; thrilled by Demetrius's deception and approving it. *God, I'll burn in Hell. Whatever my D&D alignment is, it can't be good. I murdered a man and now I love a guy who backstabbed his brother.*

Demetrius looked down on his brother's corpse, holding the dripping flail. "He got what he earned: a treacherous death by his own weapon. Now I'm properly avenged."

Preach it, brother, thought Mike. *I wish you were mine.*

Chapter Five:

A Special Place

"You really expect me to believe that you're Demetrius Rhone?"

Will didn't like the chief mage. But he was intrigued by him.

"I *am* Demetrius. Yes, my brother killed me last year. I was worried that might happen, so I made a dying wish: that my spirit live on. I knew where he was hiding and the rest of the Magi didn't. None of you up here in the temple were equipped to take him on anyway. You're still not. I waited for a body to possess. It took a long time but it happened today, and now Darius is dead. You're welcome, by the way."

The chief mage stared down from a seat that was too big for him. He didn't seem thankful. "And how were you granted such a dying wish?"

"I was given a ring by Keldor, the chief mage at the time. It was a ring of three wishes and it had one left."

"As I said before, Keldor is no longer with us."

"And as you didn't say before, what the hell happened to him?"

The mage kept smiling at Demetrius, but Will wasn't fooled, and he doubted Demetrius was either. Auriga Sirkinos reeked of bad vibes. Just like the Auriga in Mike's game.

"I have a better question," said the mage. "How does this boy feel about you possessing his friend?"

"It's only temporary," said Will, wanting to diffuse hostilities. "He just needed to stop Darius."

"Which he has done, according to you both," said Auriga. "And yet your friend - Dustin, is it? - remains possessed. Tell me, priest, how that makes you any better than your brother."

Demetrius scowled.

"As I thought," said Auriga. "You know, I believe you actually are Demetrius. Selfish vengeance would be just like him. Not to mention -"

A chime sounded, and Auriga looked over their heads. Will and Demetrius turned as someone came through the temple door: a mage apprentice, wearing a rainbow colored robe and silver mask. The dress code of the Magi. The mask was a cherub, the sacred image of Usamigaras. Seeing that he was interrupting, the apprentice moved quickly towards a side door.

"Hold," said Auriga. "Wait there, Shanti. We'll be only a few minutes."

"Or maybe more," said Demetrius.

Maybe a lot more, thought Will.

They were in the Magi temple, which served the dual role of worship chamber and audience hall. At one end was a star-shaped altar, at the other a small dais with the huge ornamental chair. Tapestries hung on the walls: at the altar end they showed star constellations; at the audience end, silhouetted people with their hands in the air celebrating freedom. The Usamigarans were libertarians - mages and astrologers (the full members in charge of the temple), but also clerics (like Demetrius), thieves, and assassins - anyone who resisted the authoritarian leanings of the other cults. Auriga, however, was a power hungry sleaze. He spouted the libertarian rhetoric, but it was just that. Will knew this from Mike's gaming module. Demetrius had apparently never trusted him.

"*Auriga Sirkinos?*" he had spat, unbelieving, when Mike told him who the chief mage was. They had left the party rooms on Tier 5 for the upper-tier temples.

"Yeah," said Mike, as they climbed corridors. "In the game he's a scumbag." He and Lucas were struggling to keep up. They had eaten the piggy pink mushrooms and come down hard from the beserker drug. Their bodies were pulverized with exhaustion. Mike's back wound had barely healed from Demetrius's cure spell. They needed a bath; they had tried to clean their faces but still wore bits of Darius's brains.

"He always struck me that way," agreed the cleric. "And he's not leadership material at all. What about Keldor? Is he down in the city now?"

"I don't remember anyone in the module named Keldor," said Mike.

"Well, shit." Demetrius looked grim. "He was a good leader and friend."

"Never mind Keldor," said Lucas. "Just remember your promise. You get out of Dustin's body as soon as you tell your people about Darius."

Demetrius had gone silent at that point. They proceeded to Tier 3 and the revolving passage Will couldn't wait to see. It was a corridor constructed on a turntable, made to revolve by a system of weights and counter-weights. On the wall next to each of the two doors inside the corridor was a column of eight buttons, each labelled by a hieroglyph. They matched the buttons on the walls of the eight surrounding halls. Pressing one of the buttons caused the end of the passage to rotate clockwise and line up with its corresponding hall. From the other direction, pressing the single hallway hieroglyphic caused the revolving passage to swing clockwise and line up with the door, so that the hallway door would open into the revolving passage. Will thought it was one of the coolest dungeon designs he'd ever played, and he wanted a ride.

They came up from Tier 4 into a corridor that led to the northern hallway, and at the door pressed the hieroglyph. Grinding noises indicated that the revolving passage was turning from wherever the last passenger had left it; when the noises stopped the door opened. Inside the corridor was the column of eight hieroglyphs; Demetrius knew what they all stood for and pressed the one for the Magi temple. The passage rumbled and the two doors disappeared; the hall rotated past two more doors, five times, before stopping at the door they needed.

"Cool ride," said Will, who had wandered down to the other end during the rotation.

"Does it ever break down?" asked Mike. "Like an elevator?"

"I don't know what an elevator is," said Demetrius. "But this thing broke down twice in my lifetime. It wasn't funny." He looked down at the other side. "Come back, Will. That door goes to the Maidens. They're man-hating bitches."

"Yeah, they weren't friendly to us in the game," said Lucas.

"Neither were the Magi," Mike pointed out.

"I have a feeling," said Demetrius, "that I should do this alone."

"What do you mean?" asked Will, walking back.

"I'll see Auriga by myself. He'll require delicate handling. You guys and your opinions about everything can have a wander. Push this button to the south hallway." The cleric pointed at one of the eight hieroglyphs. "It leads to the top tiers. You're familiar with what's up there, Mike; you can go all the way up and outside. Relax and get some air. You two look deader than undead."

"I can use some air," admitted Lucas.

"Some dry, choking desert air," said Mike. "Great, let's go."

"Go ahead," said Will. "I'll stay with Demetrius."

"Oh, you will?" asked the cleric.

"I want to see the Magi. I won't be a problem."

The priest looked at him hard. "You'd better not be. Keep quiet and let me do the talking."

And that's how they had settled it. Mike and Lucas were exploring Tier 2. That meant the Brotherhood. The warriors of Gorm split their domain between the second and third tiers. Their temple was here on the third, their base quarters up on the second. As players in Mike's game, Lucas, Dustin, and Will had allied with the Brotherhood against the Zargonites. But Will had had a soft spot for the Magi. Despite their entirely untrustworthy leader, Auriga Sirkonos.

"I'm glad you reported this to me, Demetrius." Auriga was trying to end the audience. "The Magi will of course investigate your claim that Darius is dead."

"There's a big bloody mess where I told you," said Demetrius.

"Yes, the party rooms," said the chief mage, sounding amused. "Who would have thought?"

Demetrius cleared his throat. "Auriga, could you clear the room?"

Auriga frowned. The vast temple room was clear, save for the one apprentice. He looked over by the door. "Leave us, Shanti. And arrange food for our guests. And fix me my usual, but leave it in my chamber."

"Yes, Auriga." Shanti bowed low and then went through the door into the Magi quarters.

"Thank you," said Demetrius.

Auriga was sour. "Why the need for privacy?"

"How have things been, Auriga?" countered the priest.

"What do you mean?"

"Darius had a network of spies going. Moles inside each of the cults, or at least according to rumors. Could any of the Magi be a problem?"

"Highly doubtful," said Auriga. "What would a mole accomplish? We have a few spells that we keep secret, and a couple of minor artifacts, but not much else worth the espionage."

"I doubt Darius cared about Magi spellbooks," said Demetrius. "Sabotage was more likely his goal. Sowing dissension, spreading misinformation, that kind of thing."

"Dissension?" asked Auriga. "Among the cults or within?"

"Both," said Demetrius. "To a Zargonite it amounts to the same thing. Anything to weaken the gods who came before. You may want to keep a close eye on your apprentices."

"I'll certainly take that under advisement," said Auriga. "But I've seen nothing suspicious with the Magi. Naturally, I can't speak for the Brothers or the Maidens."

"Of course," said Demetrius.

"So tell me when you plan on departing from the body of this Dustin Henderson. You're dead, and this man deserves his body back."

"Soon," said Demetrius. Will sensed he was annoyed by the question. "I want to see our people down in the city. And Raen." Will didn't know who Raen was, but he assumed he was the high priest of Usamigaras.

"So you can resume your post?" asked Auriga bluntly. "Shira is getting along fine without you."

"She's very capable," said Demetrius, containing his fury over the insult.

"Indeed," said Aurgia. "And of course, I have no say in how the stronghold is managed." As chief mage Auriga was in charge of the temple, here in the pyramid. Down in the stronghold, the high priest led the Usamigaran community, and Will recalled Demetrius saying that he'd served under the high priest with the priestess Shira. "But it would be unseemly - and most unpriestly - for you to return as the community's savior at the expense of an innocent man robbed of his life and free will."

Will didn't believe for a moment that Auriga cared for Dustin's well being. Auriga didn't care much for anyone but himself, and Dustin was an alien.

"I agree," said Demetrius.

"I'm glad," smiled Auriga.

"I agree that it's none of your business, is what I meant."

Auriga went cold.

Demetrius continued: "And while the management of this temple is likewise none of my own business - and though I hate to engage in pissing matches - I'll remind you that I do outrank you, Auriga."

"Yes, yes," said the chief mage, waving his hand dismissively. "I know your power. And I agree that pissing matches are boring. Like this conversation."

"I asked you about Keldor," said the priest. "And I want a real answer."

"Keldor had ideas," said the chief mage. "Ideas that he evidently acted on. He wanted to explore the Catacombs for some reason. Need I say more." It wasn't a question.

Will remembered from Mike's campaign. The Catacombs were down in the city and held terrible monsters of enchanted nature. He, Lucas, and Dustin had avoided them so he didn't know the extent of the horrors.

Demetrius scoffed. "Keldor wouldn't have gone into the Catacombs. Certainly not alone."

"Yet he remains vanished," said Auriga. "After four months."

"Did he leave anything in his chamber? Any letters or writings?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid."

"Who took your bunk when you were promoted?"

"I haven't replaced myself yet. We're eleven Magi and still need a twelfth." Auriga was eying Will as he said that.

"All right, then," said Demetrius. He turned to Will. "We'd best be going."

Will wanted to protest. *What about dinner?* He was hungry again. Demetrius had provided them a sumptuous lunch, but that was hours ago.

"The Magi are preparing a feast for you both," said the chief mage. "An expensive dish. Or is our food not good enough for the great Demetrius Rhone?"

"I appreciate your hospitality, Auriga." The priest's tone said otherwise. "But I can't linger. I need to collect Will's friends and get down to the city."

"Very well," said Auriga. "But perhaps you could let Will stay. For dinner and overnight, as a guest of the Magi."

Will felt jolted. Why would the chief mage be interested in him?

"Uh, *why?*" asked Demetrius.

"Will is from another world. To my knowledge, no one in Cynidicea has ever been exposed to an alien - let alone an alien who can fluently speak our language. We're Magi. This needs studying." Auriga smiled at them both. "I know he's a child. I promise he will have my full protection as a guest. And we can put my old bunk to use."

"Yes," Will blurted out, before Demetrius could overrule him. "I'd like that... I mean, I'd be honored. Sir."

"Very well." Auriga clapped his hands. "It's settled."

Will could see that Demetrius wasn't happy. But the cleric relented. "If Mike and Lucas are fine with this, then we'll plan on picking you up tomorrow morning."

"Yeah," said Will. "Tell them I'll be okay." He could already see them hating the idea, but he didn't care. He was going to meet the Magi, and he was going to do it alone.

Auriga got up from his chair and walked down the dais. "I'll go find Shanti and have him show you around, Will. He's our youngest apprentice. Just turned eighteen."

"The food up here is still drug-free, right?" asked Demetrius.

"Of course," said Auriga. "Supplies from the city twice a week. Food and water blessed by your priests. None of the Magi will turn into unwilling addicts on my watch."

Demetrius nodded as the chief mage left the temple through the side door.

"Thanks, Demetrius," Will said when he was gone. "And I mean it, I'll be fine."

"If I didn't think that, you wouldn't be staying," said the priest. "Now come with me for a minute." He led Will out the main door, to the corridor that connected with the revolving passage. In the hallway he stopped and faced Will. "No eavesdroppers out here. Now listen. Go ahead and stay for dinner, and have a nice evening. But be careful of Auriga. He's a snake in the grass."

"Why would he invite me like this?" asked Will.

"I'm not sure," said Demetrius. "But don't worry, he's not the bird man."

"What?" said Will, turning red. "What do you mean?"

"He doesn't want to fuck you."

Will turned redder - and got angry. "I didn't... I never thought that." Thinking of the bird man stirred nausea and shame inside him. He resented Demetrius for bringing it up.

"Auriga's a scumbag, but he has a certain problem that I'm not complaining about. He's impotent."

"What's 'impotent'?" asked Will.

"It means he can't fuck anyone."

"Oh." He wanted Demetrius to drop the whole subject.

"How are you doing, by the way?"

"What?" said Will, caught off guard. "What do you mean?"

"You've been through a lot today for a kid."

"I'm... fine."

"Someone tried to fuck me when I was your age."

Will went red again. "I... it was nothing. You don't have -"

"Let's not bullshit each other. It's not 'nothing' when something like that happens. It's a personal violation. Apparently in your world even more so. I believe Mike used the words 'scarred for life'. A bit melodramatic, if you ask me... but perverts do leave their mark."

Will was getting furious. "He just took me by surprise. He was on drugs. Mike overreacted. You said so yourself."

"Mike overreacted by killing the guy, but he's right to be protective of you. My parents never cared about me. A Zargonite priest put his fingers

up my ass while my father stood by and laughed. If the priest hadn't passed out drunk, he would have followed that act with his cock."

Will re-tasted the tongue being jammed down his throat. He gagged and felt his stomach rebel; he needed to sit down. "Why do you say it's worse in my world?" He hardly heard himself speak.

"I don't know your world, but in Cynidicea most kids are abused daily and conditioned to brush it off. Beatings especially. I doubt that we're psychologically damaged by things that you are. Or at least not to the same degree. I saw how you reacted in the lounge. Mike could barely calm you down. Being finger-fucked infuriated me - and I'm not making light of it - but it never traumatized me."

Will fell to his knees and vomited. Demetrius's words were as raindrops on a window; soft noises with no meaning. The bird man's face had replaced Dustin's. Will squeezed his eyes shut. *I'm fine. God, what's the big deal?* His body felt like pins and needles.

Someone was saying his name. He opened his eyes and saw someone shaking him gently. Sweat soaked his shirt and the world was out of focus. He waited for the awful feeling to pass. A minute and then two.

"Can you get up?"

He could make out words again. He nodded to whoever was saying them and stood on his own. He wiped his mouth. The man before him solidified into Demetrius.

"Now let me ask you again," said the priest. "Are you sure you're up to being on your own tonight?"

Will felt a spark of defiance. "I said it already. I'm fine." And he was better now. The hideous flashback had passed.

Demetrius nodded. "I'll accept that, then, against my better judgment. Go on back inside. I'm going to find Mike and Lucas and do my best to convince them this isn't a crazy idea. If I'm successful in that task, we'll see you tomorrow morning." He turned to leave.

"Demetrius," called Will.

The priest stopped and looked back.

"What do you think happened to Keldor?"

Dustin's lips pressed together. "It's what I intend to find out. Auriga's hiding something, if not outright lying."

"Do you think Auriga killed him?"

"Will, I have no idea."

And that's when Will realized: *He's not going to let Dustin go yet. Not by a long shot.*

"Thank you for agreeing to talk," said Auriga. "It's late and I know you had quite a day."

They were in Auriga's chamber, facing each other across his medieval looking desk. Will wondered where this interview was going, and recalled Demetrius's warnings.



Quite a day. Quite an understatement.

In truth, Will could barely keep his eyes open. The bassil dinner had been splendid but he had gorged and was sleepy. His physical activity for the day - piled on everything stressful that happened, plus what he had done with Shanti - was beyond what most twelve-year olds could endure without collapsing by now. Will was grateful that Auriga wasn't treating

him like a child by sending him to bed, even though that's where he clearly belonged.

"It's no problem," said Will. "I like your room." Will supposed he should have been scared of the gray wolf lying at the foot of Auriga's bed, but he liked wolves, and this one was obviously trained. The candlelight on the mage's desk cast shadows that lent the chamber a menacing atmosphere, but Will liked that too.

"Has Shanti been a good host?" asked the mage.

"Oh, yes," said Will. "He showed me all the Magi rooms, and some of the spellbooks. Did he tell you what we did?"

"He told me what *you* did," smiled Auriga. "He said you successfully cast a cantrip." Cantrips were minor (zero-level) spells that apprentices cut their teeth on before learning the real spells.

"Yes," said Will. "I couldn't believe it." He had cast *message* by reading it from a book and performing a few basic hand gestures. "The spell allowed me to whisper to Shanti when I was in the bunk room and he was out in the hallway. He was, like, fifty feet away and around the corner of the door, where I couldn't see him. We carried on this impossible conversation. In whispers."

"I have to be honest, Will. I've never seen anyone cast a successful spell - even if only a cantrip - without months if not years of prior schooling. Nor have I seen anyone work magic at such a young age. The youngest Magi we have on record lived over three hundred years ago. He was fourteen and exceptional. Are people from your world born wizards?"

"No, no. Not at all." Will was stunned to learn that he was a prodigy. "Just the opposite in fact. We don't have magic in my world."

Auriga's expression said that he didn't believe that. "Don't lie to me, Will." At the foot of the bed, the wolf growled.

"I'm not!" Will protested. *Is that wolf going to eat me?* "There are no wizards or mages where I'm from. Honestly, spells don't work."

"Except the one that brought you here?"

"Yeah, but... I can't explain how that one worked. It shouldn't have."

"I see," said Auriga. He leaned back in his chair, pondering impossibilities.

Will risked a glance over at the wolf. It was staring at him with bared teeth. He was oddly thrilled by these threatening theatrics, and thankful for the adrenaline rush. His body cried for sleep.

The chief mage abruptly leaned forward on his desk. "I have a question for you, Will. And think carefully before answering."

Will's heart skipped a beat. "Yes?"

"Would you like to join the Magi?"

Will gaped. *Would I like to join -?* "That's... well, I don't know what to say." *Yes you do, you fool. This is your dream come true. Say yes.* But he couldn't. This world wasn't his. He had a mom and brother waiting for him back home. "I... really don't know."

Auriga laughed. To Will that laugh sounded contemptuous. "A fair enough answer, after everything you've been through today. I want you to sleep on it. And I want your unequivocal answer by tomorrow morning. Do you understand?"

Sleep. That word was all that mattered in Auriga's reply. Will's eyelids felt like mountains. "Yes." *Unequivocal.* "I understand."

"There's a place here for you," said Auriga, with the look of a predator, but Will barely heard or saw. "A very special place..."

Will finally gave up trying, and fell fast asleep in the mage's chair.

"Wake up, Byers!"

Will rose from the depths, then pushed himself back under. *Go away.* He needed to sleep forever.

Then he was being shaken roughly. "Will, come on." A different voice. "It's late, dude. The Magi ate breakfast already."

Will moaned and pulled the blanket over his head. It was yanked off immediately and then he was being pulled up into a sitting position on the bunk. He opened his eyes, vowing to kill his tormentor. It was Mike. *No... it's not.* It was an adult with long shaggy hair, an angular face, and a body taller than Jonathan. Mike was a kid. Like Will. Then it all came back quickly.

"Rise and shine, sunshine," said the first voice, another permutation of a familiar friend. Dustin. No: *Demetrius*, he corrected himself.

"How have they treated you, Will?" It was Lucas, standing with the others. Elsewhere in the room, a few Magi bustled about. All the other bunks were empty and the beds made. Will had slept like a corpse.

"Fine," said Will, rubbing his eyes.

"Your new friend over there" - Mike looked across the room - "oh, he's gone now, but he left you breakfast."

Will saw the mug and plate on the small table by his bunk, and was instantly hungry. Mike handed him the plate. Shanti had fixed him dog sausage and black toast and a hard-boiled egg. There was a glob of butter next to the toast. He smiled, thinking of Shanti, and began devouring the skinny sausage.

"How was the city?" he asked, his mouth full. "Where did you guys stay?"

"The Magi stronghold," said Mike. "They put us up as guests. Once the high priest got over shitting himself."

"Yeah," said Lucas. "Raen didn't believe that Dustin was his dead friend Demetrius, until he used a *detect lie* prayer."

"I had basil for dinner," said Will.

"They treated you to basil, you little shit?" asked Dustin.

"It was good," said Will, buttering his toast with his finger. Basil was like a Middle-Eastern rice curry; the spices had been heavenly.

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Nothing's too good for you, Lord Byers. Our supper was blander than naked bread."

Will stopped chewing. This insulting version of Dustin who had called him "Byers" twice now didn't sound like Demetrius. Which could only mean...

"Dustin?"

Dustin grinned at Mike and Lucas. "He finally caught on. Like it or not, Will, I'm back. The cleric is letting me drive. At least for now."

Letting you drive? Will shook his head, not understanding.

"He's in lurker mode," said Dustin, "and letting me control myself. We came to an arrangement last night. We're going to swap turns controlling this body. Based on his needs, of course, and not mine, the arrogant bastard."

"He's a lying asshole," said Mike. "He promised to let you go after he killed his brother." Mike put his mouth to Dustin's ear: "*Do you hear me in there, Demetrius? You're a lying sack of shit.*"

"Will you stop spitting in my ear!" said Dustin. "He can hear and see you just fine."

"Dustin, are you're seriously okay with this?" asked Will.

"Being possessed has its upsides," said Dustin, "and Demetrius is a cool guy. He lets me ride his consciousness without suppressing my own, so I can still witness everything going on. I saw everything that happened to you guys - the ghost, the three of us turning into men while screaming our bloody heads off, the acid heads, Mike chopping that guy's head off, the bloodbath with the hobgoblins - Jesus, it was the best horror movie I ever saw. When Demetrius casts spells, it's like I'm casting them. When he wields that mace, I'm fighting too, but without doing the work. It's fucking trippy, you guys, I feel like I *am* this 7th-level cleric. I've shared his consciousness and I know his mind. I can see why people love and follow him. He's the kind of hero we always try to be when playing D&D."

"That's funny," said Lucas. "None of the characters I ever played robbed people of their free will."

"You said you were cool with this, Lucas," said Dustin.

"Hey, it's your body," said Lucas. "If you're cool with it."

"But why isn't Demetrius letting his spirit go?" asked Will. But he already knew the answer. *Keldor. Auriga.*

"More unfinished business," said Dustin. "He thinks Darius put enough into motion that his death may not even matter. He also doesn't trust Auriga. He thinks the Magi are in serious trouble with that conniving shit leading them."

"They are," said Mike. "Auriga *is* a conniving shit."

"But how long is this arrangement for, Dustin?" asked Will. "You can't take Demetrius home."

"Home?" said Dustin. "Byers, this is our new home. What the hell is waiting for us in our world if we go back in a month? We're men now. Mike and Lucas are twenty-two, and I'm thirty-two. What do you think would happen to the three of us if we went back to Hawkins?"

"I don't know," said Will lamely. "But at least we'd be home."

"I'll tell you what would happen," said Dustin. "The government would take us and lock us in a lab. They'd probably think we were Soviet clones who kidnapped or killed the real Dustin and Mike and Lucas."

"I hate to say it but he's right," said Lucas. "We need to think about making a life for ourselves here. And Mike and I decided something last night."

Will somehow knew what was coming next.

"We're joining the Brotherhood of Gorm," said Mike.

Of course. Life and art. Again. In Mike's game, Lucas, Dustin, and Will had joined the Brotherhood, mostly at Lucas's urging. But Will hadn't cared for the Brotherhood. He had liked the Magi. Then he remembered his activities with Shanti. Their whispered conversations around corners, far away from each other. And Auriga's offer.

"We met Kanadius yesterday," continued Mike. "He's awesome, Will. He liked us right away. And Dustin, shut up."

Will barely heard him. *A spell. I cast a spell, Mike. Auriga wants me to join the Magi!*

"All the Brothers are cool," said Lucas. "And Jesus, do they know how to fight. When we told them about us - and how we slaughtered Darius's bodyguards - they were practically begging us to join."

Dustin began: "If I may add my not so humble opinion -"

"You may not!" said Mike.

"- I think Kanadius is a judgmental prude. He's kind and well-meaning, I'll give him that. But he epitomizes all that the Brotherhood stands for, and some of that - no, a lot of that - is pretty bad."

"Seriously, Dustin?" said Lucas. "The Brotherhood stands for justice and mercy. More than the Maidens or the Magi. They defend the weak."

"I'm not denying that," said Dustin. "But they're insufferable bigots. They think women shouldn't be warriors."

"Well, they really shouldn't," said Lucas.

"And they hate homosexuals. They distrust magic-users."

"Don't tell me you're going to start defending homos," said Lucas, disgusted.

"I don't have a problem with homos," said Dustin. "There's also the justice code. You guys will be committed to studying that every week. The Law of Gorm. It's like the Jewish Torah; or the American tax code. When you have laws that are so complex and unbending, it gets in the way of compassion. It even becomes a tyranny. That's why the Magi are libertarians."

Will kept a straight face but inside he was cheering Dustin. *I cast a spell. I can be a mage!*

Mike played the mediator. "It's true the Brotherhood can be rigid. As full members we'll have to take vows of celibacy. But they *are* virtuous, and their sword skills are mind-blowing. We start our training tomorrow."

"But wait a minute," said Will. "They're also prejudiced against resurrected people." What was their cuss word? *Zoombies*.

"Yeah, we talked about that last night," said Lucas. "And this is important, Will. Not a word of my death and resurrection. To anyone. Okay?"

"Yeah, of course." He hated to think what Kanadius would do if he found out his new initiate was an "evil zoombie".

"Did you tell any of the Magi?" asked Mike.

"No. I didn't tell anyone," said Will.

"Please keep it that way," said Lucas. "I'm not saying the Brotherhood is flawless. They do have some hangups that are a bit silly. But they're by far the best option in this city. They have the largest following of the old cults, and they're the oldest."

"Yeah," said Mike. "Gorm was the first Cynidicean king, long before he became a god. Madarua was a queen centuries later, and then Usamigaras - he was a hobbit, believe it or not - came last."

"Coming first doesn't equate to greatness," said Dustin.

"Dude," said Mike. "It's called seniority. The Brotherhood has pride of place."

"I think there's a lot going for the latecomers," said Dustin. "I share a mind with a Magi priest, and from everything I've gleaned, I rather like the Usamigaran philosophy." Will was loving Dustin.

Lucas bristled. "But they hate everyone - the Brotherhood and the Maidens almost as much as the Zargonites. *Everyone* is too authoritarian for them."

"Yeah," said Mike. "They're more tolerant of alien religions than of the Brothers and Maidens. That's fucked up."

"Not really," said Dustin.

"And then, as we said, there's Auriga," said Mike.

"Auriga is a bad leader," said Dustin. "That happens in all religions."

Will wanted to shout: *Auriga wants me to be a mage! I'm a prodigy!* But he couldn't accept Auriga's offer. He had a mother and brother back home.

"Well, Kanadius is a good leader," said Lucas. "Of a good religion. I can't wait for our initiation ceremony."

"When is it?" asked Will. In the game their induction into the Brotherhood had been a big show. They had dressed up in white robes and gold masks, knelt before the altar of Gorm, washed their hands in holy water, and sworn to uphold the Brothers' creed. Then one of the warriors had branded a tattoo on each of their right arms: a blue lighting bolt, symbolizing their status as full members.

"This afternoon," said Mike. "In the temple. On the other side of this tier. You and Dustin can't attend. But don't worry, Will, we made a special arrangement with Kanadius. You'll be able to bunk with us upstairs. They're going to clear out an unused room for us. Lucas and I will have it all to ourselves, and you can live with us."

"I still say he should live with me down in the city. Demetrius has no problems taking on Will. He and I -"

"You and he are two different people," said Mike. "I trust you. I don't trust him, no matter how much you two have bonded inside that head of yours."

"I'm just saying," said Dustin. "Demetrius is solid. And I dare say he could protect Will better than you guys. You start combat training tomorrow. You're barely 1st level warriors, feeling high and mighty because you slaughtered some goblins with the benefit of drugs. Demetrius is a 7th level cleric, for Christ's sake."

Will couldn't believe how casual they sounded. They would be living in the Lost City for the rest of their lives. His eyes filled with tears and he angrily wiped them away. "You guys don't sound like you'll miss home at all."

"That's not true, Will." Mike sat on the bunk and put his arm around him. "Believe me, we haven't been taking this lightly. We all cried last night coming to this decision."

"Got a little drunk too," said Lucas.

"And a little sick this morning," said Dustin. "If not for Raen's generosity with some healing potions, we'd still be in bed. But we'll make a new home here, Will. And new family."

"Easy for you to say," said Mike. "You hardly have a family in Hawkins."

"Hey listen, Wheeler. I love my mom and it's killing me being away from her. She needs me... she'll need someone. She doesn't do well on her own. So don't give me that shit, just because I don't have siblings and a second parent. We all miss our families."

"I agree with your point about siblings," said Lucas. "I'm not missing Erica and I don't know that I will."

Mike laughed. "Yeah, sisters. Lately Nancy's been so uppity and bitchy."

"True, but I had a bit of a crush on your sister," said Dustin.

"Jesus, that's gross!" said Mike.

"How can you say gross when we're adults now? Don't you feel desires, dude?"

"She's my sister!"

"Jesus. Your vows of celibacy won't do you any good."

Will was upset by the sibling trash-talk. "I love Jonathan," he said. "And my mom. I can't not ever see them again." But his internal voice contradicted that homesickness. *I can cast spells. I'm a mage.*

"Don't worry, Will," said Mike. "There's no reason you can't go back."

"Mike's right," said Dustin. "In a month we'll be able to read the 'Black Passage' incantation and send you back. You'll have some explaining to do - where you were for the past month, and why the rest of us are missing, but we'll have a story for you by then."

I want your unequivocal answer by tomorrow morning.

"It's going to be a tough sell," said Lucas. "Our families will go ape-shit. They might even blame you for our disappearance."

"It'll be your choice," said Mike, "and you have a month to decide. For the three of us, at least, there's no future back there. I can't see us stumbling on an artifact that will reverse our ages."

And it was right then that William Byers made his decision that would unleash catastrophe in the months to come. "I won't need a month," he announced. *You want your unequivocal answer, Auriga?* "I made a decision of my own last night." *There's a place for you here... a very special place...* Auriga's voice came back to him, dripping venom. Or had Will imagined that part? It didn't matter. *I am a mage.*

They looked at him, waiting.

"I won't be going up to the second tier with Mike and Lucas. And I won't be going down to the city with Dustin and Demetrius. And I won't be going home in a month. I'm..."

A mage.

"... I'm staying right here."

Yes, Auriga.

Part 2:
**The Gods Who Came
Before**

Chapter Six:

Brothers of Gorm

The gardens were a paradise, drug war be damned. Mike was floored whenever he visited them. No matter how many minds they fried and lives they destroyed, they were twenty shades of salvation for countless others. People found themselves in addiction, rose to a desperate endurance, and lived in impossible dreams. The alternative was the slaying of the heart and soul.

Everywhere in the underground, but at the gardens especially, were things that had fired Mike's obsession when the Lost City was a game. The adventure module had suggested a fallen race, that retreated into fantasy to cope with enslavement. A tragedy of lost culture, and vain struggles for its restoration. He had wanted to go there; that's the kind of grip it had had on him.

Now he was here - impossibly here - and was part of that hopeless struggle. The gardens were a reality check, ironically, on what Kanadius required of him. The return of the old gods. Upending eleven centuries of drug culture. *Just thinking of it is absurd.* The natives wouldn't give up their lifeline. If a thirty-five-foot tall monster was nominally their god, the real deity lay stretched out below, over a 200 x 400 foot field of multi-dazzling color. Most of the mushrooms were blue, but there were a score of colors, all of which Mike and Lucas had been required to memorize. Kanadius had summoned Mike to his chamber last week and given him a tome from his library.

"Part of your qualification for command," he had said, handing it to Mike.

"Command?" Mike felt privileged to be invited into Kanadius's chamber.

"If you or Lucas ever want to lead," said the Grand Master. "I won't be around forever."

Mike was stunned by the idea that Kanadius would be willing to consider him - a recently initiated alien - to ever fill his shoes. The man was in his sixties but could fight like Hercules. Did he have a health issue, or was he just planning for the future? *I'm not the future of the Brotherhood, and everyone knows that. He's talking about Lucas. And just being polite in summoning me.*

The tome was heavy as he leafed through it. "Is this more doctrine? I'm burned out on theology." Mike loved the daily sword drills; the twice-a-week readings of the *The Creed of Gorm*, less so. Lucas was no theologian either, but of course Mike didn't add that. Lucas was the Chosen.

"Not theology," said Kanadius. "Mycology."

Mycology? Isn't that like botany? He skimmed more pages and his eyes widened. There were drawings of mushrooms in every color and spot and stripe. He looked up at Kanadius. "Are all of these grown in the gardens?"

The Grand Master nodded. "Except for the priestly mushrooms, which are grown in secret somewhere - probably the Catacombs. Cynidicea will never reattain greatness until addiction is wiped out. Defeating Zargon and the church isn't enough. And we can't wipe out a problem we don't understand. I want you and Lucas to familiarize yourselves with the mushrooms - every kind cultivated by the Zargonites. They're all addictive, except the poisonous ones obviously. Visit the gardens in the city. Spend time on the streets observing people. You told me once that you have special treatments for drug addicts in your world. I'm not expecting you to work miracles here, but if you or Lucas can think of anything to help in our war on drugs, let me know."

Our war on drugs. Life and art again. Back in America, President Reagan and his wife had promised to rev up that same war. Mike's parents approved the Reagan efforts. Mike was becoming less sure that a drug war could be won.

Kanadius wouldn't tolerate that opinion. And Lucas was optimistic that drugs could be done away with. Mike swore thinking of Lucas. Gorm's Chosen. He remembered their initiation rite three months ago, and the divine intervention that had stunned every warrior in the temple. Who would have guessed?

He looked around for Lucas, wondering where he was. Probably still yakking with the idiot who was hawking biscuits. They were down in the

city for supplies, but Mike had insisted on a detour to the gardens. Not that he'd learn anything new. But he loved staring. The shrooms were eye candy.

He watched as city workers moved over the garden floor, tending to the irrigation channels. Zargonite warriors and hobgoblins patrolled the area, alert for thieves. When Mike saw the pens along the northern perimeter he made a face. The pens were filled with cave crickets that infested the city; bugs that gorged on fungus, and had to be caged to keep the mushrooms safe. The crickets were then kept as foodstuff and consumed for nutritional value. Mike had vowed to never eat a cave cricket.

Someone cried out, and he looked down the street. A man in a racoon mask was fighting an unseen foe and swinging his fists in the air. Not far from him, a medusa-masked woman had disrobed and assumed a lotus posture in the middle of the road, fondling her breasts. A few passersby - a demon, a flying squirrel, and a kangaroo - ignored them both, the kangaroo humming a listless tune. *Thus are they easily ruled.*

It was the key to Zargonite dominion: keeping the citizens drugged. In return for a few peasant labors, the Cynidiceans had license to spend most of their day in dreams - baked on acid, stoned in sedation, whatever their flavor. Those who refused mushrooms became lesser addicts anyway. Acid was in the water supply.

These fields would have to burn.

It felt good to imagine it. But you couldn't bring down Eden and expect people to go on.

Mike wished he could enter the gardens and see the crops up close, but knew he would be shot on sight without a worker pass. And a Brother of Gorm would never have such a pass. Mike wasn't wearing his mask - the golden face of the stern warrior - but from the neck down he was in uniform: chain mail over a blue tunic, like all Brothers. And of course he had his long sword strapped to his back. On top of that, his black hair marked him as an alien. He was a walking bullseye when he was in the city - to say nothing of when he had Lucas by his side.

"Mike!"

He turned again and saw Lucas hurrying up the street. It hit him suddenly, how far they'd come since being here. He thought of Darius's hobgoblins. *Was that really three months ago?* He and Lucas had been so wet behind the ears and absurdly proud - proud of a slaughter that owed nothing to the warrior discipline that ruled them now. They'd been juiced up on rage; a maniacal rage made possible by this garden. Since then neither of them had touched a shroom of any kind.

"About time," he said as Lucas joined him at the fence.

"Got biscuits," said Lucas, belching. He had already devoured his, and handed the other one to Mike.

Mike shook his head. "I've been thinking," he said, staring down at the garden floor.

"Then we're in trouble," said Lucas. He stuffed the other biscuit in his mouth.

"Trying to get rid of all this is hopeless. And counterproductive."

"What?"

"We're talking about a drug culture that's over a thousand years old," said Mike.



"The Zargonites are over a thousand years old. The two go hand in hand."

"Who says?" said Mike. "I mean, who says it has to be that way? Get rid of the Zargonites and the old cults are in power again. What happens to the gardens at that point is up to the old cults - up to us."

"I don't follow. You want us to be like the Zargonites and rule over a city of acid heads? You think mushrooms are okay?"

"For some people, yes - no, hold on, Lucas. I'm just trying to work this through."

"Well, while you're working it through, walk down those streets and take a good look."

"I know this shit does a lot of damage."

"Gee, you think?"

"But so does ale and mead. Look at the alcoholics living on some of those streets. Do you want to outlaw booze?"

Lucas made a face. "That's a stupid analogy."

"It's a perfect analogy."

"I can't believe you're defending acid and comparing it to a glass of wine. Or berserker rage - what that shit made us do - and say that it's like having a shot of whiskey."

"Drink enough of that whiskey and you've got wife beating and child abuse and lies and thievery and homelessness - and just as much poison in your body as any drug will do to you. Booze destroys lives too, Lucas. But booze isn't bad for everyone."

"Come on, Mike, you're reaching. What mushrooms do is on another level."

"But for good as much as bad. For some people the shrooms foster artistic creativity. And they make life bearable - even enjoyable - when you live under these constant fucking threats. How would you get through your day knowing your wife or your kid might be chosen for the next altar sacrifice? If I were a peasant in this city, I'd take the acid over drowning in booze."

"Mike, there wouldn't be any blood sacrifice under the old gods!"

"I know that," said Mike. "My point is that drugs aren't bad for everyone. And there should be a *choice*, don't you think?"

"No," said Lucas. "I don't think. That's what the Usamigarans think. I hope Will hasn't been brainwashed with that libertarian garbage."

"But you believe in your choice to have a pint of ale."

"Okay, you're talking crazy," said Lucas. "And don't let Kanadius hear this shit. Or any of our Brothers."

"Lazur might agree with me."

"Lazur has been disciplined twice for heresy. Do not, I say *not*, float these ideas with anyone else."

"Well, you're the Chosen," said Mike. "I guess I'll just do as you say."

"Shut up," said Lucas.

Mike sighed. Lucas had replied as expected. He turned back to the gardens, and saw one of the field workers staring at them. Also as expected. "That guy's eyeballing you."

"I'm more worried about that guy," said Lucas, inclining his head in the other direction, and closer to the fence line.

It was a Zargonite. The guard glared at them across a patch of sea green mushrooms. Again, mostly at Lucas. They were used to this by now.

The fish-bowl experience was a constant in the city. Cynidiceans were chalk white - hair and skin - and most of them had never seen a black person. Strangely, few of them were racist. The creeds of the old cults explicitly condemned racism, and the Zargonites preached that a person's ethnic background had no meaning. The peasants embraced the Zargonite teachings. There was a shop owner who had tried throwing Lucas out for being a "black burn" - Lucas had quieted him with a draw of his sword - but that sort of reaction was exceptional. The Cynidicean people self-identified as mammals, reptiles, demons, and a lot weirder. A human being of different color was hardly likely to offend. Still, in their sober moments they stopped and stared. The sight of a black wasn't bothersome, but it was extraordinary.

"He has a hard on for you, dude," said Mike.

"Ugh." Lucas was disgusted. "Stop it with that shit."

Mike couldn't resist: "He wants your Indiana black snake pounding his a -"

"Hey, enough! When the day comes my skin color isn't an issue anymore for anyone - including you and your homo humor - I won't know what to say."

"Cry me a river," said Mike. "Black has made you a fucking celebrity."

"That is *not* what made me a celebrity," said Lucas. "As you very well know." Which was both true and false.

Lucas's skin color and something else had made him a hero. Being black was a huge score in the Brotherhood. In his mortal life Gorm - the first Cynidicean king - had been dark-skinned, and the Brothers never forgot their origins. Being a resurrected black was the jackpot - though an ongoing bone of contention. Lucas had almost been executed for it.

Every day Mike relived their induction ceremony. Lucas had collapsed in front of the temple altar, unable to speak the words of initiation. He kept trying, but the holy words felt like nails in his cranium. Kanadius had roared for his death immediately - for this was the clear reaction of a "zombie" who had been resurrected, and who could not utter the sacred rite without feeling immense pain. Mike had launched himself at the Grand Master, threatening to slay the entire Brotherhood. He was restrained at swordpoint by two warriors, while two others seized Lucas and positioned him for beheading. Mike had screamed furiously. Then everyone in the room got a rude surprise. A clap of thunder boomed - impossibly - above the altar. And then - also impossible - a tattoo materialized on Lucas's right arm. The Brothers gasped. It was the blue lightning bolt of Gorm. The sign of acceptance. The tattoo that was burned onto every initiate at the end of his induction ceremony. *From the hands of a Brother*. Never before had the tattoo appeared magically. The sign was clear: Gorm had spoken. Lucas Sinclair was his Chosen.

"I'm glad we're missing the drama this morning," said Mike. "The fanatics should be settled in when we get back."

Lucas made a noise. "It's about time Kanadius moved them."

"You realize you're like Jesus, dude?" said Mike. "There was this verse in the Bible that said Jesus didn't come to bring peace but a sword, and set family members against each other - brother against brother, shit like that."

"The Bible said that?" asked Lucas. "Swords and shit? Doesn't sound like Jesus."

"Honest truth," said Mike. "Maybe we're Christians, in a weird way. And you're the savior, causing all these divisions."

"Please," said Lucas.

"Everyone should be happy about the move," said Mike. "That room's been empty for years - like the one you and I took over. Our Brothers need to spread out."

Mike and Lucas had the luxury of sharing a room on Tier 2. The other ten Brothers had been crammed into a single barracks. As of today that barracks would house only seven. Lucas's status in the cult had triggered a three-way doctrinal war, and the hot-heads needed to be separated. Kanadius in all his politic could only keep things so smooth.

And Mike's analogy from the Bible was apt. While all the Brothers, including Kanadius, agreed that Lucas was Gorm's Chosen - he had been obviously singled out by the god for special approval - they disagreed vehemently on the meaning of that approval. Brother was set against brother in an unprecedented factionalism. Mike had taken to calling the

factions - behind their backs - the moderates, the militants, and the fanatics. The *moderates* (four Brothers) said that Lucas had been chosen to set an example for them all by his righteous behavior. The *militants* (three Brothers) believed as the moderates did, but also that Lucas was destined to lead them as the new Grand Master, to replace Kanadius at some point. The *fanatics* (three Brothers) believed as the militants did, but also insisted that Lucas was nothing less than Gorm come again - that their god had come to live among them as a fellow Brother, and to prepare them for a great test, possibly a "war to end all wars". Lucas's black skin proved it in their minds; Gorm had been a negro.

Resurrection was also up for grabs. According to the moderates and militants, the doctrine had to be completely rethought. It couldn't be so sacrilegious if Gorm had made a zombie his chosen instrument. Perhaps it had been evil in the past, but Gorm wanted that to change. But the issue was complex. Lucas had been pained by the ritual holy words, and unable to speak them - a sign of rejection. Yet he was divinely accepted. He was a zombie and Gorm's Chosen, an outrageous paradox that mocked *The Creed of Gorm*.

Things were simpler for the fanatics. They believed nothing had changed at all: resurrection was still an abomination; Lucas was the exception who proved the rule. The privilege of resurrection was reserved for Gorm, who had chosen to return in the body of a zombie, cleansing the corrupted entity and transforming it by his divinity. How else to explain the impossible? Lucas had felt the pain of the holy words as an evil zombie. And at that moment Gorm had entered Lucas, cleansing him, and revealing his stamp of approval. Lucas had to be Gorm.

Mike felt sorry for Kanadius. He was in his sixties and didn't deserve this nonsense. Mike had wanted to murder him when he called for Lucas's execution, but he had grown to like the old man (Lucas adored him) and envied his leadership skills. It was a tightrope act to referee three factions impartially and encourage their heated debates when his "neutrality" was a posture. Mike knew the Grand Master was a moderate.

And it was no accident, Mike was sure, that the fanatics were also the strongest sexists and homo-haters. *The Creed of Gorm* was sexist to begin with, but not misogynist by any means; it didn't promote hatred or fear of women. It taught that women deserved to be happy and obtain pleasure within the patriarchal boundaries prescribed for them. But the three men who hailed Lucas as their deity showed hints of borderline misogyny. And while homosexuality was a sin and stigma that led to expulsion from the

Gormish community (let alone the Brotherhood), Mike had heard one of trio calling for the death of homos.

He feared a schism if Kanadius didn't assert himself more.

Lucas, for his part, had taken his role as the Chosen in stride. He was the eternal diplomat. As the object of the Brothers' reverence, he refused to show favoritisms. It was for Kanadius to take sides (if only he would). Mike worried about the conflicting expectations for Lucas, and in their first week hadn't slept so well.

"Don't worry about me, Mike," Lucas said on one of those nights as they lay in their beds. "I like it here. I don't know what my 'magical' tattoo means, or what role I'm supposed to play, and I doubt any of the Brothers know either. I just know I feel at home here. The Brothers aren't perfect, but there's not a racist bone in their bodies. Like it or not, women are different from men, and homos are perverted. But color, it just doesn't matter."

It does in this garden, thought Mike, looking down at the myriad of pigments that saved or damned if they weren't one and the same. *All this potential. It doesn't need burning. It needs harnessing.*

"Hey," said Lucas.

Mike broke away from the view. "Yeah."

"Let's go."

They started walking back to the main part of the city for supplies. Noises sailed around - cries, warbles, off-key notes, the occasional shriek - and the sights were just as sore. This was a seedy part of the city and dirt poor.

When they crossed a street, Mike saw another ogler: a woman with an eel mask in a yellow robe, watching them intently. Had he seen her before? The eel looked familiar. He pointed her out to Lucas.

Lucas shrugged. "I don't know. We've probably seen everyone here before." They stopped on the other side of the street. "Our usual? You hit the shops, I'll see Zoran." Zoran was the high priest at the stronghold of Gorm. He insisted on seeing Gorm's Chosen whenever Lucas came down with Mike to make the supply runs. The priests sent them back to the temple with blessed food and purified drink.

"Fine," said Mike. "I'll meet you at the tunnel." That's what they called the passage winding up from the city to the pyramid.

"No, meet me at the stronghold. It won't kill you, and we could stay for lunch."

"I should visit Dustin or Demetrius," said Mike, and then thought: *No you shouldn't. The Magi have no love for the Brothers. It wouldn't look good.*

"Forget those two in one," said Lucas. "Come on, Mike."

"If you want to stay for lunch, go ahead," said Mike. He didn't like visiting any of the strongholds, though he'd never been inside the Maiden Tower. They were the communities of holdouts - the few Cynidiceans who rejected Zargon in favor of an old god or goddess. The Gormish community loved Mike and Lucas, but Mike couldn't take the hero worship.

Lucas sighed. "Then go back without me. I'm going to linger."

"Enjoy, dude."

They parted, with Lucas continuing straight ahead and Mike veering right. This would be a fast run. Kanadius needed just a few items: candles, ink, and a new lock for one of the doors. Lucas's food haul would be bigger, and a warrior from the stronghold would help bring it back.

The street Mike was on now always depressed him. Most of the buildings were fallen apart and run down. Some of the people were homeless, and catatonic stares were the norm. Mike turned down an alley that would connect him to the street of the shop he liked.

He heard the softest footstep behind him, and was immediately alert. But his warrior reflexes weren't fast enough. An arm suddenly had him in a choke hold. He was professional enough not to panic and relied on his training, but his assailant anticipated his moves - every evasive feint taught to him by the Brothers. This was a professional fighter. *Christ, is this the day I die?* He thought of Zargonite sacrifice and bloody altars - and then heaved backwards with all he had. His assailant saw that coming, released the choke around his neck just in time, and spun him around one-eighty, slamming him into the alley wall. The breath went out of him, and he heard a blade sliding from its sheath; he knew it was his own. The tip jabbed the back of his throat.

"Nice sword," said a light voice. "Keep facing the wall and don't move."

Mike coughed, outraged at being so easily disarmed, but even more outraged by the voice itself. It was the voice of a woman. *A woman.* He tried turning around. Stupidly.

At once his feet were kicked from beneath him, and he fell like cement. He heard his sword being tossed aside, and then the woman was on his back, pinning him in seconds. Mike yelled, demanding release, and was

rewarded painfully: she smacked the side of his face so hard that his eyes watered.

"Start doing as I say, or you'll be leaving with broken bones. Do you understand?"

He coughed into the alley floor, and nodded. What did this killer bitch want?

The answer to that became quickly clear. She reached under him for the front of his pants and pulled them down. Her hand slid roughly around and seized the prize she sought. She began to stroke him.

"Hey!" He struggled wildly.

She seemed to have every maneuver and trick at her command. With the one hand still on his member, she kept him overpowered with the other and his face pressed into the ground. "You're pathetic," she said, tonguing his ear. "*Brother.*" She stroked him more; he grew hard as his fury built. "You and Black Boy. Make me sick. Make me - Oooh, you're a big one... the size of you... the *size* of you... you celibate waste... you *celibate fucking waste.*"

Mike was brick hard and flooded with unwelcome desire. Her hand was absolutely shaming him. "Stop it," he gasped. "You can't..." *You can't do this.*

He was turned over on his back and finally got a look at his rapist. She was snow white like everyone in this world, had a tomboyish face, and looked everything of a hundred thirty pounds - which was about his own weight. She was shorter but had more stock - and looked strangely familiar. *Where have I seen her??* She yanked his pants down more, and hers at the same time - and with shocking celerity shoved him up inside her and began riding him. "Ooooh, gods..." she moaned her satisfaction, and devolved into a shocking vulgar litany, demanding that he stay hard, hard, and hard...

There was no way Mike could obey that command. He was a virgin, for Gorm's sake, at age twenty-two. He had discovered the relief of masturbation in his aged body, but it was nothing like the real thing from a woman - or girl (was she even eighteen?) - manipulating him at all the stress points. In less than a minute he shot his load. He braced himself for her fury and more abuse.

Astonishingly, she appeared to be on the highest plane of ecstasy - even after he came. Her face contorted in a manner suggesting an orgasm that stretched on forever. Her hips never stopped; she kept thrusting, and as he went soft inside her, she seemed not to notice. She moaned throatily. Her legs quaked as she fucked his wilting cock; she cried and came, and cried

and came. Drenching him. He tried pushing her off him, but she slammed him down ferociously. Then she began thrusting again, moaning again, building to another climax of rapid-fire orgasms - this time screaming with such pleasure over a completely deflated penis that Mike thought she had to be faking it. Except there was no way this was an act. He waited her out. It was all he could do.

Over fifteen minutes later she was finally done. Mike wondered how many people had passed by the alley. Her obscene racket would have been heard like a building collapse. She looked indifferent - and not the least bit tired - as she stood up and pulled up her pants, ordering him to do the same.

Mike clambered to his feet and looked around - and his heart stopped when he saw the figure at the end of the alley. *Lucas*, he thought irrationally... but it wasn't Lucas, only a beggar staring slack-jawed at the spectacle he had witnessed. Mike went red with shame. He could never tell Lucas this.

"You broke your vow," she said.

He turned to face her. She was handing him his sword. *Where have I seen her before?* He snatched back his sword and waved it threateningly: "I didn't break shit!"

"Honestly," she said. "Put it away. You look silly."

He was right about her age. This *girl* looked barely eighteen, maybe nineteen - an adult woman, yes, but in his eyes a girl. He had three or four years on her, five or six inches on her - and a man's biology on her - but she had just kicked his ass and raped him with little effort. Then he saw the mask not far from her feet: the eel. And the discarded yellow robe as well. His blood began to boil. *She's been stalking me.*

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"Do you feel better now?" she countered. At her waist she was adjusting her own sword that she had thrown aside to commit her rape. Mike registered her apparel: bronze chain mail over a green tunic. *Who -?*

And then he knew.

"How you Brothers get through a day without raping each other is beyond me," she said.

"We have *discipline*," spat Mike, "unlike you bitches." He had seen this girl a couple of times in the revolving passage on Tier 3. She lived high in the pyramid and served the old gods like him. She was a Warrior Maiden of Madarua. Demetrius's words came floating back: *Those man-hating bitches.*

The Maiden rolled her eyes. "If you say so."

"You're rapists!" shouted Mike. "Using some kind of magic!"

With swift fury she belted him across the face.

"OW!" he yelled.

"Only some of us are rapists," she said. "And don't pretend that I didn't do you a favor here."

"Favor???" he screamed.

"And as for magic," she said, "the Maidens aren't into that shit. Cheap tricks are for Magi."

"Why have you been stalking me in that?" he asked, pointing to the eel mask and yellow robe.

She looked at him as if sizing him up. "You go to the gardens. Sometimes with Blackie. Most of the time alone."

"His name's Lucas," said Mike.

She smiled. "Yes. Everyone in the pyramid by now has heard of Lucas the Chosen." Clearly mocking.

"Shut up, bitch."

"What's your interest in the gardens?" she asked. She sounded genuinely curious.

"None of your business," he said.

"Mike," she said exasperatingly.

So she knew his name. *Of course she does. Everyone in the pyramid knows of Lucas the Chosen, his friend Mike, and Will the Spider Child.*

Mike looked away. "You fucking raped me. I'm reporting this to Pandora." The lead warrior of the Maidens. Madarua's Champion.

She walked right up to him. "Be my guest. And I'll tell Pandora - and also report to Kanadius - that it was the other way around. That you raped me. Tell me who you really think they're going to believe." She laughed hard. "And also who will get excommunicated - for breaking his stupid childish asshole vows of celibacy?"

Mike exploded. He slapped her face, as hard as he done to him.

That finally hurt her. She looked slowly up again. Then she grabbed his face and kissed him ferociously.

Stunned and inflamed, he returned her passion - and then broke off, backing away. "Jesus! What's wrong with you?" He turned to leave.

"Mike!" she called.

Keep going. Don't listen to another word from her. If he had obeyed himself, future events would have unfolded differently.

"Mike!" she repeated.

He slowed and then stopped. Turned around; glared at her.

She walked up slowly. "I'm on a supply run too. Come shop with me. We can go back together. I know Blackie is staying longer - I heard you both talking."

"His name is Lucas," snarled Mike.

"Lucas," she said, this time without a trace of mockery. "My name is Jilanka. I'm not as mean as you think. And maybe I can tell you a thing or two about mushrooms."

That night, Mike stayed up reading long after Lucas went to sleep. The mycology tome consumed him. After his heated argument with Lucas, he wondered if he was too radical. After listening to Jilanka, he feared the opposite; that he was downright hypocritical. The mushrooms had his full attention now - their dangers, but also their unexplored potentials. Jilanka had tapped those potentials, and Mike had seen the results firsthand.

You mean you experienced the results. She raped you.

He was still furious at being attacked and degraded, but he was also getting over it more than he had any right to. His opinion of Jilanka had turned quickly in the short time of their shopping down in the city. By the time they were heading back he was enjoying her company, and her conversation in particular.

She had told him "a thing or two about mushrooms" which - if her suppositions were true - required a complete rethinking of the drug problem. Mike needed a solid handle on all the mushrooms and what they did, how much they cost, and he studied the tables in the book over and over.

The first page listed the staple drugs: hallucinogenics, sedatives, and amphetamines - in that order of abundance and popularity.

	Drug Name	Mushroom Color	Cost per Dose & Effects
Hallucinogenic 1	Acid trip	Dark blue	3 cp. The world takes on a dreamlike state.
Hallucinogenic 2	Dream share	Sea green	6 cp. The same as acid trip, but communal trips are possible if the drug is taken by several people at once.
Hallucinogenic 3	Sex craze	Yellow and orange spotted	2 sp. Enhanced sexual performance and enjoyment, even without a sex partner or manual stimulation.

Hallucinogenic 4	Warped sensations	Red and white spotted	5 gp. Radically altered senses: sights are perceived as sounds, sounds as smells, smells as touches, and touches as sights - or different combinations.
Hallucinogenic 5	Creative artistry	Fuchsia	100 gp. The shroom eater enters a state of wildly delusional creative energy; mages can work their magic at double, triple, or even quadruple the usual effect, which they have a hard time controlling.
Sedative 1	Sleep	Purple	5 cp. Uninterrupted and peaceful sleep.
Sedative 2	Numb	Silver	8 cp. Numb relaxation and riding a pleasant high.
Sedative 3	Quick-time	Pale cerulean	3 sp. Distorted sense of time; the shroom eater perceives the world as if it is passing three times as fast.
Sedative 4	Fade	Lime green	2 gp. The shroom eater is wide awake and fully alert, but also completely "stoned" (calm and high) and can move about while the body rejuvenates as if sleeping.
Sedative 5	Come-down	Piggy pink	50 gp. Negates the effects of any amphetamine.
Amphetamine 1	No sleep	Black and orange	10 gp. The shroom eater is able to ignore exhaustion and function without sleep or rest for 24 hours.
Amphetamine 2	Haste	Yellowish brown	20 gp. Haste, moving fast, running fast.
Amphetamine 3	Slow-time	White and burgundy stripes	30 gp. Distorted sense of time; the shroom eater becomes energetically fast, perceiving the world as if it is passing three times as slow.
Amphetamine 4	Berserk	Blood red	40 gp. Fearless and psychotic fighting, with the benefits of slowtime (everything seems too

			slow) and also masochism (wounds and injuries energize and empower the shroom eater).
Amphetamine 5	Come-up	Purple with green spots	50 gp. Negates the effects of any sedative.

The amphetamines were pricey, but that was no surprise. The Zargonites preferred people in fantasy-land or sedated, not on speed. Mike and Lucas had plenty of money from their dungeon crawl in the pyramid. Still, you had to really want a mushroom - or be addicted - to pay anywhere between 10-50 gold pieces for it.

The currency of the Lost City followed the D&D game standard pretty closely. 1 gold piece (gp) equaled 10 silver pieces (sp) which equaled 100 copper pieces (cp). Copper was the currency of day laborers and beggars. A single copper piece bought a candle, a torch, a piece of chalk - things like that. Three or four copper pieces might fetch a shitty breakfast, or some hard bread and cheese for lunch. For most Cynidiceans, silver was the most common coinage. One silver piece bought a nice pint of beer. Two silver pieces paid a peasant for a day of work. Two would also buy an elaborate breakfast or a very decent lunch. Gold was out of reach for most citizens - the money of merchants, the elite few, and the Zargonite priesthood. Two gold pieces paid for a seven-course dinner, fifteen gold pieces for a nice sword, fifty gold pieces for chain mail, hundreds for plate mail, and thousands for a private home. Most Cynidiceans lived in communal dormitories, unable to afford homes.

All of this put the drug prices into perspective. The average citizen was restricted to grades 1 and 2 hallucinogenics and sedatives - maybe an occasional grade 3 after saving up. Beyond those staples, mushrooms were an expensive privilege.

On the next page were listed the poison and medicinal mushrooms, used for assassination and healing. Both extremely expensive.

	Drug Name	Mushroom Color	Effects
Poison 1	Rotgut	Persimmon orange	200 gp. Victim suffers diarrhea, vomiting, and excessive dehydration, usually dying within 24 hours.
Poison 2	Blackface	Black	300 gp. Victim's face turns black as blood

			vessels in the head explode; the increase in blood pressure to the brain results in a massive stroke.
Poison 3	Bluetongue	Midnight blue	300 gp. Victim's tongue swells to enormous proportions until suffocation occurs.
Poison 4	Jellybones	Watermelon	400 gp. Victim's skeleton liquifies within thirty minutes, resulting in death.
Poison 5	Rictus	Raw liver	500 gp. Victim's face contorts into a "grin of death" rictus; muscle spasms induce heart and lung failure, causing jerking motions of the body; death follows within ten minutes.
Medicine 1	Healing	Peach	400 gp. Neutralizes pain and heals wounds.
Medicine 2	Restore senses	Cornflower blue	600 gp. Cures blindness, deafness, smell, taste, etc.
Medicine 3	Cure disease	White	800 gp. Cures any disease.
Medicine 4	Restore mind	Smoky gray	1000 gp. Cures insanity, fear, anxiety, mental illness.
Medicine 5	Liberation	Shamrock green	Not for sale. Removes all withdrawal symptoms of any drug, and allows recipient to break free from any one addiction per dosage, but does not prevent re-addiction to the same substance in the future. (A very rare drug, cultivated only by the high priest of Zargon in his private gardens.)

Mike chewed his lip, wondering about the medicines. They'd be nice to have on hand. Demetrius wasn't always around to pray his healing spells, and healing potions were rarer than shrooms. He did a mental tally of each of the four that were for sale. *Shit. Close to 3,000 gold pieces.*

He considered the wealth they'd amassed from their dungeon crawl in the pyramid. From the treasure piles of the ghost and hell hounds, he and his friends had acquired a total of 5,000 copper, 15,000 silver, and 6,000 gold. From Demetrius's secret room they had already taken 300 gold, but Demetrius ended up giving them his entire fortune (a minimum of thanks for possessing Dustin's body). That was an additional 3,000 silver and

4,700 gold, bringing their grand total up to 5,000 copper, 18,000 silver, and 11,000 gold. In the gaming room, Will had lost 2,400 silver and 1,500 gold in the card games. Which had brought them down to 5,000 copper, 15,800 silver, and 9,500 gold. They'd agreed to split this four ways, leaving Mike, Lucas, Will, and Demetrius/Dustin each with 1,250 copper, 3,950 silver, and 2,375 gold.

Mike and Lucas had each made a donation of 500 silver and 500 gold to the Brotherhood after their induction ceremony - a generous sum that was already about half of the Brothers' treasury. That had left Mike and Lucas each with 1,250 copper, 3,450 silver, and 1,875 gold. They had spent some of that money in three months, though not much. When he last opened his chest (kept triple locked under his bed), Mike had something like 1,100 copper, 3,200 silver, and 1,800 gold. Needless to say, he wouldn't be buying many medicines on a bankroll like that.

The third page listed the untouchable priestly mushrooms. Few outside the Zargonite temple had ever seen these colors. None were grown in the public gardens or for sale, and all were jealously guarded by the temple priests.

	Drug Name	Mushroom Color	Effects
Priestly 1	Speak with the Dead	Olive	Not for sale. The shroom eater can speak with the dead or the undead.
Priestly 2	ESP	Bright red	Not for sale. The shroom eater can read peoples' thoughts.
Priestly 3	Spirit Walk	Robin egg blue	Not for sale. The shroom eater can have out-of-body experiences.
Priestly 4	Glowbug	Gold	Not for sale. The shroom eater sees the aura of all living things - knows if they are good or evil, if they are lying, if they are possessed, etc.
Priestly 5	Nightmare Trip	Indigo	Not for sale. Creates a gate to the shadow world of nightmares, and allows a creature from that dimension to possess the shroom eater's body for 1-6 days. (A very rare drug jealously guarded by the Zargonite high priest. He usually uses it in ritualistic magic to bind a nightmare creature to use as an assassin.)

Mike shuddered at the idea of a nightmare trip. That a mushroom could open a gate to the shadow world was beyond him. The others too. The priestly shrooms would have to be cultivated with the aid of powerful prayers to work such magic.

He flipped back to other pages, digesting it all, hardly knowing where to begin applying his newfound revelations. *So many colors. So many combinations...*

What Jilanka had explained to him overturned assumptions about drug addiction. It was true, she had said, that all the mushrooms were addictive (except the poisonous ones, which killed you right away), but *when taken in combinations of two*, their addictive power was cancelled. Not only that, eating two kinds of mushrooms simultaneously diffused the effect on the psyche; the shroom eater could repress the effects of the drugs, provided that his or her willpower was strong enough. Mike couldn't believe that at first, but Jilanka's rape illustrated the point.

She had taken the grade 3 hallucinogenic (sex craze) to produce a state in which she could enjoy enhanced sexual performance, regardless of her victim's performance - or indeed regardless of any manual stimulation. She could have had the orgasm of her life without Mike, though he certainly added to the experience. This was the mushroom that the bird man had taken when he assaulted Will. But Jilanka hadn't seemed like the bird man. She'd been more in control of herself - out of her mind during the twenty-minute orgasmic earthquake, but instantly in control afterwards.

And she'd been in control of him. Thoroughly, and despite all his physical advantages.

The way she had dominated him was by grinding up grade 3 amphetamine (slow-time) and mixing it with the sex craze drug, to produce the distorted sense of time which gave the shroom eater super-fast reflexes. To a person on the slow-time drug, the world seemed sluggish and people clumsy. Mike had gotten a dose of this experience when he and Lucas took the grade 4 amphetamine (berserker), and massacred the hobgoblins who normally should have slain them with ease. But again, Jilanka had shown no signs of being juiced up after she finished raping him. She should have: mushroom trips lasted hours; at least six, and as many as fifteen. Mike and Lucas had taken the grade-5 sedative (come-down) to cancel their berserker trip. Jilanka had taken no such sedative.

No, she had simply "switched off" the effects of both mushrooms with willpower. She could have reactivated them at any time during the 6-15

hour duration, and kept switching on and off until the trip actually ended. Mike had been skeptical of this too.

"Do you want me to prove it?" she had asked in the tunnel, as they ascended to the pyramid. "Rape you again?"

"Don't even think about it," said Mike. It was a feeble retort and she knew it. He wouldn't mind a tumble with her again - he hadn't made any female friends since being here - but on coequal terms, and to prove that he could satisfy a girl without her mind blown high.

"What I'm saying is true, Mike. I discovered this by accident. I don't know who else knows, if anyone does. Are the Zargonite priests even aware of it? Just imagine what other drug combinations would do - with no addiction problems and being able to turn the effects on and off whenever you want."

Mike was shaking his head. "That's assuming this rule you discovered holds true for every mushroom combination. How do you know that the sex craze and slow-time combo isn't exceptional?"

"I don't," she admitted. "But it stands to reason."

"And you've told none of the Maidens this?"

"Not on your life," she said. "If they knew I took shrooms, I'd be expelled."

"But you're telling me. And I'm your worst enemy. You bitches hate the Brothers."

She had looked at him then as if knowing his secrets. Smiled a bit sadly. "I can't afford to hate outsiders. And you, Mike Wheeler, are an outsider. You don't belong with the Brothers."

Chapter Seven:

The Spider of Usamigaras

The trick to the spider climb was to not think so hard about it. Press one hand firmly, lift the other, and same with the feet. Imagine a single crawling movement, and soon it was streetwalking. Think too hard, and you overcompensated; next the ground was claiming you.

The trick was not - contrary to what Shanti insisted - to not look down. Will loved looking down, and he never mucked his steps when he did. He loved looking down because he felt a secret power over those below him. He had no fear of heights, so vertigo wasn't a problem.

Auriga was below him now - far below, almost eighty feet - watching his student with the usual mixture of pride and contempt. They were down in the city, at the cavern wall on the east side, not far from the stronghold of Usamigaras. Their weekly trip, and Will's favorite day, when he could test his limits.

The more perilous the wall, the more it called to him. He loved how it felt, to crawl up and across ceilings in bare feet. The city ceiling was too high - two hundred feet from the ground at least - but he'd conquer it some day. If *fly* was the more powerful spell (Will had yet to learn it), *spider climb* was artfully superior. It was so unobtrusive; the coveted technique of spies, thieves, and assassins. A hawk preyed openly, but a widow stalked in murderous silence. Will was the Magi's widow: the Spider of Usamigaras.

He'd felt reborn receiving that moniker.

Two other Magi had *spider climb* in their spellbooks, but the alien child William Byers had mastered the art in less than half the time it took them

to memorize the spell. Most of the Magi were proud to have a kid in their ranks, but some burned with envy. Auriga, for his part, seemed to enjoy fomenting whatever resentment he could of his prodigy.

He looked down at Auriga and saw him wave, the signal to keep going. Will grinned and resumed his crawl. *Onwards and upwards*, his mother used to say. He wished she and Jonathan could see him now. *A hundred feet. I'll make a hundred feet today.* The city wall was a challenge, and not just because of the monstrous height. It wasn't smooth like the walls of the pyramid rooms. There were natural rocky protrusions all over. The big and sharp ones could dislodge you, or fail to stick to the hands and feet, if you were crawling too fast or not careful.



Will wasn't feeling careful; he was feeling his oats. He wanted to impress Auriga. The spell gave him twenty minutes of spider climbing, and he'd been on the wall for a little over five minutes. He still had time before he had to be back on the ground. He was a second level mage - an impossible achievement for a twelve-year old, and usually even for an adult in such short time - and proud of the spells he'd acquired. Auriga was now sixth level, having advanced impressively over the past few months. The other ten Magi in the temple ranged between first and third level. Shanti, Will's best friend, was still only first. There wasn't a sliver of envy in Shanti. *If he were here, he'd be applauding me.*

He must have been at ninety feet now. He paused and glanced below, thrilled by the vastness of open air. Everything below was inferior, insignificant; even Auriga. He went on upwards - and was hit by a sudden feeling of exhaustion. He stopped himself at once. *Whoa.* He shook his head to clear the fog, but he was getting weaker. It wasn't vertigo. He'd been fine looking down moments before. Something else...

He began to panic. He was perched ninety feet above the ground, and his muscles were failing him. *Auriga!* He couldn't shout for help even; all that came out was a raggedy gasp. And then fear knifed into him as he realized: *It's a spell. I'm under a spell.* Someone was assaulting him. With no other recourse, he began a desperate crawl back down.

In his state of enfeeblement his left foot banged against a rocky protrusion, and he overreacted to compensate. Both of his feet slipped and his hands scraped uselessly across the wall. Then the wall was flashing past. The city floor rushed up to meet him. *Mom! Help me!*

A cushion of air arrested his fall a split second later. He tossed and turned, seeing that he was about twenty feet from the ground, and now falling like a feather. *Auriga,* he thought. The chief mage had saved him with a *levitate* spell.

When he touched the ground, Auriga's look was a reprimand. "What have I told you about getting cocky?"

I did what you said! Will almost shouted. *You told me to go higher!* He'd seen the mage wave him upwards.

"Even the gifted need to be taken down a peg," said the chief mage. "Today you were taken down quite a few."

Will could hardly stand. His legs were shaking from the terror of the drop. "I... it was a spell. Someone put a spell on me." He looked around the area but saw no one.

"Nonsense," said Auriga. "You exceeded your limits and got fatigued. Let that be a lesson to you."

No. There's no way that was fatigue. He'd been at full capacity and then suddenly overwhelmed by an unnatural exhaustion. And then he saw the truth of it. *You.*

It was Auriga who had made him fall.

Later they lunched at the stronghold. The mess hall bustled with the usual activity. Will saw eight adults and three kids, two Magi, and the priestess Shira. But no sign of Dustin/Demetrius. At that moment he wanted to see Dustin's face more than anything.

He and Auriga were eating a meal of maize and split yellow peas. The cooks called it split pea soup, but to Will it was split pea goop. He liked it that way - eating split peas like mashed potato. They didn't often have split peas in the pyramid, despite the requests Will had put in for the supply runners. More of Auriga's petty power plays.

But he loved his city trips with Auriga. The Usamigaran stronghold was a community for everyone, not just Magi. It felt warm and inviting here. He knew that Mike and Lucas felt the same about the Gormish stronghold - or at least Lucas did. Apparently Mike didn't always visit the stronghold during their supply runs.

Will wasn't a supply runner for the Magi. His best friend Shanti was, along with a mage named Makran. Will was too good for such tasks - and he was a child besides - so instead he was subjected to the backhanded privilege of praise and insults, and being set up to fail when he exceeded himself.

"You did good today otherwise," said Auriga, feeding his face. "Great things are in store for you. I keep saying. But you need more discipline."

Will nodded obediently. *What will he do next to "discipline" me?*

He knew that Auriga had sent him falling, and that the chief mage wanted him to know that without having to admit it. According to Demetrius, Auriga was a sadist with an inferiority complex. He enjoyed scaring and belittling Will both to gratify and feel better about himself. Then there were the logistics of spell casting. Auriga had saved him in the nick of time with *levitate*. That spell took only two seconds to cast, but a fall from the height of ninety feet had you on the ground in two seconds. There was no way Auriga could have reacted in time to levitate Will unless he'd known what was coming. It was obvious: he had cast some kind of exhaustion spell on Will, then immediately started the *levitate* spell to intercept Will's fall.

It had occurred to Will on many occasions that Auriga was a terrible human being, but he refused to let that matter. He would certainly not tell his Hawkins friends about the indignities and dangers that came with being Auriga's student. He was going to be a powerful mage, and the way to that future was Auriga, whether he liked it or not.

He looked up as someone came over from another table. It was the priestess Shira.

"Well, look who's here," she said, favoring Will with a greeting. "That day of week?"

Will smiled back at her. "Yeah." He liked Shira.

"If you have time after lunch, you should join us in the courtyard. The kids are putting on a play. About Alexander and Zenobia."

Auriga wiped his mouth with a napkin. He was seething at being snubbed by the priestess. "We should really be heading back," he said, refusing to look at Shira.

"Thanks for inviting us," said Will.

She smiled and proceeded to greet someone at another table.

"Shira," called Will.

She stopped and looked back. "Yes, Will?"

"Is Demetrius around?" He knew the question would irritate Auriga, and that's the main reason he asked it. *Make me fall, will you?*

"Yes, but he's busy with Raen. If you stayed and waited a while..." She glanced at Auriga who coughed irritably.

"It's okay," said Will. "Like Auriga said, we have to be going." It wouldn't do to provoke his teacher too much.

Shira smiled and moved on.

Auriga shoved his plate aside. "Are you finished?" he asked curtly.

"Almost," said Will. He still had plenty of food on his plate, as the mage could easily see.

"Well since you eat so damn slow, and you're determined to keep us here, give me the breakdown of the city's population. Go."

So this was his penance for speaking out of turn. No matter, he knew the figures by heart. Auriga had grilled him weeks ago on demographics. A while back the Magi had conducted a census of the underground city. Four of the Magi took lead on the project. It was about three years ago, but the population remained fairly constant in Cynidicea, with little outside interaction and no warfare to reduce the population by much. As for the problem of increase, the means of population control was at the sacrifice altar. The Zargonites put just enough victims under the knife - adults and

youths - to maintain a steady population of around 1200. If you counted the goblin and hobgoblin population, the total was about 1600.

Will had the census committed by photographic memory. The current year was 1055 AC ("after the crowning" of some emperor in a foreign land, he forgot who). The census had been conducted in 1052 AC. He recalled the breakdown:

Census of Cynidicea, 1052 AC

In the Underground City

Throughout the City - 996 (809 adult citizens, 187 youths)

Temple of Zargon - 85 (25 priests, 36 warriors, 24 hobgoblins)

Stronghold of Gorm - 49 (4 priests, 10 warriors, 26 adult citizens, 9 youths)

Stronghold of Madarua - 36 (2 priestesses, 11 warriors, 17 adult citizens, 6 youths)

Stronghold of Usamigaras - 25 (3 priests, 5 mages, 13 adult citizens, 4 youths)

In the Goblin Caves – 300 (estimated; about 120 goblin and hobgoblin warriors at the emergency call of the Zargonites)

At the Catacombs - 100 (estimated; mostly hobgoblins who guard the area and patrol the main streets of the city and the gardens)

In the Pyramid

Temple of Gorm - 11 (1 Grand Master, 10 warriors)

Temple of Madarua - 10 (1 Champion, 9 warriors)

Temple of Usamigaras - 12 (1 Chief Mage, 11 mages)

Apparently the Zargonites had accommodated the Magi students, even allowing them into the temple to see the numbers for themselves. The message was obvious. It was a blatant power display for the priesthood,

putting their superior numbers beyond doubt and making it official, lest anyone - especially the old cults - get seditious ideas.

Will rattled off these numbers around mouthfuls of split peas, which Auriga barely acknowledged. He was wasting his breath but getting off easy; this penance could have been far worse. When he was finished with his facts and his food, he brought their dishware to the kitchen bins, and they headed back to the pyramid.

Two days later, Will got a surprise visit in the morning.

"Dustin!"

It had been at least two weeks since he'd seen his friend, and rushed around his desk to give him a hug. Dustin laughed and hugged him back.

"Thanks for that, Will," said Dustin, releasing him. "I needed one of those. But I'm actually the other."

Will looked up at him. "Demetrius?"

"The very same," said the priest. "But I wouldn't have gotten a hug like that if you'd known, right?"

Will smiled. He liked Demetrius - *almost* as much as Dustin. The priest would have gotten a hug anyway.

"By the gods, look at this space you have," said Demetrius, marveling at Will's privilege. "Your own room."

It was part of his reward for being a prodigy. Almost a month ago, Auriga had cleared space in the Magi treasury room and made it Will's private chamber. Will now slept in a room full of chests containing the Magi's wealth. And he still had enough space left over to match the size of Auriga's chamber.

"I know," said Will. "I can't believe Auriga does all this for me." *On top of playing tricks that nearly kill me.* "Do you want to see him?"

"Ah... no," said the priest. "I came to see you, actually." He stopped and stared at the tapestry. "Leaving your mark, I see."

The tapestry had been woven by Shanti and two other mages, and hung on the wall facing the room entrance. It was a giant widow spider. When Will sat at his desk - as he had been upon Demetrius's entry - visitors saw the spider in the background over Will. The Magi took pride in their Spider Child.

"Do you like it?" asked Will. "Or is it... too much?"

The priest seemed lost in thought, and then answered: "Oh no, it's fine, Will. Truly. I'm fully behind the Spider Child."

"But you came to see me about something?" *If he talks to me about pedophiles and the bird man, I'm going to scream.*

"Yes, I did. Do you want to take a walk?" Demetrius looked pointedly around the room, at the walls and ceiling.

Will stood up, understanding. "Sure." He knew that Demetrius wasn't being paranoid. It was more than likely that Auriga had a scrying device planted somewhere in this room, though Will had never been able to find one. It may have been invisible. Not that it bothered him. With all the wealth stored in this room, he rather expected the chief mage to keep tabs on his private doings. Though that did contradict the libertarian platform of the Magi. Shanti's refrain came back to him: *Auriga is no true Magi.*

"Good," said Demetrius. "Let's go outside."

"The top?" asked Will, excited.

"You'll never be a true Cynidicean," laughed the priest, "if you like being out in the sun."

Will grabbed his sun-goggles and key, and locked the door behind him as they left the room. They walked down the corridor that put them at the southwest door of the revolving passage. They didn't have to push the button. The passage was still aligned at this door where Demetrius had left it.

Inside they swiveled the passage a full seven notches to align their door with the southern corridor. From there they went up the stairs to Tier 2.

"Can we stop and see Mike and Lucas?" asked Will as they climbed.

"If we must," said the priest sourly.

"They might be sword training downstairs," said Will.

At the top of the stairs they took a right detour down to Mike and Lucas's room. Will knocked on the door but no one answered.

"Like you said," said the priest.

Will nodded, disappointed, and they both retracted their steps to the corridor that went ahead, then branched right down to another door. They opened it and entered the central room of the tier.

It was the way to the desert surface, with three ladders spaced ten feet apart; each ladder climbed up to the first tier and beyond it to the top of the pyramid outside. The rest of the room was filled with weird looking parts of machinery, clay pots, and oil flasks. There was a small foundry - with a forge, anvil, tongs, and hammers. Will remembered Shanti saying the foundry was used in old days to fix broken parts of the three god-statues on top of the pyramid.

"Middle ladder," said Demetrius, positioning himself to climb. Not that it mattered. All three led to the same place. He began his ascent.

Will climbed up after him. At the ceiling they entered a huge cylinder and kept climbing for twenty feet, until they reached a door in the cylinder wall. It was the door to Tier 1, which they bypassed - a single room filled with traps for the unfortunate. Any desert explorers who chanced upon the pyramid and entered uninvited got a rude surprise in that room.

They continued to the top, where the cylinder took on the shape of a hollowed-out statue. Will felt a thrill of excitement. They were inside the statue of Usamigaras - the way he'd come with Shanti. Like the other two statue interiors, this one had a special speaking tube. In the days when Cynidicea was a surface city - well over eleven hundred years ago - the priests of the old gods used these tubes to "speak the god's will" to the people. *The days of unity, thought Will. Before Zargon. When Brothers, Maidens, and Magi fought as one.*

There were also levers inside the hollow, and Will reached for one, heaving it to one side. He needed both arms to move it, and even then it was hard. He was moving some part of the Usamigaras statue - an arm maybe, or the head, or the eyes - though no one was outside to see the effect.

"Enough play," said Demetrius. "Let's go. And put your goggles on." The cleric was already strapping on his eye protection.

Will donned his goggles, which were an absolute requirement for walking the surface. Months of living underground had given him night eyes. When Demetrius opened the door at the base of the statue, Will squeezed his eyes shut as sunlight blazed in. Even with goggles on they needed to let their eyes adjust. Then they stepped out onto the pyramid top, and saw the desert.

It was a land out of Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

Will had been outside like this only twice: once with Mike and Lucas, and then a few weeks later with Shanti. All the cults forbade their members from going outside alone, and even partnered or group visits were discouraged. The desert was a lifeless, scorching, arid land, and there were occasional marauders bred to the climate. Hardly anything remained of old Cynidicea. A few ruins and stone blocks stood out, but the blowing sands had effaced most of them. Over three hundred yards away were hints of the old city wall, jutting out of the sand.

And then, overcome by the vast expanse, Will Byers started weeping. He missed Hawkins. Out here in the open sky he didn't feel like the Spider of Usamigaras. He felt like the tiny kid he was, who needed to be home with his mom and Jonathan; to start middle school with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin; and to ride his bike for miles. He missed bike riding more than

anything. There weren't even horses down in the Lost City. Just a few camels.

Get a hold of yourself, dammit.

He hurriedly wiped his eyes under his goggles before Demetrius could see him crying. The priest had no patience for it. Will turned around to hide his face, and looked up at the statues. They towered like the titans of Greek mythology. Gorm stood thirty feet tall: a strong bearded man holding a balance of scales in one hand and a lightning bolt in the other. Madarua, also thirty feet, was on the other side: a female warrior holding a sword in one hand and a sheaf of wheat in the other. In the middle was Usamigaras, twenty feet tall: a winged child - some said he'd been a hobbit in mortal life - with two snakes twined about his body. The cherub/hobbit held a wand in one hand and a fistful of coins in the other. From within these statues, priests had blared out divine imperatives.

"Humbling, isn't it?"

Will faced the cleric again. He nodded, still too overcome to speak.

"Cynidicea wasn't always lost. It was a kingdom of thousands, not hundreds. You know, during the reign of the fourteenth monarch – it would have been 1339 years ago – the three gods came down from the heavens and lived in the city, walked among their people, for a whole month. Can you imagine? But anyway. Now that we're out here, tell me true. How has Auriga been treating you?"

Will's heart picked up, but he kept a poker face. "Fine. You know, he's a bit shifty, but... you know, a really good teacher."

"Mm-hmm." The priest regarded him carefully. "Shifty. I can think of other words I'd use to describe the man. You're being charitable. And loyal. Good traits in a student, I suppose."

Telling Demetrius about his ninety-foot fall was out of the question. Not that he didn't trust the priest to keep a secret like that. He thought he probably could. It was Dustin he didn't trust, and Dustin was hearing this now. Dustin would shoot off his mouth to Mike and Lucas at first opportunity, and they, in their overprotective fury, would descend on Auriga and remove Will from the Magi. Will wasn't having that.

"I'm doing fine, Demetrius," he said. "I'm happy in the Magi."

Demetrius nodded absently and turned to look over the city ruins. He stayed quiet for a couple minutes. "I hate the outside," he said finally, "but every once in a while, I like this view from the top. All this emptiness. And a reminder of what we once were."

Will waited, unsure of what to say.

"You were a surface dweller in your world," said the priest.
"Underground life must be quite an adjustment."

What's eating at him? Whatever the priest wanted to discuss, it wasn't Will's welfare or fresh air.

Demetrius went on before getting a response: "I try to imagine Cynidicea when it was up here under the sky. The glory days. I guess most places in the world are still like that." He looked at Will. "What about where you're from? Are there underground cities in your world? Anything like our Lost City?"



"Not many, I don't think," said Will. "But there's this place in the middle of Turkey, where, like, twenty-thousand people lived underground. Like, for centuries, until recently. But you can visit them and see the chapels and schools and stables. And other rooms."

"Twenty-thousand?" said Demetrius. "Fascinating." He sounded anything but fascinated. "I'm sure you must miss the open sky. And I'm sorry if this fucking place feels like a fucking prison."

Will took a deep breath. "I miss being outdoors. I really miss bike riding. But even if I had a bike here, I couldn't ride it in the desert."

"What's a 'bike'?" asked the priest.

Will stopped to think how "bike" had rolled off his tongue in the alien language. It had come out as an invented word. "It's a thing you ride with two wheels. It has pedals. And there are brakes -"

"I see," said Demetrius, cutting him off.

"I've gotten used to the underground," said Will. "It's not so bad."

"Well, you don't have much choice. So there's no sense complaining."

"I wasn't com -"

"And if our food still upsets your bowels, you'll just have to choke that down too."

Will didn't know how to react to this. He waited as the priest started pacing, clearly troubled by something. Demetrius went to the edge of the pyramid again and stood looking out, with his hands on his hips. He stood like that for a long time.

"Demetrius?" said Will. "Is something bothering you?"

The priest turned to face Will again, sighing. "I want to show you something." He removed a parchment from his tunic. "This is a letter written to Keldor."

Keldor. The chief mage before Auriga. He had vanished mysteriously seven months ago and still hadn't been found. He was presumed dead.

Demetrius continued: "It's from one of the mages in our stronghold. His name was Sinbar. This letter from Sinbar was never sent. He died from poisoning, probably by Zargonites. About a month before Keldor disappeared. We found the letter just a few days ago." He held it out to Will. "Read it. I'd like your opinion of it."

Will took the parchment, flabbergasted that Demetrius was bringing him in on something like this. The handwriting on it was sloppy but legible:

Keldor,

Get thy uppity arse down here, soon's you're able. Things be not as they seemed. The Eye and Hand be on the Isle, not the Catacombs. At Vark's Ring, if thee can believe it.

Regards to the Magi, and a pox on Jess if she be refusin to spread herself for thee.

- Sinbar

He read it multiple times, struggling through the archaic grammar. "The Isle" almost certainly had to be the Isle of Death - the only island in the city, and which every Cynidicean refused to set foot on. "Vark's Ring" was apparently a site on the Isle. "The Eye and Hand" were - what? Magic artifacts of some kind? The last sentence made no sense to him. Jess was one of the Magi in the temple. Her bunk was two beds down from the one he'd slept in before being gifted with his private room. She was a nice person and Will liked her. He took a dim view of anyone calling down disease on her.

"The last bit's not important," said Demetrius, as if reading his mind. "It's the stuff before."

Will looked up. "I don't understand most of this. What's the Eye and Hand that are supposed to be on the island? What's Vark's Ring?"

"The Eye and Hand of Gaius," said Demetrius. "Two artifacts that the cults would kill for. Some say they're cursed, but that the powers they grant are so great as to make the curses worth it. This letter implies that Sinbar discovered their location. Up until now it's been assumed that the Eye and Hand were somewhere deep in the Catacombs. The lich Gaius is entombed down there, but anyone who goes too deeply into the Catacombs never comes out again. Vark's Ring is the ring of stone arches at the isle's center."

"Aren't there a lot of undead on the island?" asked Will. In Mike's game, he, Lucas, and Dustin hadn't gone out to the isle, but they'd heard the rumors.

"Yes," said the priest. "But no one knows what kind. The island is only a hundred feet across, maybe a little more, so gods only know where all the undead rest. Probably in underground caves. When the Cynidiceans first built the Lost City, they dug up all the dead bodies in the areas they were clearing out, burned them, and reburied the ashes on the island. Not

long after came the undead, and no one is really sure how, except that the ashes must have had something to do with it."

"And so the Eye and Hand are at this ring of stone arches, surrounded by undead?"

"It would appear," said Demetrius. "If this letter can be trusted."

"You don't?"

Dustin's face took on a vexed expression. "I don't believe Sinbar wrote this letter."

"I'm lost."

"So am I," said Demetrius.

"Well... how many people talk like this? In my three months here, I've never heard anyone speak with 'thee's and 'thy's'."

"Oh, it *sounds* perfectly like Sinbar. He was raised to speak that way by his deranged mother."

"Then what's the problem?"

"It's not Sinbar's handwriting. One of our people found this letter in the corner of the trash storage. Which means that it's been there since Sinbar disappeared - eight or nine months ago. Which I find hard to believe. The letter was given to Raen and he called in me and Shira to discuss it. Even aside from the astonishing revelation about the Eye and Hand, it seemed fishy to me."

"You said Sinbar died from poisoning? From Zargonites?"

"Zargonites is our best guess. I was dead during this time, of course, so I had no idea what was going on. When I was dead, Sinbar and two other people in the stronghold were poisoned by a blackface mushroom that somehow got in the food supply. Everyone presumed the Zargonites were behind it. It's a common tactic of theirs."

"When did Keldor disappear?" asked Will.

"About a month after the poisoning incident. This letter would seem to confirm what Auriga told me on your first day here: that Keldor was after something in the Catacombs."

"The Eye and Hand of Gaius," said Will.

"Which I also don't buy," said the priest. "Keldor wasn't nearly experienced enough - or stupid enough - to go after artifacts like that on his own, or with someone like Sinbar. So I told Raen to fetch one of the mages who had worked closely with Sinbar, copying scrolls. We showed him the letter."

"Forged?" asked Will.

Demetrius nodded. "The mage swore up and down this wasn't Sinbar's handwriting. So unless Sinbar was possessed, he didn't write this letter."

"I'm still lost. What kind of opinion do you want from me?"

"You've played scenarios like this, back home in your games. You're a prodigy in our world, being showered with special privileges. Start earning them. I'm asking for your counsel."

Start earning them? That wasn't fair. "Demetrius... I don't know what to say. If Sinbar didn't write the letter, then you're saying it was planted?"

"I believe so, yes."

"How could I guess who did that?"

"I'm not asking you to identify the forger. We're not going to solve this mystery standing up here today. I'm asking you what should be done with what we know."

"Have you or Raen told Auriga about this?" asked Will.

"Not yet. But I'll be doing that as soon as we finish our talk."

"Well... do you think he wrote the letter?"

"It crossed my mind," said Demetrius. "But I find it hard to believe. If he's the forger it would mean that he's playing a very deep game within the Magi community."

"That's... possible," said Will. Or was it? Auriga was mean and petty, but this letter involved murder, disappearing acts, and conspiracies.

"I've suspected his involvement in Keldor's disappearance ever since I returned to life in Dustin's body."

"Well, if that's true..." said Will. *Come on, think.* "Then Auriga was after Keldor's position as chief mage. Keldor had to be removed. Keldor was never interested in any magic artifacts or a suicide mission into the Catacombs."

Demetrius kept nodding. "Go on."

"Keldor was just... in the way." *Blocking Auriga's climb to power.* "Auriga would never have become chief mage with Keldor holding the title."

"Good. Which means?"

"Which means what?" asked Will.

"If Keldor never had any sights on the Eye and Hand of Gaius, then what does that say about Sinbar?"

"He didn't either," said Will. "They were never working together on some mission like that."

"And yet he's no longer around either."

"But he was poisoned. And not just him, but two others. Were they mages too?"

"One of them," said the priest. "The other was a citizen. They all ate the same product - a dried fruit - that had been laced with the blackface mushroom."

"That's different from Keldor. You never even found his body. Do you think Auriga was behind the poisoning incident?"

"If he was - and/or if he's the forger of this letter - then, as I said, he would be playing a very deep game."

Will was straining to keep up. "Someone wants the Magi to think that the Eye and Hand of Gaius are at the island."

"Yes."

"Even though they're not."

"Why do you say that?" asked the priest.

"We just determined it."

"No, we determined that Keldor and Sinbar had no interest or involvement in them. So someone is now using Keldor and Sinbar - who are conveniently dead - to wave the Eye and Hand under our noses. Maybe it is smoke; maybe it's bullshit; maybe it's true. What we know is that the forger wants the Magi to think they are there."

Will felt a chill go through him. "So it's a trap. Whether or not the artifacts are really there."

Demetrius smiled. "Someone either desperately wants the Magi to retrieve these items, or someone - equally desperately - wants to send the Magi on a suicide errand."

Will shook his head. "I can't offer much beyond that."

"Nor can I. But I wanted to bounce this off you before bringing the matter to Auriga, which is what Raen sent me here for. You spend more time with Auriga than anyone. What does your gut say? About him being the forger - or at least being the one who orchestrated the forging of this letter?"

Will remembered his fall two days ago. His muscles failing. His feet out of step. His hands shaking. The wall flashing by. His rescue - and his rescuer's sneer.

Jesus, he's a monster.

Sweat broke out over Will's skin. "I'd say," he answered slowly, "that anything is possible with Auriga."

"Thank you. I take your opinion seriously. And now the difficult task lies before me, when we go back and I talk to him."

"So why tell him?" asked Will.

"He's the Chief Mage! The second in command of our community. Raen leads the stronghold, and Auriga leads the temple. When Raen makes a decision like this, Auriga has to be involved."

"What decision?" asked Will, fearing the answer.

"We're going to the Isle. To get the Eye and Hand - if they're there."

"You're going to walk into the trap?"

"No choice," said Demetrius. "Raen, Shira, and I agreed. If we can get the Eye and Hand of Gaius, the Magi could tip the balance of power. The Zargonites wouldn't rest so easy anymore."

A part of Will felt excited. This was a classic D&D quest; a hunt for legendary artifacts. The other part said this mission was crazy. "What exactly do the Eye and Hand of Gaius do?"

"No one knows exactly," said Demetrius. "In order to be used, they have to replace a missing eye or hand on a person's body. And it has to be two different people. If one person were to bind himself to both the Eye and Hand, he would die instantly - the power would be unendurable. And once someone is bound to the Eye or Hand, it's for life. They're supposed to be impossible to remove without killing the person."

Will was aghast. "You're saying that you need to rip out one of your eyes or chop off one of your hands to use these things?"

The priest smiled grimly. "The price of power."

"But what do they *do*?"

"The Eye is supposed to grant visions of near omniscience. And the ability to kill creatures just by looking at them."

Holy shit.

"The Hand is supposed to make a warrior nearly invincible."

"Wow."

The priest nodded. "So you understand the Magi's interest. If we had the Eye and Hand of Gaius, the Zargonites would have cause to fear us. So would Zargon himself."

"Maybe," said Will, feeling skeptical. "But there are no warriors in the Usamigaran community. Who would wield the Hand?"

"Well, yeah. I've been thinking about that."

"I don't know, Demetrius. In our D&D games, if there was even a chance something was cursed, I didn't touch it with a ten-foot pole."

"This is no game, Will. We're fighting for our survival. I'm aware of the risks, as are Raen and Shira. We didn't decide this lightly."

"Well, I hope it goes well for you. Who would be the ones to go on this quest?"

"That's what I need to discuss with Auriga."

"Do you think he'll volunteer himself?"

The cleric smiled. "If he did, that would, at the very least, mean that he believes the artifacts are on the Isle. But I don't see him agreeing to put himself in that kind of danger."

Will nodded. He looked out over the ruins and blinding sand. The heat was becoming brutal. It had to be over a hundred degrees. He didn't care. Being outside was a rare treat.

"So tell me, Spider Child," said Demetrius, changing the subject, "what new spells are you learning?"

They stayed and talked that way for a few minutes more. Finally the heat was too much, and they started to go back. Demetrius was on top of the ladder inside the statue when Will thought of something.

"Hey, Demetrius."

The priest paused on the rung, looking at him.

"Was Keldor really 'uppity'? The letter called him that."

Demetrius laughed. "Funny how you ask. He sure as hell was. Keldor could be mighty condescending. But he was a very good man. Why?"

"I don't know," said Will. "But it seems like a small detail that makes the letter sound genuine. You know, like it's really from Sinbar."

"That's very perceptive of you. But for that very reason, it's the kind of detail a good forger would want to include. To make it look real. That's why he also included the extraneous bit about getting laid."

"Getting laid?"

"Come on. You need to get back to your studies. And I have a hard afternoon ahead of me."

He went down the ladder, and Will followed.

Chapter Eight:

Maiden of Madarua

Mike was out of control and it felt *good*.

He slammed Jilanka against the altar and tore her shirt, working over her mounds as if he'd never seen the female form. And in a way he hadn't. Not like this, souped up on drugs that had no business mixing together. Raging he slapped her; and then shredded her tunic completely. Then he threw his face into it, devouring her, running his tongue along breasts he saw as the size of mountains.

God, what world am I in?

He boiled with desires a mind wasn't made for. Everything about Jilanka was dialed up by five, then twenty, then impossibly more. The shroom combo had pushed sex into the fourth dimension. He roared with libidinous fury and threw her on top of the altar, and she bellowed affirmatives while cursing him. She tore at his pants, promising castration if he didn't make this good - and he tore hers right off. She was wetter than a swamp after days of rain, and the sight of that put Mike over: he shot over her stomach and fell onto her, devouring, devouring her again...

His head was yanked up and she clobbered him hard. Then she reached for his nethers and soon had him building to another climax. She forced him inside her - and Mike went off the charts, slamming and pounding her in a humping fury. He came but stayed hard; and came again. His thrusts never stopped. He bit into her shoulder, and came again. Her legs had his torso in a vise. She shouted his worthlessness, screamed his praises, and came six, seven, eight times. He yelled and kept yelling - unbelieving this was *life* - as he fucked the proverbial living shit out of Jilanka Maw for fifteen minutes more.

Pinning this girl on the altar of some unnamed forgotten deity was fitting, considering how unspeakable their union was. They were forbidden lovers in a forbidden room - a temple that had been abandoned ages ago. Tattered tapestries hung from the walls. Days ago there had been evil-looking relics on the altar before Jilanka cleared it for her and Mike's fuck-fest. A rotten cloth, curved candlesticks, an offering bowl, and a holy symbol looking like a demon - all these had gone crashing to the floor, and were still there now. This was their fourth fuck in the pyramid, in this shunned room where no one would intrude to see blasphemous lovers - Brother and Maiden - hump each other frantically as if possessed by demons themselves.

They were possessed by a near equivalent - a mushroom combination that blew their minds sky high. And without the perils of addiction or prolonged tripping. It was Mike's first time on the drugs. He'd drunk the kool-aid. He could have gone wild like this for hours more.

When he spent himself again - he was dry ejaculating now, having cum way too many times - he realized she was lying under him motionless, regarding him with amusement. *She switched off*. He tried to do the same. He moaned into her neck, wanting to pound her more. He didn't know how to switch off.

"Just tell your mind to stop it, and it will," she said.

And sure enough, it was easy as that. The world quickened and caught up; his libido went to sleep. He returned to himself and lay in her embrace.

They stayed on the altar like that for a while, he in her arms, as she ran her fingers through his hair. Black shaggy hair that she loved to play with. Hers, like any Cynidicean's, was snow white.

"Jesus Christ," he said softly. "Don't tell me anyone ever had sex like we just did."

Her fingers massaged his head. "Anyone who's eaten sex craze has had more and better. We didn't go for very long. And who is this 'Jesus Christ' you keep mentioning? Is he a god in your world?"

"Sort of," said Mike.

"Gorm's your god now," she said.

Your sarcasm is noted. And Gorm is a shit name for swearing. Lucas said things like "Gorm's bolts", "Gorm damn you", and "For Gorm's sake", but Mike couldn't let go of Jesus when it came to profanity.

"And Gorm doesn't approve you fucking anyone, especially a Maiden," she said.

"Hypocrite," said Mike. "How does Madarua feel about you fucking a Brother?"

"She doesn't give a filthy shit," said Jilanka. "It's her Maidens who have that hangup. *The Madaruan Circle* allows for sex with followers of any creed. The taboo against Brothers is an oral tradition from recent centuries."

"Well, excuse the fuck out of me. That's probably the same for us."

"Yes and no," said Jilanka. "It's true that your clan's dislike of us is from recent centuries. After Zargon came and the cults started mistrusting each other. But celibacy is holy writ for you guys. It's always been that way. *The Creed of Gorm* says that his closest disciples can't have sex with anyone, whether Maiden or not. Don't you know your own holy book?"

"Of course I do!"

"And don't you think what it says is stupid?"

"All religion is stupid," he said. "I mean... all religions have stupid requirements. We have celibacy. I'm sure you have something just as stupid."

She ran her tongue over his face. "I'm sure you're stupid and don't have any idea what you're talking about. In fact, I think you're the stupidest shit alive." She started rubbing his balls.

"Knock it off." He pulled her off him. "I have to go." He sat up and swung his legs over the altar.

She yanked him back into her embrace and kissed him roughly. Then she had him on his back again, and was on top readying for another assault. She had reactivated the drug effect.

"No," he said, trying to disengage. "Come on, Jilanka, I have -"

She struck his face and began thrusting over him. She didn't need him erect inside her; this was the sex craze drug. She could have ten orgasms without even touching herself.

Mike had two options at this point. Wait out her rape, or reactivate the drug so that he could match her physically in speed and reflex. But if he did the second he'd be sex-crazed again too - and a most willing partner. Either way, he wasn't leaving the room right now.

They're going to come looking for me.

He sighed and switched on.

Over a half hour later they were putting their clothes back on. He had destroyed her tunic but she didn't care. She had spares. She put on her chain mail without a shirt. She was beautiful - tomboyishly in the way that Mike liked.

If any Brother or Maiden saw them like this, their careers serving the old gods would be over at once. The Brothers took their oaths of celibacy seriously, and while the Maidens were under no such vows, they despised the Brothers as a matter of principle - oral tradition or not. Mike and Jilanka's relationship was a grievous offense on both sides. To say nothing of their drug consumption: that too was forbidden. In the three cults, only the Magi were allowed to use mushrooms.

He had fallen hard for Jilanka. The past five days had been his wildest if not best in the Lost City, and the guilt was eating at him. He'd thought he was happy in the Brotherhood; that he and Lucas were partners for life. They were best friends sworn into the best cult. But his few days with Jilanka had called those assumptions into question.



If her accounts of the Maidens could be trusted, they didn't seem so bad; in some ways perhaps better than the Brothers. Authoritarian but less so; making room for more freedoms. Mike found himself angered by some of the limitations placed on women in this world (except in the flaming libertarian Usamigaran community). He'd been blind to it because it didn't affect him, but now he saw things through the eyes of his girlfriend.

And to her credit, she didn't glorify the Maidens. Jilanka Maw was no blind follower. She was loyal to Pandora - Madarua's Champion - but only up to a point; she ultimately did as she pleased. Her outrageous affair with Brother Mike proved that.

He said good-bye to her and left the abandoned temple, and went down the diagonal corridor to the door that summoned the revolving passage. Jilanka would follow only after he used the passage; they couldn't chance being seen together. Mike pressed the button on the wall, and the passage moved on its turntable to align with the door. Mike opened it and went inside. The door at the other end led to the Brothers' temple. Mike was due there in less than an hour for military drills. He selected a button from the column of eight, the one that made the passage align with the north-south axis. The grinding noises began as the turntable moved. When the passage stopped he opened the door to the southern corridor that led upstairs to Tier 2. He began hurrying, wanting to get back to Lucas.

He heard footsteps ahead around the corner, and felt a flash of guilt. *Are her juices still on me? Do they smell?* The figure turned the corner.

It was Lucas.

He stopped when he saw Mike and stared. Mike went red, feeling another wave of guilt.

"Where the hell have you been?" demanded Lucas.

"Nowhere," said Mike feebly. "I just wanted a walk."

"Well you're walking the wrong way," said Lucas. "We're due in the temple. Now."

"What?" That wasn't right. Their exercises didn't start for an hour. His fuck-fest had gone on for too long, but not that long. The slow-time drug affected one's perception of time, but he and Jilanka had gauged their activity with that in mind. Mike knew what time it was.

"You heard me," said Lucas. "Kanadius has some big announcement. It's a mandatory meeting. Everyone's down here already. I've been looking all over for you upstairs, even outside. Let's go."

He followed Lucas back to the revolving passage. They could hear rotating noises and the door wouldn't open; the passage was in use.

Jilanka. She was returning to the Maiden barracks. Mike's heart raced. *She and I are going to get caught someday.*

The grinding stopped, and Lucas pressed the door button again. When it lined up, they opened the door and went inside, selecting the northwest-southeast axis - exactly where Mike had just come from. The passage shifted and stopped, and Mike looked at the northwest door. *We were just fucking down there. On the altar of a demon. I'm still on the drugs now. What has my life become?* He and Lucas left through the southeast door.

They walked down the corridor to their temple. All the Brothers were there, glaring over their shoulders at Mike as he came in after Lucas. They turned back to Kanadius, who stood in front of the altar. Mike prayed the drugs wouldn't reactivate during this meeting. What would happen if they did? Would he start masturbating on the floor, or try raping one of his fellow Brothers? Jilanka's voice came back to him: *Once you have the technique, it's easy. On and off as you please. The drugs obey.*

"Nice of you to join us, Mike," said Kanadius. The Grand Master was plainly furious.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Mike, standing rigidly at attention.

Kanadius began. "I have big news for all of us. Momentous news. I spent a late night yesterday over in the Magi sector. We all have a low opinion of the Magi. They're lawless sorcerers who care little for the welfare of others. But they do serve the old ways, and they hate Zargonites as much as we do. Auriga invited me to hear a proposal. They're sending a group of Magi to the Isle of Death. And they want some of us to join them."

Mike saw the shock on the Brothers' faces. No one went to the Isle. No one came back when they did.

"The Magi have become aware of something hidden on the Isle - or which may be hidden there. It could be a false lead. But it's something that has been long desired by the old cults: the Eye and Hand of Gaius."

There was muttering now; reactions of awe and disbelief. Mike couldn't remember anything in his gaming module about an eye or a hand. He looked over at Lucas, who shook his head.

"The Eye and the Hand are supposedly resting at Vark's Ring - the archways that some say have strange powers. I think you all know what this means. Except Lucas and Mike. Gaius was the twelfth Cynidicean king who reigned over 1300 years ago; he was mighty and powerful, a lot like the Nithian god-kings of old. Before he died he preserved his left eye and right hand and gave them incredible powers - powers that well could turn the tide of our war against the Zargonites. Or at least help us a great

deal. They're also cursed, but no one knows exactly how. The Magi are proposing that the Eye go to them, and the Hand to the Brothers. The Hand is supposed to make a warrior nearly undefeatable. The Eye is designed for a mage's use."

The room erupted in fury. The proposal was outrageous. The news was either too good to be true, or too perilous if it was true. A lich was a lich and couldn't be trusted. The Brothers began hotly objecting.

"*Shut up!*" yelled Kanadius.

The room quieted at once.

"When I want your worthless knee-jerk reactions, I'll ask for them! We are *accepting* this joint mission. I thought very hard about it last night, and that was - is - my decision. If any of you object, then feel free to leave this pyramid and walk your spinelessness out into the desert. Right now. Anyone?"

No one spoke.

The Grand Master went on: "I saw the impossible happen three months ago, as did you all. What seems ungodly and evil is not always so." He looked at Lucas and pointed. "Gorm's Chosen stands among us. We're unable to agree on what that means, but we agree that Lucas Sinclair is privileged in Gorm's eyes and made for holy purpose. If a zoombie can offer the Brotherhood salvation, then who is to say a lich cannot? The legends surrounding the Eye and Hand are murky and conflicted. What matters is our eternal war against Zargon. Worn by a Brother, the Hand of Gaius could wreak devastation on the Zargonites."

He paused to let it all sink in. There was some murmuring, mostly of approval. Mike's mind was reeling. He was clueless about these artifacts. He wondered about Will and how much he knew about this joint mission. Auriga must have briefed the Magi by now.

Kanadius fixed his audience with a glare. "So I ask you, Brothers: *Are we as one?*"

Twelve Brothers, including Mike and Lucas, thundered: "*Yes, sir!*"

"*Will we aid the Magi in their quest?*"

"*Yes, sir!*"

"*Will we hold the Magi to their word, and to their end of the deal?*"

"*Yes, sir!*"

"*And if we obtain it, will we use the Hand with the grace and humility becoming us, not for power's sake, but to crush the Zargonites and return Cynidicea to the ways of the old gods?*"

"*Yes! Yes! Yes, sir!*"

"Very good!" said the Grand Master. "You inspire me, Brothers. The mission to the Isle departs early tomorrow morning. Training exercises are cancelled today. I need five volunteers for the mission. There will be five Magi as well. Lucas, you and Mike are volunteering. So I need three more. Before any of you volunteer, are there questions?"

A warrior named Dracut immediately raised his hand.

"What?" snapped Kanadius.

"Who is in charge of the mission, sir?" asked Dracut.

"We agreed on a joint leadership," said Kanadius. "Auriga will command his people, and Lucas will command the Brothers. All decisions will have to be agreed upon by Auriga and Lucas."

Lucas cleared his throat. "Sir?"

"What?"

"I'm humbled by your choice of me, but I think it's appropriate that you lead the Brothers. You're our leader. Like Auriga leads the Magi."

"And as your leader," said Kanadius, "I delegate as I please. Do you agree with that?"

"Yes, sir, of course, but -"

"You are Gorm's Chosen. The Isle of Death is plagued with your kind. For a mission like this, surely, you are the one to lead us."

Mike almost laughed out loud. Lucas was no undead and he never had been. The Brotherhood's resurrection-phobia was superstitious crap.

Lucas inclined his head. "As you wish, sir."

"I do wish. And you, Mike, will back your friend in every way and guard him with your life."

"Of course, sir," said Mike.

Another hand shot up. A Brother named Djibor.

"What?"

"Sir, the Isle is crawling with undead and no one ever returns. We're not cowards. But neither are we suicidal."

"There will be a Usamigaran priest on the Magi team: Demetrius Rhone. Many of you know this priest was killed by his Zargonite brother well over a year ago, and he returned to life three months ago in the body of an alien - Lucas and Mike's friend. Demetrius has a powerful medallion that can keep undead at bay, though it only works in a fifteen-foot radius. Still, he's a powerful priest, and he can turn undead and use other prayers. We will also be sending one of our own priests from the Gormish stronghold: Atsu Horjei. Atsu is a high priest and will be very useful against any undead. So the team will consist of a total of five Magi, five Brothers, and two very powerful priests."

Djibor nodded and bowed.

"And remember *The Creed*, Brothers. Dying on a holy quest guarantees your salvation. But as Brother Djibor points out, these are undead. Avoid being touched by the Isle's inhabitants at all costs. If you're lucky, you die for good. Only Brother Lucas has been otherwise blessed in this regard."

Another hand went up. Mike winced. It was Azariah, one of the fanatics.

"What?" said Kanadius.

"Sir!" Azariah stepped forward boldly. "It is my contention that sharing command in this venture is an affront to our deity. Lucas Sinclair is Gorm come again. That he should defer in any way to the snake Auriga is an unbearable offense. *Sir*."

The other two fanatics, Moser and Hyme, nodded approvingly. Everyone else was shocked and held their breath.

Kanadius looked at Azariah and then marched straight up to him. He swung his fist and Azariah went sprawling. A tooth clattered on the floor, and the warrior spat blood.

Mike's heart raced. *The man is in his sixties and he's a fucking bull.*

Kanadius looked down at the warrior. "Question my judgment again with that kind of contempt, and the desert will be your reward. Do you hear me?"

On the floor Azariah nodded, holding his bleeding mouth.

"On your feet," said the Grand Master.

The warrior stood - and Kanadius slugged him again. Just as hard. There were gasps as Azariah collapsed with a broken nose.

Next to Mike, Lucas was keeping cool, but barely. He didn't like being the cause of this.

"Now you can get up," said Kanadius. "And look smart."

Azariah stood proudly, and shouted, spitting blood: "*Yes, sir!*"

"Mind yourself, Azariah," warned the Grand Master. "And remember me kindly in your prayers."

"*Yes, sir!*" said the fanatic.

"Anyone else?" asked Kanadius.

Mike was rankled by something. He raised his hand.

"What?"

"Sir, what about the Maidens?"

Kanadius was nonplussed. "What about them?"

"Why are the Magi willing to team up with us, but not them? They represent the old gods as much as we do."

"Gaius left two artifacts from his body, not three," said Kanadius.

"Right, but why us and not them?" asked Mike. "The Maidens are warriors like us. They could use the Hand."

The Grand Master laughed uproariously. A few Brothers laughed as well.

Mike frowned. "Did I say something funny?"

He heard Lucas hiss through his teeth. *You better watch yourself. You could lose a mouthful and be sent into the desert.*

"Yes, Mike, you said something very funny. Your alien otherness excuses you, perhaps. Women are not true warriors. They can aspire to be second-class fighters at best. That's what the Maidens are."

That rubbed Mike the wrong way. For the first time since Kanadius tried to have Lucas executed, he found himself furious with the Grand Master.

Kanadius went on: "As you hopefully know from your readings of *The Creed*, a woman's proper place is in the home - where she can wage war on dirt and house pests, and the pots and pans she's liable to burn."

Now everyone except Mike was laughing - even Lucas.

"It seems to me," said Mike recklessly, "that the Maidens have a history of kicking some serious ass. Yes, I read *The Creed*, but I read the history books you give us too."

The room went silent. Kanadius stared at Mike for a long time.

Dig yourself out. Right now.

Mike cleared his throat. "What I really mean, sir, is... yes, we know women are inferior" - he choked on the lie - "but the Magi don't believe that. As I understand it, they hate the Brothers and the Maidens for their authoritarianism, but to them the Maidens are the lesser evil. Why aren't they offering them the Hand of Gaius?"

Kanadius seemed to relax. "I see your question. The Magi are pragmatic above all. They claim to be egalitarian, but when push comes to shove, fantasies about feminine strength are suicidal. Do you really think they would entrust their safety to a bunch of women? The fact that they chose to ally with us just proves how hollow their rhetoric is about the equality of the sexes."

Mike doubted that was the right explanation, but he knew when to clam up. He bowed his head.

Another hand went up.

"What is it?" barked Kanadius.

A warrior named Gore spoke: "Sir, who will become the Hand's owner? Who among us will wield the Hand to our greatest victories?"

"Never mind that now," said Kanadius. "Let's actually obtain the Hand before we decide who is going to wield it. Remember, this may be a wild goose chase. The Magi aren't even sure the Eye and Hand are really on the Isle. It could be a trap we're walking into."

Mike wanted to know how the Hand was used. Was it a glove-like cover that went over someone's hand? And what about the Eye? Was it like a *gem of seeing*, that someone looked through - strapped over the user's eye?

"More questions?" No hands went up. "No? Good. Now we need our three volunteers besides Lucas and Mike. Raise your hand if you want to be considered for the mission."

All ten hands shot up.

Kanadius smiled. "My Brothers, you are worthy of your shoulder marks - each and every one of you. May Gorm's lightning bless you all. Stand forward when I call your name."

Mike knew what the Grand Master was going to do.

"Dracut!"

"Sir!"

The warrior who had first spoken stepped forward. Dracut was one of the four *moderates*, as Mike called the faction who believed Lucas to be a prophetic role model.

"Coval!"

"Sir!"

This was one of the three *militants*, who claimed that Lucas was indeed a prophetic role model, but that he was also destined to lead the Brothers as the next Grand Master.

"Azariah!"

"Sir!"

That surprised Mike. He thought Kanadius would choose either Moser or Hyme from the *fanatics* - those who believed that Lucas was actually Gorm himself - instead of the one who had just given him lip.

But on whole Kanadius had done as Mike predicted. He'd chosen a warrior from each of the three factions that disputed Lucas's role. *Very shrewd*. He was a hardass but he didn't play favorites.

Everyone seemed pleased as Kanadius adjourned the meeting. "The five of you will rise early tomorrow morning and depart to the city. The others will be busy today, preparing food and travel stuff for the five volunteers. You will meet the Magi down at the lake. Our priest Atsu will be there already. Auriga and Demetrius are leasing a boat, which should be

ready by the time you arrive. If any of you need to see me today for any reason, I'll be in my chamber. May Gorm bless you all."

The Brothers drew their swords and cried a salute as Kanadius left the room. When he was gone they began nattering about the mission.

"Pushing your luck," said Lucas quietly.

Mike didn't need recriminations now, especially not from his best friend. "It isn't right," he said.

"What isn't?" asked Lucas, exasperated.

"That the Maidens are being left out."

"Seriously, Mike?"

"All the cults are important, Lucas. Not just the Brothers."

"That's sure not how you felt as a dungeon master. We chose right. And Kanadius is right. The Magi know they need the Brothers if they want to get rid of Zargon."

Kanadius is wrong. Whatever reason the Magi had to ally with the Brothers, Mike was sure it had nothing to do a grudging acknowledgment of Brotherhood superiority.

"Anyway," said Lucas, "you want to stay and spar?"

"Hell, yeah," said Mike, "Whup your ass."

In sword matches, it was usually the other way around: Mike was good, but Lucas beat him three times out of four.

The Brothers began leaving the temple. Azariah, Moser, and Hyme bowed to Lucas on their way out. As soon as Mike and Lucas had the room to themselves, they went at each other hard. Their blades clashed and their blood sang. On this they agreed: sword fighting was an art, and worth living for.

It was a close match, but Lucas won.

That night they were on the altar again. Tasting forbidden flesh, riding forbidden highs. Seen by no one, save a forbidden deity who had faded from the collective memory. There was power in obscurity, and Mike wondered if he and Jilanka were better off kneeling here and telling Gorm and Madarua to go to hell.

"I wish you could meet them," she said.

They'd switched off after an excessive marathon of unbridled sex, and now lay naked in each others arms.

"Me too," he said, opening his eyes. He'd started to drift. "They'd hate me though."

Jilanka ran her tongue over his cheek. "You'd be surprised. I think they'd see you for what you are. Certainly Pandora would."

She won't get off this. In the five days they'd known each other, not one passed by without her insisting he didn't belong in the Brotherhood. Maybe this room really was for him. "I love the Brotherhood," he said. "I just wish they'd accept the Maidens - and same for you guys."

"We're not guys," she said, "and the Brothers will never accept anything outside their narrow *Creed*."

"Your *Circle* has just as many problems as our *Creed*."

"Mike, we reject the chauvinism of the Brothers, the deceptions of the Magi, and the evil of the Zargonites. How can you have a problem with that? We want a society with law and order, but one that gives strength to women."

"You mean *only* women," said Mike. "I'm not wild about the Magi, but at least they stand for true equality. There are men and women in the Magi. You Maidens prohibit men from becoming full members of your community."

"That's a temporary state," she said, "but a necessary one, in order to balance the Brotherhood. Especially since they have the most influence."

"Your 'temporary state' had lasted for centuries," said Mike.

"Tell that to Kanadius," she retorted.

"So your dream for a restored Cynidicea includes men as full members?" he pressed.

"Our dream for the restored kingdom is that all Cynidiceans can do what they want with their lives."

That wasn't exactly a yes. "Including drugs?" he asked. "You're as much a heretic as I am."

"Of course," she said. "I'm not saying the Maidens are perfect. I believe my sisters can be moved to accept mushrooms once they realize addiction can be avoided."

"Dream on," said Mike. "The fact is that only the Usamigarans are okay with mushrooms, and only they practice true equality." *We should both be Magi, like Will.*

"The Usamigarans are anarchists," said Jilanka. "Their history is saturated in dirty back-handed opportunism with little regard for compassion. Is that the kind of society you want?"

"No," said Mike. "I'm just -"

"Run by mages and thieves and assassins?"

"No, but -"

"You need warriors in charge to have justice," said Jilanka.

"I agree with that!" said Mike. "I'm just playing devil's advocate, because you make the Maidens seem much better than they are."

"No," she said. "It's that I make the Brothers seem as bad as they really are. They're bigoted against women, and even worse against homos. Their law codes are inflexible - sometimes more tyrannical than just. They are ultimately what *male* warriors can *only* be: deficient and unenlightened warriors."

"Jesus, you're so full of shit," said Mike.

"You know I'm right."

The truth was that he didn't know what to believe anymore. His past five days with this girl had upended his rosy view of the Brotherhood. Practically, for one: he liked fucking her, especially on drugs. But also philosophically: now that he had a girlfriend, *The Creed's* bigoted teachings were more than just intellectual exercises; they affected someone he loved.

Loved?

It was the first time he allowed himself to think he was actually in love with Jilanka. She had raped him (more than once), and that was hardly the foundation of a healthy relationship. But he *was* in love with her. His first time in love. He'd skipped from twelve years old to twenty-two and never known the heartbreaks of teen affairs. Romance was uncharted waters. He was clueless how to navigate it.

All things considered, he was probably in for disaster.

"I suppose you're always right," he said, deadpan.

"*Damn* right," she said, disengaging from his embrace. She repositioned herself to straddle him. She had switched the drug effect back on.

"Wait a minute," he gasped.

She paused over him. "What?"

He came so close at that moment to telling her about the mission to the Isle the next morning. About the Eye and Hand of Gaius. Then he thought of something else. *No*, he scolded himself, appalled by his perfidious idea. Then: *yes*, knowing it was right.

"Quit stalling," she said.

"Not stalling," he said. "Just switching on." Which he did. This was his second time taking the sex craze/slow-time drug combo. And for tomorrow's mission, he had quite a different combo planned. He had arranged it that afternoon with Demetrius.

He thought of that combo - of the dead speaking and life disembodied - as Jilanka abused him and bruised him, and he cried and came and then again before working her over just the same.

Chapter Nine:

The Isle

The island rose like an awful promise. A cairn of old rock, no more than a hundred twenty feet in diameter; a mound of homage to some terrible deed. Remarkably small, and yet reputedly more fatal than any place in the city. The longboat kept its distance as the crew watched and waited. Demetrius stood in the prow, readying himself for his task.

Mike hung back in the stern, feeling ruin close in on him. The whole mission seemed foolish now that they were here. He hadn't risked his life like this since crawling the lower pyramid tiers. That first day - the last in Hawkins, Indiana - was an eternity ago. He and his friends had been twelve. Now only one of them was. Mike looked down at that person standing next to him. William Byers was the only member of the quest who appeared moderately calm. If anything happened to him, Mike would kill Auriga before Lucas could.

The twelve of them had assembled at the lakeside only minutes ago. The Usamigarans were six: Auriga (leading), Demetrius (priest), Shanti, Kemse, Lija, and Will. The Gormish also six: Lucas (leading), Atsu (priest), Mike, Dracut, Coval, and Azariah. Five Magi and a priest; five Brothers and a priest. The boat required four rowers. Lucas had assigned Dracut, Coval, Azariah, and himself. Azariah had strenuously objected to Lucas rowing: he was a deity, and a god did not deign to such tasks when he had others at his command. Mike should row, he said. Lucas reminded Azariah of *The Creed of Gorm*, which commanded even kings to assume servile roles - and as indeed Gorm had done as the first king of Cynidicea. Azariah had flushed red with shame and bowed to Lucas, accepting his chastisement.

"When will he start tripping?" asked Will quietly.

Mike watched Demetrius. "We'll soon find out."

Will looked up at him. "You never said how you learned about this trick."

"Nor will I," said Mike curtly. "You never said why a kid your age has a death wish. Now shut up."

"Sure Mike," said Will. "Whatever you say."

The question of Will's inclusion had almost killed the mission in its crib. Mike and Lucas had gone to the Magi yesterday in order to strategize with Auriga and Demetrius. When they entered Auriga's chamber and saw Will there, they exploded.

"What the hell is this?" Mike had shouted.

"This," said Auriga, "is my best student. I invited him to this meeting, and he will be joining our mission."

"Like hell he will!" said Lucas.

Auriga's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Watch yourself, warrior. You're a guest over here."

"He's a kid, Auriga," said Lucas, not intimidated by Auriga in the least. "He's not going, no matter how many walls he's climbed."

"You can talk to me like I'm here, Lucas," said Will.

Auriga placed a hand on Will's shoulder as he faced Lucas. "The decision of who represents the Magi rests with me. I don't run your house and you don't run mine."

Lucas shot back: "*No* decision regarding this mission can be made unless both you and I agree! Kanadius made that clear. Will's participation requires my assent. I don't give it."

Demetrius cleared his throat. "Can I offer an opinion?"

"No, you can't!" said Lucas.

"Well, I'm going to anyway," said the priest. "I would *respectfully* submit that excluding Will would be severely disrespectful to both him and the Magi community. Will has proven himself to be a talented mage, to the extent of earning his own personal bed chamber. Even you - Gorm's Chosen - share a room with Mike. The Magi love Will and have given him a special title. If Will is mature enough to have accomplished all this, then he's surely mature enough to be assigned whatever task any of his colleagues take on. Don't shame him by belittling him."

"Nice words, Demetrius," said Lucas, "but twelve years old is just that."

"Unfit for life-threatening missions," agreed Mike.

"Shut up, you guys!" yelled Will. "I'm going whether you like it or not!"

Well, well, thought Mike. *Will's grown some teeth.*

Lucas was shaking his head. "Don't get me wrong, Will. I'm proud of how far you've come in the Magi. I really am. But I'm not agreeing to this."

"I don't care if you agree or not," said Will. "You're not stopping me."

"Indeed," said Auriga. "I'll suspend the mission if you really want to push this, Lucas. Will has been appointed, and that's the end of it."

Lucas had furiously relented, not having much choice. He had bottled his rage for the duration of their two hour-long meeting, and when he and Mike returned to the Brothers' part of the tier, he seethed. In the revolving passage Mike asked him if he was okay. Lucas had finally answered:

"I'll be fine, Mike. You just watch over Will when we're at the Isle. Ignore what Kanadius said about protecting me. I've got every Brother yapping to be my personal bodyguard. Especially Azariah. If anything happens to Will, I'm going to kill both you and Auriga. Oh, and Demetrius too."

"Are you kidding?" said Mike. "I'm already on that. Your ass isn't worth protecting anyway."

"Can you believe that fucking snake?" said Lucas. "He all but admits we're walking into a trap, and he wants to take his precious Spider Child along for the ride. What the hell's so important about Will coming along?"

"Auriga is a slippery shit," said Mike. "It's not beyond him to risk the life of his favorite student just so he can show him off in a mission like this." They got off the revolving passage and headed up to their room on the second tier.

"You've been slippery yourself lately," said Lucas. "Don't think I'm blind to it."

"Excuse me?"

"All your disappearing acts this past week. And I don't buy for a moment - anymore than Demetrius did, I'm sure - that you just 'overheard' that explosive news about mushroom combinations."

"I'm telling you, Lucas, I was in the candle shop, and a customer was going on about it." Which was the truth: Mike and Jilanka had been shopping in that store on the day they met, when she explained the details of the drug combo that she had used to rape him in the alley.

"Yeah," said Lucas. "And where have you been all week? You're hardly ever in our room anymore."

"Lucas, I told you -"

"Are you doing drugs?" Lucas asked bluntly.

"No!" said Mike, flushing red.

"So then who knows if drug combinations are really safe or not," said Lucas. "Or if they can be switched on and off. Sounds like an urban legend. Demetrius is crazy to put it to the test tomorrow."

Now everyone in the boat watched Demetrius closely. The Usamigarans had hopeful and approving looks, the Gormish less so, believing drugs to be an abomination. Demetrius had eaten his mushrooms back on shore, as the drug effects took anywhere between ten to forty minutes to kick in. When this combo kicked in, it would produce some interesting results.

They were rare priestly mushrooms, seldom seen outside the Temple of Zargon, and almost never in the hands of anyone except a Zargonite priest. Raen, the high priest of Usamigaras, had obtained a few of them off the black market. It was time to put a couple of them to use. Last night Demetrius had told him what Mike said about shrooms being safe and convenient when used in combinations, and so Raen had given him two shrooms for the island mission: a grade-1 priestly and a grade-3 priestly.

A grade-1 priestly mushroom enabled the eater to speak with dead souls or with undead. There was plenty of both on the isle, and who knows what they might reveal to someone asking them questions. A grade-3 priestly mushroom gave one the astounding power to *spirit walk* - to leave his physical body and travel about invisibly; or to have, in other words, "out of body experiences". This was a perfect way of scouting the isle without setting foot on it - to get a peek at what was waiting there while everyone stayed safe in the boat.

Mike saw that Demetrius was staring out over the water. Lucas and Auriga stood close by him and Lucas asked him something. Demetrius nodded slowly. Then he looked back at Mike and beckoned him to the prow.

Mike swore. *What does he want? Just get on with it.* He went to the front of the boat and Will followed him. Will was under strict orders to stay close to Mike.

"Is it working?" asked Will when they got to the prow.

"Shit, is it working," said Demetrius. He looked a bit dazed.

"Well, get going then," said Mike.

"I already have," said Demetrius. "Or rather Dustin has."

"Say what?" asked Lucas.

"*Spirit walk* lets the spirit leave the body. This body, as you know, is being shared by two spirits. I'm sending Dustin's along. He asked me to this morning and I said yes. He wants to participate in the mission."

"Well good for Dustin," said Lucas. "He's earning his keep for a change."

"That's not fair," said Will.

"Hopefully he won't bungle the job," said Auriga. "Does he know what he's doing?"

"Dustin cast a spell that brought him and his friends to this world," said Demetrius. "Don't underestimate him. He knows to be thorough and search the whole island."

"Can you speak with any dead?" asked Lucas.

"Funny you ask," said Demetrius. "I need a dead body or an undead creature present to do that."

"Why is it funny I ask?" asked Lucas.

"Because this," said the priest.

Lucas's eyes widened. "Whoa," he said.

"What happened?" asked Auriga.

"Demetrius just spoke to me in my head," said Lucas.

"He has telepathy?" asked Mike.

Demetrius shook his head. "Not with anyone. Just the dead and the undead."

"What do you mean?" said Lucas. "I'm not - oh, please!"

The Gormish priest Atsu had been listening closely and joined the conversation at the prow. "Indeed, you *are* undead, Lucas. Just as your Brothers have told you all along. But you're not evil. Gorm has chosen you, as a zombie, for special purpose."

"Well, praise be to fucking Gorm," muttered Mike.

Atsu whirled on Mike. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," said Mike, cursing himself for the impious slip.

"Blasphemy will not be tolerated!" boomed the priest. "Gorm will not be mocked!"

"Relax, Atsu," said Lucas. "I'm sure Mike wishes to withdraw his vulgar remark and do whatever penance you prescribe." He was glaring at Mike.

Fuck both of you. "Yes, of course. I meant no disrespect to our god."

Atsu still looked affronted. "On your knees, Mike, and say the 'Our Judge' three times. And pray for the success of this mission as you atone for your impiety."

Mike knelt and began praying. Not for himself but Lucas. He didn't like the implications of the telepathic speech with Lucas. Or at least not from a mushroom that enabled communication with dead or undead. Mike had always thought the zombie doctrine - and the Brothers's phobia of resurrection - to be superstitious crap. And he knew Demetrius had thought it was silly too. He wondered what he thought about it now.

As he finished praying, Demetrius shouted to everyone on the boat: "He's back!"

Everyone faced front and paid attention.

"Listen up!" said Demetrius to the entire crew. "I'm turning this body over to Dustin Henderson, so that he can report directly what he has seen on the island. You all know the story of Dustin and how I came to possess his body. But most of you have never heard him speak. He has a peculiar sense of humor, so you might be offended. Dustin, the show is yours."

Dustin's eyes blinked rapidly and then Dustin was in control. "Well, all righty, everyone! It's a privilege to be on this mission with you. And I'll tell you that spirit-walking is one fucking hell of a trip. Jesus Christ. But I got to say this island's reputation is either a hoax, or the undead inhabitants are invisible. I've passed over every square foot of the damn place - looked down into caves, everywhere - and I can't spot a single creature. No skeletons, no zombies, no ghouls, nothing."

"No tombs anywhere?" asked Auriga.

"Nada," said Dustin. "The island is as barren as the desert surface."

"What about Vark's Ring?" asked Auriga.

They could see the ring of stone archways from where they were. They had stopped the boat about thirty feet from shore, and the archways were about forty feet inland. But no one could make out details or what was inside the ring.

"Well, this you're going to like," said Dustin. "Though maybe you shouldn't. Inside those archways is a stone altar. Guess what's on it?"

"The Eye and the Hand?" asked Auriga eagerly.

Dustin nodded.

"Are you serious?" said Lucas. "They're just lying there out in the open?"

"No shit," said Dustin. "I mean, this can't be a more obvious trap. I think we should turn the boat around and go home."

"Absolutely not," said Auriga. "We came for Gaius's artifacts and we're leaving with them."

"I agree," said Lucas, "but Dustin's right. No one has ever left this island, and two ultra-powerful artifacts are just sitting there begging to be taken. Ideas anyone?"

"Dustin, what do they look like?" asked Mike.

"Pretty fucking creepy," said Dustin. "The Eye is all bloodshot and fleshy. I mean, it's not a jewel or anything like that - it's an actual human eye. The Hand looked withered and blackened, and also like real flesh."

Mike once again wondered how these artifacts were wielded. Did their users wear them around the neck, like a talisman?

"As the legends say," said Auriga. "They're the real thing, all right."

"Okay," said Lucas. "So someone has gone through a lot of trouble to get us out here and take the Eye and Hand. They want us to have them. Maybe they are just lying there without any traps."

"The traps are the Eye and Hand themselves," said Atsu.

"And so I reiterate," said Dustin. "We're being played for fools and tools."

"Perhaps so," said Auriga. "But we've already weighed these risks, in hours of debate. The decision remains unaltered: we're getting the Eye and Hand."

"That we are," said Lucas. "Enough talk. Team One, we're going ashore. Team Two, hang back until we give the all clear."

Lucas and Auriga had agreed to send in only half the mission at first. It would be foolish to sink all their eggs in one basket, given the isle's reputation. If something ugly happened to Team One, then at least Team Two would be forewarned and forearmed.

The rowers brought the boat in more until they heard the scraping of rock and stopped. Then Team One debarked and started wading ashore: Lucas, Atsu, Dracut, Shanti, Kemse, and Lija. They were bravely taking the biggest risk.

Team Two stayed in the boat: Auriga, Demetrius (now Dustin), Mike, Coval, Azariah, and Will. Each team had a commander (Lucas or Auriga) as well as a priest (Atsu or Demetrius), and three representatives from each cult. Mike had known that it would be Lucas riding the first wave and not Auriga. The chief mage was a despicable save ass. There had been no question of allowing Will to put himself on the front line. Mike's place was by his side. Mike wondered why Demetrius hadn't reasserted himself in Dustin's body.

The team reached the shore. Lucas turned around and waved at the boat, indicating they were okay so far. He began leading them up the slope of the isle.

Mike was all nerves. Everyone in the boat watched the isle closely.

"Lucas is brave," said Will.

"He is Gorm come again," said Azariah with pride. "He was the first to step on the isle and he will be the last to leave it."

I wish he was Gorm, thought Mike. *We could use a god on this cursed rock.*

"Uh-oh," said Dustin.

Everyone gasped.

Something was happening on the slope. The team members had stopped and were acting strangely. Their bodies shook and their heads jerked about. They dropped their weapons. One of them - it looked like Lija the mage - clutched the sides of her head, croaking something inaudible. Someone else, the warrior Dracut, began having an epileptic seizure. The priest Atsu fought himself in vain, falling to the ground. Then they all collapsed and began shrieking like animals.

All except Lucas. He was still himself and had his sword drawn. He shouted at his team members, desperately trying to reach them - when Atsu suddenly stood up and lunged at him like a rabid beast. Lucas barely leaped back in time. He must have been horrified but he didn't hesitate: he ran the priest through with his sword, yanked the blade free, and then chopped Atsu's head off.

Then the others were on him.

Chaos erupted on the boat as everyone urged a different course of action. Mike shouted at Lucas to come back. Coval advised rushing the shore to aid Lucas. Azariah was on his knees, crying praises to Lucas/Gorm, insisting this was proof that Lucas was the god - the only one who could stand safely on the isle. Will was screaming Shanti's name, and begging Lucas not to kill his friend. Auriga said they should calm down and keep watching the shore; there was nothing to be done for their former friends; they were undead now and lost.

Dustin ignored them all - and leaped over the prow.

"Dustin!" yelled Mike. "Don't!"

Dustin splashed thigh-deep into the water. He called back at everyone in the boat: "*Stay there and wait! I have an idea!*"

Mike couldn't believe this. They were all going to die. *Demetrius, where the fuck are you?*

On the shore, Lucas dispatched two more of the savage undead. One of them was Shanti, and Will fell to his knees, sobbing hysterically. By the time Dustin arrived on the shore, Lucas had slain all five. He saw Dustin

and started shouting furiously, waving him back. Dustin held something up in his hand. The necklace. Of course.

A stupid gamble, you idiot.

Dustin's necklace warded against undead attacks and kept undead creatures fifteen feet away - the five who were now slain would not have been able to assault Dustin as they did Lucas - but there's no way Dustin (or Demetrius) could have known that the necklace would protect anyone from turning into an undead after stepping on the island. It certainly hadn't protected them from the terror gaze of a ghost who aged them into adults. Dustin was lucky.

Mike watched as Dustin and Lucas conferred on the shore. Will's wailing and Azariah's pious chants were driving him insane. He grabbed Will and pulled him up. He didn't want to do this but he had to.

"On your feet, Will," he said bluntly. "And get your shit together. You don't get to scream about your rights to come on this mission and then cry like a kid when your friends get killed." *He is a kid, you asshole. He needs his mom and Jonathan.* But Will had consciously rejected that option. He wanted with all his heart to be a mage. *So be it.* "Any one of us could die. Me. Dustin. Lucas. Be ready for that someday. You're the *Spider*, and spiders don't cry or make obnoxious noise. They're silent and deadly. Understand?"

Will nodded, quieting down.

And if Will is the Spider, and Lucas the Chosen, and Dustin the Holy Vessel, what does that make me? As far as Mike could tell, he was the Twice Traitor, who savored the Zargonite drug and slept with the enemy. A fine one to lecture.

There was a cry from the shore. Lucas and Dustin had resolved their argument, and Lucas was giving the signal.

Auriga addressed everyone on the boat. "Now it's our turn. Apparently Dustin's necklace will protect us if we stay close to him - within fifteen feet. Let's go."

They all left the boat - Auriga, Coval, Azariah, Mike, and Will - and went ashore. Dustin came right down to the waterline to ensure their protection. Then they went up the slope to where Lucas looked over the dead bodies.

"What are they, Lucas?" asked Mike.

"No undead I've ever seen," said Lucas, shaking his head.

"Zoombies," said Dustin.

"Yes," said Auriga.

"What?" said Azariah.

"Zoombies," repeated Dustin. "Zombies that can move fast - even faster than mortals. But where are they all? Where do they dwell? When I *spirit walked*, I didn't see any of them - any creatures at all - anywhere on the island."

"I don't know, but they're savage," said Lucas. "Strong as motherfuckers. Lija and Kemse were frail women, but when they turned, they were as strong as Kanadius."

"You beat them, sir," said Coval.

"If this had happened two months ago, or even one month ago, they might have torn me apart," said Lucas. Ninety days in the Brotherhood had made him and Mike formidable warriors.

Azariah was distressed. "But, sir!" he said. "These cannot be zoombies, as Dustin claims. Zoombies are raised by the blasphemy of resurrection, and the result is more subtle - less ferocious. Like the body you have chosen to reveal yourself in."

Mike couldn't help himself. "That's superstitious crap! Resurrection doesn't turn people into undead."

Azariah drew his sword. "Sir," he said to Lucas, his eyes never leaving Mike's, "I request the right to avenge Mike's insult."

Lucas stepped between them. "Azariah, put away your sword. Mike, put away your opinions. We have a job to do here."

"But sir!" shouted Azariah. "He denies *The Creed of Gorm* - your creed! - and contradicts our doctrine!"

And then Lucas one-upped Kanadius. He sucker punched Azariah and sent him flying backwards. For the third time in two days, Azariah was on the ground with a bleeding mouth.

Lucas stood over the fanatic. "Question me again, for any reason at all, and you'll be joining this pile of corpses. Am I clear?"

Azariah scrambled to prostrate himself on his knees. "*Yes sir!*" he screamed.

"Not trying to stir the pot," said Dustin, "but I confess I don't know what to make of resurrection. You're clearly not like these animals who attacked you, Lucas. On the other hand, you can walk this island safely. You don't need my necklace protection. The island *accepts* you, even if its inhabitants don't."

"A fascinating paradox I admit," said Auriga. "But as Lucas said, we have a job to do. Let's get up to the Ring."

They all agreed and went to the top. Lucas led them, and everyone followed near Dustin. At the island's center they came to the arches.

"Wow," said Dustin.

"Stonehenge," said Will.

It was indeed a Stonehenge-like group of arches made from large stone blocks. Mike knew from the gaming module that they dated from the time before the Cynidiceans excavated the Lost City. But no one knew their original purpose.

Lucas was looking through one of the arches. "I see the altar you mentioned, Dustin." He squinted. "Yeah... the Eye and Hand are there." He faced everyone. "All right, people, this is what we came for. I'm going in first. Wait for my signal."

What we came for. We came for punishment, is what we came for. For pride, if not treachery. He realized then that he did love Jilanka - and wished they'd never met.

As Lucas went under an archway, Mike half-expected a wall of fire to appear and incinerate his friend on the spot, but nothing happened. Inside the circle, Lucas approached the stone altar, but he didn't touch or take anything. He turned and looked around inside. After a minute he called everyone in.

They filed through the same archway, in an order that kept Dustin strategically placed: Auriga, Will, Mike, Dustin, Coval and Azariah. In the circle they fanned out while keeping close. It was a thirty-foot diameter area, and the altar was a five by ten-foot stone table.

Everyone saw the body parts and fell silent. No one moved or spoke for over a minute. Mike's heart began to race. He remembered making love last night on an altar just as forbidden. And his silent vow.

"The Gifts of Gaius," Auriga breathed in awe. "I hardly dared believe it."

The Eye and Hand were much as Dustin had described them: a hideous looking bloodshot eye, and a withered blackened hand. They didn't look like magical artifacts. They looked like serial killer trophies.

"I don't get it," said Mike. "How are you supposed to use these things?"

"We'll worry about that later," said Lucas. "Right now I just want to pick the damn things off the table without getting blasted by a death spell." He looked at Auriga. "Well?"

Auriga cast a spell that identified magic and traps. When he was finished he shook his head. "The altar appears harmless."

Lucas breathed deeply. "Shall we do this then? Same time?"

Auriga nodded, his eyes hungry.

As one, the Magi Chief and Gorm's Chosen reached and claimed their prizes. Auriga lifted the Eye and held it reverently. Lucas took the Hand

and inspected it. Everyone else looked around nervously, fearing a sudden attack of some kind.

"Mike," said Lucas.

Mike nodded, taking from his belt the *bag of holding* that belonged to the Brotherhood, and to which he'd been entrusted. Lucas handed over the Hand, and Mike almost cried out revolted. It felt cold, rubbery, and repulsive. He dropped it in the *bag of holding* and fastened it back at his belt.



"Guard it with your life," said Lucas.

Oh, I will. And you'll never forgive me for it.

Will was taking out his own *bag of holding* to secure the Eye for Auriga, when the archways started to glow. Coval was the first to notice and shouted a warning. The stones were turning red as burning coals. And in the space of the eight archways, the air shimmered.

"Out of the circle!" yelled Lucas, leaping towards an archway. "Follow me!"

But it was too late. A second later the air under the archways turned a misty red, and hordes of savages poured through.

Zoombies.

And not dozens, but hundreds; the army which gave the Isle its name. They snarled and shrieked as they threw themselves at the altar thieves, only to be stopped by the power of Dustin's necklace. Their eyes burned

with madness; their mouths spat saliva strings surely crawling with contagion. They knew only one purpose, to kill and feed; and they never fled their prey.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" yelled Dustin. "We are certifiably in a world of shit!"

"Don't panic!" shouted Lucas. "Stay close to Dustin!"

Everyone did that. Without the necklace, they'd be torn to shreds and eaten alive. The zombies were so numerous that the horde extended halfway down the hill to the shore. There was no way of "walking through them" with the power of the necklace. They were stuck in the circle; protected but unable to leave.

Mike was enraged. "*Dustin! Where the fuck is Demetrius? There's an undead army here, and we need a goddamn priest!*"

Dustin's eyes fluttered and Demetrius was back. "Right you are, Mike. But I haven't been sleeping. I've been using the drug to speak with these undead, and try to convince them to let us pass. I'm afraid my communication with them has just enraged them more. In any case, I'm afraid there's little I can do. Between my spells and turning prayers, I could probably get rid of a score of these zombies. There are hundreds."

"Well then what the fuck do we do?" yelled Mike.

"There's only one thing to do," said Auriga, looking at Demetrius. The priest nodded.

"I hope you have a mighty spell up your sleeve," said Lucas.

"I have many offensive spells at my disposal," said the mage. "*Magic missile, color spray, scorching ray, wave of exhaustion* - all of which would hardly put a dent in the army surrounding us."

"So what are you saying?" said Lucas.

"We need the Eye and we need it now," said Auriga.

"I don't follow," said Lucas. "Don't you need time to study the Eye and figure out how to use it? Not to mention ascertain its dangers?"

"Time is what we don't have," said Demetrius. "Auriga is right."

"Well, then do it already," said Mike. He couldn't care less if Auriga fell under some curse. If he could save their asses from this mess, that's all that mattered.

Auriga nodded. "Will, come here."

"Me?" asked Will, surprised.

The chief mage nodded.

All eyes were on Auriga as he guided his prodigy to the altar and sat him upon it.

"Around the altar, everyone," said Demetrius. "Form a circle around me, Auriga, and Will."

"Whoa!" said Lucas. "What the hell is going on here? What are you doing with Will?"

Mike had his sword out. "He's not doing anything with Will. Let him go, Auriga!"

Auriga looked at Mike coldly. "Lucas, order your Brother to cease threatening me. I command this mission."

"So do I," said Lucas, "and I'm still waiting for an answer. Don't even dream of telling me that you intend Will to use the Eye."

"That's exactly what I intend," said Auriga.

"Then I intend to *order* Mike to chop your fucking head off."

"Demetrius," said Auriga. "Back me up."

The priest nodded. "We foresaw this eventuality. Ideally we wanted time to study the Eye, so the Usamigaran community could make a judicious decision. But Lucas, given our situation here, there's no way we're leaving this Isle without the power of the Eye. And that means bonding someone to it."

"Fine!" shouted Lucas. "Auriga can bond himself to it! Where the fuck does he - both of you - get off trying to shove a cursed artifact down a kid's throat?"

"The eye socket, you mean," said Auriga.

"What?" said Lucas.

"We're not shoving the Eye down Will's throat," said the chief mage. "We're going to place it in his eye socket. We have to remove his left eye and put the Eye of Gaius in its place."

"*What?!*" screamed Mike.

"One thing is clear in the legends of the Eye," explained Demetrius. "Younger people stand a much better chance of surviving the transplant and resisting the Eye's evil. Old people tend to die, go insane, or commit unspeakably evil acts. A child like Will - indeed a prodigy like him - is best suited to wield the Eye. If anyone is."

"Am I the only one here who *is* sane?" demanded Mike. "This isn't happening."

Will was looking at everyone, confused and scared. Clearly he hadn't expected this role to be thrust on him. "Auriga, I... I don't want my eye taken out."

"Oh don't worry, Will," said Mike. "This piece of shit isn't touching your eye." He still had his sword drawn, and he looked at Lucas expectantly.

Lucas was shaking his head, trying to digest everything. "You're saying, Demetrius, that a child can avoid the Eye's curse?"

"No one can avoid the curse of Gaius," said Demetrius. "But a child stands the best chance of being able to, how shall I say it, curb the excesses of the Eye."

"You both intended this all along!" shouted Mike.

"No," said the priest. "Auriga and I knew this eventuality might arise, which is why we both wanted Will on the mission. No one has ever left the Isle, and now we can see why."

Fifteen feet away in all directions, the zombies snarled, pressing their bodies against the invisible wall of protection.

"But you don't even know what the Eye does," said Lucas. "What do you expect Will to do here?"

"The legends are consistent on a few points," said Auriga. "One of those points is that the one who wields the Eye can wreak massive devastation with an 'eye bite' - killing any number of creatures just by looking at them."

Everyone gasped in disbelief. That kind of power was unheard of. And terribly obscene for anyone to use.

Coval shuddered. "I for one do not trust these 'gifts of Gaius'."

"You're not required to," said Auriga. "Only to do as your told."

"Let me get this straight," said Lucas. "You're going to cut out Will's eye, give him Gaius's Eye and he's going to destroy this army of undead just by looking at them? And he'll be stuck with the Eye, what, for the rest of his life?"

"That's kind of the whole point," said Demetrius.

"No!" cried Will. He looked pleadingly at Auriga. "Please don't make me do this! You should wear the Eye."

Auriga put his hand on Will's shoulder. "This is the role for which you've been prepared. I will help you and guide you, don't worry."

"Lucas!" said Mike. "This stops right now!"

"Be quiet, Mike!" yelled Lucas, clearly torn between duty and his feelings. "Auriga, I asked you a question. Is wearing the Eye for life?"

"Yes," said Auriga. "Once someone has bonded with the Eye or Hand, it's absolutely for life. If you remove it after transplanting it, the patient dies immediately."

"What *about* the Hand?" asked Azariah. "Can one of us use it to defeat the zombies, instead of having Will use the Eye?"

"Not a chance," said Demetrius. "The Hand isn't nearly as powerful as the Eye. It's supposed to make a warrior nearly invincible, that's true, but

even a super-warrior would have a hard time cutting down hundreds of zombies."

"There's another problem with the Hand," said Auriga. "The legends say that it takes five days for its power to kick in. But the Eye's power should be accessible right away."

"We're not using the Hand in any case," said Lucas. "The Hand belongs to the Brothers and as a group we need to decide carefully who the wielder is going to be. That's going to be more Kanadius's decision than mine."

"And I assume the wielder must have his hand removed in order to use it?" asked Coval.

Demetrius nodded.

"We need to get started," said Auriga, his hand still on Will's shoulder. Will looked at Mike in desperate appeal.

Mike lunged at Auriga. He threw the mage off Will with his free arm. Lucas barked a command. Mike raised his sword over Auriga - and then the sword went flying. Mike found himself being restrained by Coval and Azariah. He let out a deluge of vulgarity and threatened to kill everyone in the circle.

"That's enough, Mike!" said Lucas.

"Let me go, you fucking shits!" screamed Mike.

Lucas got up close to him. "I'm sorry, Mike. We need the Eye, and now."

"Then let Auriga rip out his own eye!" yelled Mike, in tears.

"And let me ask you this," said Lucas softly. "Do you really want Auriga Sirkinos to be the wielder of the Eye of Gaius?"

"I sure don't," said Demetrius.

"Your low opinions of me are noted," said Auriga contemptuously.

"Our low opinions of you are shared by many," Lucas slammed back at him. "You're a snake who'd sell his own mother. The only reason I'm agreeing to this is because we literally have no choice. I don't trust a mage like you wearing the Eye. There's not an evil bone in Will's body. I'm hoping that will make a huge difference in offsetting whatever curse this Eye will bring."

"And I would add, Auriga, " said Demetrius, "that I believe the only reason a power-monger like you isn't taking the Eye for yourself is because you could die or go insane from it. It's self-preservation that's driving you here. The rest of us are trying to preserve the best possible outcome for everyone - and I'm talking both the short-term and the long. We - and when I say 'we', I mean the Usamigarans - agreed as a community that the Eye could enable us to bring down Zargon and his

priesthood. We have to be very careful in our selection of the victor who prevails over Zargon. And I trust William Byers."

"At least we agree on something," said Auriga smoothly. "I too have every confidence in Will. And despite what you think of me as a person, I will be there for him constantly. Now please allow me to begin."

Auriga then took a knife from his belt, and started to push Will down on his back. Will rebelled, crying for Mike. Lucas and Demetrius moved to restrain him. They positioned themselves on each side of the table, holding Will down. Auriga stood at the head of the table, looking down on Will's face. Mike thrashed in the grips of Coval and Azariah. Auriga positioned the knife over Will's left eye.

Mike's fury escalated. "Jesus, at least put him to sleep, you assholes! Use a fucking *sleep* spell!"

"I don't have a *sleep* spell," said Auriga. "Lija did. But in case you didn't realize it, we need Will wide awake. We have an army waiting to eat us."

"Anesthesia is out of the question," agreed Demetrius.

"I'm sorry, Will," said Auriga. "I'll make this quick as I can." He sank the blade firmly and up into the bottom of Will's eyeball.

Will screamed as blood went everywhere. He thrashed on the table, scissoring his legs. Lucas and Demetrius tightened down. Auriga cut deeper and under, and with the flat of the blade tried to force out the eyeball. Will howled - horribly. His agony filled the island's air, blending with the shrieks of the undead. Auriga swore as he lost hold of the eyeball, then dug and got it again. Will screamed and begged for help. The chief mage paused, wiping sweat from his forehead. Then he cut deeper - and with a firm hold flicked upwards. With a sickening noise, Will's eyeball popped out and fell to the ground.

Mike's body felt numb. He was living a nightmare and wanted to wake up in his bed on Maple Street. To be a kid again in America, where horrors like this were enjoyed safely on movie screens. And where friends went home afterwards, to eat pizza and play games.

"Now for the easy part," said Auriga. He reached into Will's *bag of holding* and produced the Eye, positioning over the bloody socket. To Mike it looked thoroughly evil. What Will saw in it at that moment, Mike never wanted to know for the rest of his life. He looked as if Death itself had come knocking for him:

"*Keep it away!*" he shrieked. "*Keep it away! Keep that thing away from me!*"

Lucas and Demetrius could barely hold him down. Lucas shouted at Auriga to hurry up. Auriga obliged, wanting the surgery over and done with. He touched the Eye of Gaius to Will's empty socket, and waited to see what would happen. Everyone in the circle held their breath.

The transition was instantaneous. The fight left Will completely. The Eye, of its own accord, attached itself and nested inside his socket. Will moaned, sounding like a catatonic, as the new body part settled in.

"Very good, Will," said Auriga, propping him up on the table. "Are you able to stand?"

Will looked around the circle at everyone. His manner suggested the victim of a stroke. He was dazed, clumsily slow, not speaking, and his right hand twitched.

"What's wrong with him?" demanded Lucas.

"What the fuck do you think, Lucas?" said Mike, throwing Coval and Azariah's hands off him. "He has a piece of lich in his head now. He's practically been lobotomized."

The Eye of Gaius was undeniably a part of Will now: his left eye. The right was as hazel and normal as ever. The left was red, bloodshot, and unblinking.

"There's nothing wrong," said Auriga. "There may be an adjustment period after the surgery."

"What do you mean?" said Lucas. "I thought you said the Eye's power would be accessible right away?"

"It should be," said Auriga. "Will just needs a little... prodding. I'm going to remove him from the field of Demetrius's necklace protection."

"Come again?" asked Lucas.

"Stay where you are, Demetrius," said Auriga. He took Will's hand and guided him to the circumference of the magical protection barrier. The zombies snarled, ready to tear him and Will apart.

"Uh, are you sure this is a good idea, Auriga?" asked Demetrius.

"I'm sure," said the mage, "that this is the only way we'll precipitate a use of the Eye." And with that, he threw Will into the horde of undead. The zombies fell on him immediately.

Everyone exploded in anger and rushed to help Will.

"Wait!" yelled Auriga, holding his hand up.

Mike was seconds away from taking Auriga's head off, when the shrieks of hunger became roars of pain. Zombies that were on Will were now on fire, burning as if kerosene had been poured on them. It was a black fire that roasted them to a crisp in seconds. Four zombies; then three more. The horde backed away from Will, yowling in outrage.

"Well, that did work rather well," conceded Demetrius.

"Are you sure about that?" asked Mike. "What the hell is happening to Will?"

Will was no longer the dazed victim of a lobotomy. He stood facing the zoombie horde stiff as a pole - his legs close together, arms rigid at his sides, but shaking too. His face contorted and his left Eye burned with incandescent rage. Mike thought of the horror film from his home world, *Scanners*. Will looked a bit like that guy on the movie poster.

And then Will began to scream. Not like his usual screams, but a ferocious one that didn't stop. It went on and on - a scream of such violence that had no business coming from a child. Will never paused for breath. One minute, then two. His body shook as if possessed. The zoombies were livid. Everyone in the circle was terrified. Whatever the Eye was doing to him, it was an evil artifact that craved harm.

Three minutes, then four. Will still hadn't come up for air. His scream rolled on as he stared straight ahead, oblivious to everything. The zoombies shrieked defiance, but wouldn't come near him.

Five minutes. Will's scream got even louder, working its way to a crescendo. The zoombies began to skip about and yip, in some kind of pain. And then everyone yelled in shock as one of the zoombie's heads exploded. Three seconds later, another creature's body split down the middle, sliced in half. One second. Another's stomach swelled, and its mouth vomited its innards. Two seconds. A neck twisted clockwise, as the torso went counterclockwise. Will never stopped.

He shook and screamed like that for a long time, and the zoombies died one by one. Each died differently, but it was always hideous. They broke, snapped, twisted, and exploded all the way down the hill of the isle, until the undead were dead. Still, Will didn't stop. His rage needed more. Mike feared they would all be next. He came up to Will and knelt in front of him, yelling into a face that wouldn't stop making such maddening noise.

"It's okay, Will! You did it! They're all dead!"

Will didn't register Mike in any way. He raged on, as if intent on bringing down the island itself.

Which is exactly what began to happen.

A thundering crack made everyone jump. Outside the archways, a part of the ground blew upwards like a geyser, showering the air with rubble. Not far from that, an earthquake began, splitting the island across its diameter. In minutes it would divide the island in two.

Lucas raised his voice above Will's as best he could: *"Everyone back to the boat! Now!"*

No one needed telling twice. They all began rushing through the archways to go down the hill, except Lucas and Mike. They couldn't leave Will - though gods knew the kid was probably safer than anyone in the city. Mike kept telling Will to stop. Will either wouldn't or couldn't stop. Lucas grabbed Will by one side and Mike the other. They lifted on count of three... but Will wouldn't budge. His Eye burned with a hunger yet unsatisfied; it wouldn't allow him to be moved or hushed.

Another explosion erupted. Some of the debris fell close to them.

Lucas yelled in Mike's ear: "We can't stay here!" A sharper convulsion shook the ground, and they both ducked. Hunks of rock fell around them. Lucas's shoulder was hit.

So this is where it ends.

And Mike felt that he had indeed reached the end, of all he could take. He hugged Will's body and cried for his friend. And as Will shook and screamed in his arms, Mike strove to muster words: *You have to stop this, Will. Come back. We need you. I need you.*

The concussions became a constant, shaking the isle. Will was unreachable. The stone archways were the next to go: they pitched and crumbled, some into the circle, some outside it. One of them almost hit Mike as he hugged Will, but he was hardly aware of it. Lucas's shoulder was bleeding. He yelled something at Mike. Mike had no ears for Lucas.

I'm sorry, Will. I failed you. We all did. We should have sent you home. To your mom. And Jonathan.

Something happened then. The island's tremors slowly faded. Will's body suddenly began to relax, and his scream dwindled to a soft moan. Unbelieving, Mike looked him over. He shook him gently and said his name. The rage was gone from Will's face. In its place was a dumb confusion. His bloodshot eye stared at Mike like a parody of catatonia.

"Will?" said Mike. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Is he okay?" asked Lucas, holding his shoulder.

"Say something, Will," said Mike. "Please."

Will moved his lips as if mentally retarded. His hand twitched as he reached up and touched Mike's face. He worked his mouth some more, and then croaked like a sick parrot: *"Mike?"*

Mike cried all over again. Will was back. But the light of his mind had gone out.

Chapter Ten:

Eyebite

William Byers saw too much, heard too little, and did next to nothing. It came with being a god. From the moment the Eye had attached itself to him, the Sight was so overwhelming that it drowned the other senses; made usual interactions - hell, normal life - impossible.

He felt almost nothing either, except for the splitting headache that came and went. If he looked anywhere distant - whether into the past, present, or future - the headache vanished. If he focused on what was in front of him, the pain was so bad it was debilitating. The Eye wasn't made for sights that simple.

And he spoke not a word. He was in sensory overload; he saw too much and processed it constantly. His mind had no room or time for speech. When he tried talking, moans were the best he could manage.

Needless to say, Will resented visitors; hated company, craved solitude. Isolation was the only solace to his omniscience and his agony. He got what we wanted. Auriga made his prodigy inaccessible (for his own nefarious reasons) and watched over him with a territorial eye. Will didn't mind. He found Auriga easy to ignore. The man was self-absorbed, and talked to himself more than to Will. And Will had no concerns for his safety. The Eye defended him from harmful intent - with black fire. Any more "training accidents", and his teacher would be incinerated. And the chief mage knew it.

But he was dangerous: Auriga Sirkinos had ambitions that went beyond anything Demetrius suspected. Will hardly cared. It was a drop of water. Will saw the ocean. He saw *everything*.

The day after the quest to the Isle, he lay in bed for most of the morning, trying hard to shut out his environs. A single glance at anything in the room - the ceiling, the walls, his desk - was a nail bashed through the left side of his head. He drifted and let the Eye carry him away from the pain. He wanted to see Mike... *Mike...*

... and saw him. He was with a girl Will had never seen. His omniscience filled in the details: a girlfriend, a new girlfriend, Mike's very first. He had met her - no, been attacked by her - exactly a week ago down in the city, two days before Will's fall. Mike and this girl - no, woman; Jilanka was her name - had fallen hard in love and ate mushrooms to feed their passions. They were naked on an altar now, clinging to each other, fucking (Will now understood the word's full meaning), crying their pleasure, raking and bruising each other...

... then another vision. This one in the near future; it would happen in a few hours. Mike was in a room with a different altar. He stood before a crowd of women, offering them something he had no right to give away. Then he knelt before the Madaruan Champion. She was strong, beautiful, and stern, and she asked Mike hard questions. His answers were honest but self-serving. She took his offering. He took new vows. He received an unwanted gift. Disaster would follow days later...

... with Mike in another room, in front of yet a third altar. Wielding his sword against the Brothers. It played out the only way it could - and then turned worse. Will turned the tragedy off. Watching Mike hurt too much.

He looked elsewhere, submitting himself to randomness. His Eye gleamed and showed him:

... *a rite that looked like Aztec sacrifice*. Will had seen pictures of what the Aztecs did in his home world. But what he saw now weren't brown skinned clerics chanting in the open sun. They were chalk white priests underground, wearing masks of animals and demons. The ritual was otherwise straight out of the American history books: a victim on an altar, held down as the high priest sliced open the chest and offered a still-beating heart to his god. Will left that room and coasted down corridors to sights just as ghastly. Activities of rape, torture, and cruel experiments - all for sheer enjoyment sake - went on everywhere in the Zargonite temple. Things far worse than what Mike had imagined as a dungeon master, when the Lost City was a game...

... *the sheeple*. He'd seen them before, in his weekly trips to the city: the vast majority of citizens who resigned themselves to Zargonite rule, working fields, tending livestock, retreating into dreams and nightmares. Walling themselves behind masks of alternate identities: a mammal here,

growling on all fours; a demon there, assaulting a hapless fool; a king of old, demanding that passersby bow to him; a hero of legend, defending a widow, demanding a shop owner give her free food. All of them hoping to avoid the sacrificial altar; grasping for redemption in madness...

... *the wider world of the Cynidiceans*. The nation they were once part of and still technically were: the Emirates of Yshia, six desert regions under rule of a caliph, reminiscent of the Islamic Middle-East. The Yshians followed the religion of the prophet al-Kalim, and waged holy war on any who believed differently. The Cynidiceans had been out of contact with the Yshians for centuries. That was about to change. Last year the capital had fallen to a *jihad*, and Yshlimic Law was once again enforced strictly everywhere in the Emirates. Next year the Yshian forces would come to Cynidicea, and shatter its sense of isolated security. Will and Mike and many others would be swept up in the *jihad's* fires...

... *the Isle he had just decimated*. And from which they'd barely escaped. Will's body had become a storm of wrath. But that had happened unintentionally, triggered when he was thrown into an army of undead. Right after the unspeakable surgery. Will couldn't summon the Eyebite - the scream of annihilation - at will. And his omniscience was strangely silent on this point. The Eyebite was even harder to stop than start. Will should have gone on screaming until the whole island was blasted to bits and everyone died. Somehow Mike had brought him back. Whether by his embrace or his words or his thoughts...

... *Lucas*. The resurrected "zombie". He had divided the Brotherhood into not two but three camps, none of whom had any grasp of his true nature. Will saw that nature and the consequences it would bring. Saw why the Isle had accepted Lucas, while its savage inhabitants rejected him. And saw the seed of the problem: Queen Zenobia, whose touch had tainted him with paradox...

... *the bird man*. Except the bird man was dead. Mike had bathed a lounge in his blood. This vision was in the past, in a place that looked like a cellar, probably in one of the city's communal dormitories. The bird man had a boy beneath him on the floor, and was thrusting his hips against the boy's bum. The boy was crying. Will felt a familiar nausea. His anger rose, beating on the back doors of his mind. *No*. He refused that demon entry. He turned the bird man off - but not before his stomach knotted, and he leaned over his bed to throw up on the floor.

Seeing the vomit pool on the floor put a nail through his head again. He moaned for Mike and wiped his mouth. Then he lay back in bed, closed his right eye, and tried to sleep.

His meals were served by a Magi named Prist. Shanti used to be the one to do him favors, but Shanti had been eaten by zombies. His leftover body parts were scattered on the ruined isle. Prist was quiet and punctual. The meals never came late. But Will dreaded mealtimes. The food was fine, and he ate it because his body required it. But it was hard to not look at his food when he ate it. It hurt badly enough to see anything within thirty feet. Closer than two feet was like a dagger going under his eye again.



He developed a strategy to eat at his desk with the door to his room left open. He regarded his food and utensils only peripherally, while looking

through the open doorway down the hall that extended just beyond fifty feet. It was tricky, and sometimes he couldn't avoid glancing directly at his food. At one point during lunch on the second day, he looked at his spoon while eating his soup. The pain was so bad he nearly passed out.

Later that day, he replayed his initiation ceremony, watching it as an outsider. He could do that with the Eye: see events from any point of his life, from a "god's view" above. Prist was the one who had branded him during the initiation ceremony. Will had knelt before the altar and recited the pledge: "I, William Byers, do hereby pledge to serve and obey the great Usamigaras." The Magi, led by Auriga, had hailed their new colleague, and Prist had burned the five-pointed star into Will's right palm. Shanti had then given him his silver mask of the cherub and rainbow-colored robe. Will had rarely worn his mask since then, except during temple rituals (required) and when he walked the city streets (lest everyone stop and stare). He knew that Mike and Lucas had a minimal mask policy too. How the Cynidiceans wore them around the clock was beyond Will.

He dozed, then woke later as the candlelight faded. He needed new candles. The shadows made the giant spider look alive, even through his peripheral vision. Will was no spider. He hardly moved and couldn't speak to cast a spell. The Eye had erased his achievements in a stroke.

I... am... a... mage.

He wasn't even sure he was that anymore. What good was wizardry if he knew it but couldn't use it? If the only magic he could use was too mighty for the world to withstand?

On the the third day after the quest, Auriga spent the evening with him. He was sitting at Will's desk and had put Will across from him in the guest chair. Will tried not to see Auriga in focus, looking past him as if at a point through the wall. He saw Auriga every moment anyway, and nothing in that view was pleasant.

The chief mage was euphoric about the open clash between the Brothers and Maidens. Today he wouldn't shut up about it.

"I may have to reward your friend Mike after all," he said, opening a wine bottle. It was a good vintage he'd paid gold coin for. "He's making our job easier."

On the stone table Will had looked into Auriga's heart and seen how black it was. Demetrius had been more than right in his suspicions. Auriga had not only murdered his predecessor Keldor (and buried the bloated body out on the desert surface), but he had also arranged the poisoning of

Sinbar and the other two members of the Usamigaran stronghold. Different MOs, and enough collateral to confuse the scent of those, like Demetrius, who thought the worst of him.

"At first I thought Blackie was the smart one." Auriga poured the wine into a goblet and waved the glass under his nose. "Hmm." He took a long sip and smacked his lips, placing the glass on the desk. "Mike acted like a pussy on the Isle."

Auriga's stated goal, to use the Eye against the Zargonites, was a lie. His purpose was pure treachery: to annihilate the Brotherhood and Maidens. He hated his sibling cults far more than the Zargonites. Gorm and Madarua were authoritarian and thoroughly anathema to libertarian beliefs. Auriga wanted to eradicate their two cults, but could not afford to do that while they helped maintain the balance of power against the Zargonites. Without the Brothers and the Maidens, the Usamigarans couldn't stand on their own; they would be easily destroyed. He needed the Eye to tip that power balance. With that kind of power in Magi possession, the Brothers and Maidens were superfluous. The offense of their existence could finally be obliterated.

"That negro is a tool," said Auriga. "So self-righteous he makes me sick. The worship he gets is wholly unearned. But Mike - well, it looks like he has a pair after all. He saw an opportunity. Took the risk. I guess he's just squeamish when it comes to you." Auriga laughed. "Did you see his face go purple when I cut out your eye? I guess not; you weren't seeing past my blade." He sipped from the goblet. "But that negro - he has zero ambition."

Auriga's ambitions dated back almost two years, when he'd learned the Eye's location on a fluke. There was a tome about Gaius in the Usamigaran library, and the part that described the resting place of the Eye and the Hand - supposedly the Catacombs - was actually a code. When deciphered, the text read that the Eye and Hand were on the Isle of Death. Auriga had been cracking codes since childhood, and was flabbergasted to have stumbled on this secret no other Magi had.

"You need to think ahead," said the mage, swallowing more wine. "Seize the moment. And that's what we're going to do. I need to know what unlocks that scream of yours. You're going to use it to kill every Brother and Maiden in this pyramid."

Since he'd cracked the code, Auriga had thought ahead - with a vengeance. His scheme to retrieve the artifacts hinged on three things: (1) becoming chief of the Magi, so the Eye would fall under his charge; (2) acquiring a young student who could take on the Eye without dying or

going insane; and (3) engineering a tip-off about the Isle from a source people would be inclined to believe.

"And then you're going to kill every worthless shit in the Gormish and Madaruan strongholds." Another gulp. "But not the Zargonites. Not yet. They've got their god on call, right in this pyramid. We'll let them think we're willing to share power. At least at first. Death has to be meted out sparingly. And shrewdly."

He'd been shrewd in killing Sinbar and Keldor, and making their deaths/disappearance look unrelated. After many moons of study and proving himself in the Magi, he'd poisoned Sinbar (and some additional collateral) with a blackface mushroom. A month after that - when he'd acquired enough experience to ensure his succession as the next chief mage - he poisoned Keldor with a jellybones mushroom. Keldor's skeleton had liquified into mush, and Auriga buried the pile of flesh in the desert, so that his disappearance would remain a mystery. Four months later came the arrival of Will Byers: a child of twelve years who showed unprecedented skill with magic. He was a godsend; the perfect Eye-bearer. Once he had trained Will enough, all that remained was to plant the bait: his forged letter from Sinbar to Keldor, explaining the true location of the Eye and Hand. Months of planning paid off at last.

"They have the Hand." He barked laughter. "The Hand is irrelevant. Let the Bastards and Bitches fight over pennies. And over Mike too, while they're at it. He played a good hand" - the mage laughed uproariously at his pun - "but in the end he's a tool, like Righteous Blackie."

The Hand had been a pseudo concession on Auriga's part in his alliance with the Brothers. The legends made clear that the Hand was powerful - more powerful than most artifacts - but trivial compared to the Eye. Call the Hand a grade-5 mushroom. The Eye was grade-50. The person who wore it was the functional equivalent of a god.

"What was it Blackie said? That I'd sell my own mother?" He laughed. "He was more right than he knew. I did sell my mother."

Will tilted his head. *Mother?*

Auriga gulped the rest of his wine and poured another glass. "She was a toothless fart. A zit on the ass of the world. I gave her to the Zargonites for fifty gold." He slurped more wine. "Gods know what they used her for, or what experiments. Must have gone on for days if they paid fifty gold. So much nasty shit goes on in that temple. But I'm sure it ended with her legs being spread for half a dozen priests - and then a lance up her pussy and out her throat." He guffawed, spitting wine over himself. He kept laughing, unable to stop.

Will turned his head slightly, but avoided looking at Augira, or focusing on anything that would drive the nail back into his head. He made faces with his lips, blew out huffs of air, and croaked Mike's name.

Auriga's laughter subsided as he filled another glass. "She was the stupidest cow in the city. She deserved to be raped and gutted."

An image rose from the bottom of Will's omniscience - an image he feared to confront. Auriga's ugly remarks coerced it from the pit. An image from another world. His home world.

"Mothers live to be the death of us all. Mine died so I could enjoy life for a change." He belched. "Wish I could have seen how they raped her on that altar." He roared laughter again.

Mother?

Wrapped in his visions, Will had become intimately familiar with everything of this world. Auriga's derision threw that comfort out of alignment. He saw in memory a face, of someone who had meant everything to him; a face that left him vulnerable, and like a match ignited his blood. His Eye throbbed, suspending all pain, and his face contorted. He turned fully around to face his mentor, and bared his teeth. The one word sufficed. He gasped it with the voice of a corpse: "*Mo-ther.*"

Auriga frowned and looked at him. When he saw Will's face, his eyes widened and he stood. "Will? What's the matter? Calm yourself, boy."

Boy.

Will was no boy. He was a man of centuries old. Steeped in the darkest magic. And his name wasn't Will - or at least it wasn't right now. Could this dolt not see it in his Eye? He stiffened and shook in his chair.

"No!" shouted Auriga, holding up his hands. "Stop this! I am NOT your enemy! Calm yourself and desist!"

Will laughed like a ghoul, his body filling with tremors.

"Caaaaaaaalm. De-siiiiiiiiiiist." Parroting his mentor for the last time.

"I say again, Will, I'm your friend!" The mage was sweating and looked desperate. "We have important things to do, you and I. For the Magi."

Will had friends and this wasn't one of them. No one who did *that* to his mother could be counted a friend. In the chair his body convulsed. Rage hiccuped in every muscle. And when he bared his teeth again like a rabid dog, Auriga bolted for the door.

"MOM!" screamed Will.

She would be appalled at what her son had become in this world - the avatar of death sitting here now. But surely she would approve the slaying of this matricidal trash. His scream arrested Auriga's flight and suspended him above the floor. Then, as the mage begged for his life, Will let loose

as he had on the Isle, with a violent scream that thundered throughout the whole tier. One minute and then two. Auriga's legs shattered. His arms snapped. His teeth flew out his mouth. He was quartered while hanging in the air. Then, his body parts fell wetly to the floor.

The Magi were already shouting in the hall and pounding on the door. Will couldn't stop the devastation. His desk blew apart in splinters. The tapestry shred; the spider dissolved. His bed mattress and pillow exploded - feathers rained everywhere. And still he went on, hurling his rage as if every square inch of his bedroom mortally offended him.

This time, Mike wasn't here to bring him down.

Chapter Eleven:

Farewell, Friend

His hand still burned. Three days after the surgical rape, he could feel the phantoms of old fingers inside the new. He didn't own the Hand yet. Unlike the Eye, it needed time to settle in. Mike feared what it would make him.

But the pain was more manageable today. He could push it to the periphery and ignore most of it. He wished he could ignore Jilanka's pain. What she had suffered on his behalf caused him more outrage than the curse foisted on him.

She was asleep in his arms, in the room they'd taken over for themselves with Pandora's unexpected blessing. A blessing paid for in blood. He ran his hands over her back gently, getting angry again. She had been lashed forty-nine times and still had to sleep on her side. They hadn't had sex for days; her vagina had been abused by a choke pear, and that too took time - like his gross-looking Hand - to heal.

Mike Wheeler should probably have declared a crusade on the Maidens for all the injuries done to him and his girlfriend. But he was a Maiden now himself, and proud of it. Jilanka was proud of him too. The Circle was his true calling. Not the Creed.

Lucas was not proud of him. He was bullshit with rage, the Brothers wanted Mike dead, and it was all Gorm's Chosen could do to call them off. If not for that, Mike would almost certainly have been slain by now. The Hand showed its might five days after surgery. Until tomorrow, Mike had to watch his back. Some of the Brothers - especially Azariah, Moser, and Hyme - weren't beyond mutiny. He more than deserved to be assassinated.

He sighed and kissed Jilanka's forehead. Things were bad between him and Lucas. He had committed treason and gone apostate, without having

the decency to explain himself to his best friend. To be fair, he had intended to explain his defection in person - to both Lucas and Kanadius - but he'd just had his fucking hand chopped off by his wonderful new family. He'd gifted the Maidens with the Hand, and they had "rewarded" him accordingly, right back at him. While they tended to him howling in pain, one of their warriors went to Lucas and explained what Mike had done. She had collected Mike's things from Lucas's room... and that was the end of his service in the Brotherhood of Gorm.

It was the beginning of war between Brother and Maiden.

Jilanka stirred as he kissed her again. "Hey sleepy," he said. "How's it all feel today?"

"Shitty," she said, fingering his Hand. It was as black, withered, and looked feeble. It *was* feeble. Until tomorrow.

"Still sore?" he asked.

"A little," she said. She sat up in their bed and gently prodded her nethers - and hissed in pain.

Mike was angry all over again. "Whoever came up with the idea of vaginal choke pears -"

He was cut off as someone began pounding on their door.

Jilanka grabbed her shirt. "Who the fuck?"

"You expecting a Maiden?" asked Mike, sitting up.

"No," she said, throwing on more clothes. "No one's supposed to come here, unless it's an emergency. This is our room." Pandora's single act of magnanimity.

More pounding. And insistent.

"Jesus Christ," said Mike, jumping out of bed.

The door crashed open. Lucas barged in, and stopped when he saw them half naked.

Mike was stunned by the outrageous intrusion. "*What the fuck!*"

Lucas was out of breath. "Sorry, you guys. Mike, you need to come now."

"Get out of here!" shouted Mike. "Who do you think you are?"

Jilanka was looking casually at Lucas: "He wants to fuck you, Mike. He misses rooming with you, and the sight of your ass."

Lucas ignored her. "Mike, whatever problems you and I have, they'll keep. You need to get dressed and haul ass."

Mike tried getting on his pants too quickly, tripped, and fell. He swore, and yanked his pants up while sitting on the floor. "The only ass I'm going to haul is yours, Lucas - out of this room." He stood and moved towards Lucas.

"Will you stop and listen to me?" yelled Lucas.

"What do you want?" demanded Mike.

"It's Will," said Lucas. "He killed Auriga."

"What?!" said Mike.

"Last night. He's the Chief Mage now."

"Well, well," said Jilanka. "The Spider bites back."

"Will's no Spider," said Mike, full of unease. "He's the Eye of a lich."

"He's asking to see us," said Lucas. "Dustin is already there."

"You mean Demetrius?" asked Mike, strapping on his sword.

"No, Demetrius is lurking. So Dustin can talk to his friends - all of us - directly."

Mike looked at Jilanka. "I'll be back. Whenever."

She nodded. "Go ahead."

He and Lucas left the room, went around the corridor and down to the revolving passage. He scowled at Lucas on the way. *So Dustin can talk to his friends.* Mike wasn't sure they were all friends anymore. He and Lucas certainly weren't. Dustin was absent too often. And Will - unless they were about to see a big change - was practically a vegetable.

In the revolving passage they saw two Brothers, and Mike was instantly on guard. Druids and Lazur. When they saw Mike they reached for their swords. Lucas held up a hand and shook his head.

Druids cursed Mike from the other end of the hall. "How you show your treacherous face around here is beyond me, Mike."

Lazur gave Mike the finger. "I pray that Hand chokes you in your sleep," he said.

Mike ignored them, trying to stay calm. If not for Lucas, he would have had to leave the pyramid and take up residence down in the city. His Maiden status alone wasn't enough to protect him from execution.

Lucas nodded at Druids and Lazur, telling them to go first. At their end, they pushed the button that made the hall align with the northwest-southeast axis, and they left for the temple of Gorm. Mike breathed easier when they left. He was lucky it had been Druids and Lazur. They were moderates. Militant or fanatic Brothers might have started something uglier.

"They say he's talking now," said Lucas, pushing the button for the east-west axis. The passage began grinding.

"He is?" said Mike. For the past three days, Will had been little more than catatonic, eating when food was brought to him, relieving himself at the latrine, but mostly just sitting or lying silent in bed. "Well, good. That's promising."

"Maybe," said Lucas. "How do you like being a woman?"

"Fuck you," retorted Mike. "I'm as much a man as any Brother."

Lucas shrugged. "You call yourself a maiden now, so forgive me if I'm confused."

"I'm a Maiden," said Mike, "and proud of it. My gender hasn't changed, as you well know."

"Look, Mike, I can't imagine how Pandora allowed you to join her all-female club. If not for the Hand you're wearing - sworn to her service - I guarantee you she would have never done so. You're being used."

"You don't know shit, Lucas," said Mike, growing furious. "I'd advise shutting up."

"Fine."

They debarked and went down the hall to the Usamigaran temple. An exotic smell filled the shrine as they walked in. Jasmine. Mike's favorite incense. It was burning in braziers at the star-shaped altar to the right. Straight ahead they saw Dustin jawing with four other Magi; he waved when he saw his friends. Above them on the dais sat Will. He seemed dazed and out of focus. Mike noticed his right hand twitching on the arm rest of his chair. Frankly he didn't look much improved. *Oh, Will.*

Dustin joined them. "How's the Hand, Mike? Or, should I ask, how is it treating you?"

Mike didn't want to discuss it in front of Lucas. "Fine," he said, pleased that the pain had receded. "Tomorrow we'll find out, I guess."

"Don't talk about the Hand," said Lucas, triggered. "And don't be friendly with Mike. We're here to see Will."

"Hey, I'm Switzerland," said Dustin. "I never thought the Brothers had a better right to it than the Maidens. On the other hand, Mike, that was a pretty dick move on your part."

"Oh, you think?" said Lucas. "And yes we we do have a better right to the Hand. Demetrius thought so too."

"So did Auriga," said Mike. "And what kind of shithead was he?"

"The *only* reason," said Dustin, "that Demetrius and Auriga allied with the Brothers is because of you two. They thought it made sense to involve Will's friends - all of us aliens from another world. It was Demetrius's idea, and Auriga went along with it. I *know* this, as you know, because Demetrius is in my head all the time. Otherwise, who knows, the Magi might have offered their deal to the Maidens instead."

Lucas snorted. "I doubt it."

"How *do* you like being a Maiden, Mike?" asked Dustin.

"Can we *not* talk about this!" said Lucas.

Up yours, Lucas. "Love being a Maiden," he said to Dustin. "I've been happier three days in the Circle than I was three months in the Creed." A blatantly revisionist lie, but he wanted to piss off Lucas as much as possible.

Lucas looked at him. "See how happy you are when -"

"Shut up, you guys," said Dustin.

Another Magi entered the door from the hall to the barracks. He went over and talked quietly with some of the other Magi.

"This place took a pounding last night," said Dustin, watching them. "Everyone's a bit on edge."

"Dustin, what *happened*?" asked Mike.

"From what these guys and gals tell me, Will went apeshit. It was the island all over again. In his own bedroom, for Christ's sake. Auriga was with him. For some reason Will got triggered and started death-screaming. When the Magi found him, Auriga's body was on the floor in pieces - his bones shattered and his teeth everywhere."

"Fuckin' A," said Mike.

"Good riddance," said Lucas.

"You should see the room," said Dustin. "Will vaporized all the furniture and then brought down the walls and ceiling. It's like a fucking bomb hit it. The Magi will be clearing out stone forever. Not that Will needs to sleep there anymore. He's taken over Auriga's chamber."

"How did that happen?" asked Mike.

"The Magi elected him Chief Mage on the spot," said Dustin. "Their Spider Child. And believe me, there's no love lost over Auriga. He was universally disliked, if not despised."

"Did he kill any of the Magi?" asked Lucas. "In his rage?"

"No, but it sounds like it was dicey. They waited over a half hour for him to stop screaming. Then one of the Magi - Jess is her name - was finally able to talk him down."

"A half hour?" asked Mike. "*That* was the rumbling noise we heard last night?"

"Kanadius heard it too," said Lucas. "He was down here last night in the Brothers' temple. He thought it was the revolving passage - the machinery breaking down."

"Dustin, have you talked to Will?" asked Mike.

"Negative," said Dustin. "He's been sitting there like that since I got here, not looking very lively. But he is talking again, apparently, and he told the Magi he wants to speak to us."

At the dais one of the Magi was addressing Will, and he nodded to her. She turned and came up to them. "Our Chief Mage will speak to you now. The rest of us will leave the room for you."

"Thank you, Jess," said Dustin.

The Magi finished their business. One of them checked on the incense, and replaced the candles on the altar. Then he left the temple with the others.

Mike, Lucas, and Dustin walked up close to the dais. Will didn't look at them. He was looking over their heads, at the entry door forty feet away. He had done this since returning from the Isle; looked past anyone who stood near him. Mike wondered if it was a subconscious defense mechanism, to protect others. Was the Eye triggered when he looked directly at people? Is that what made him scream?

"Hi guys," said Will. He exhaled the words as if they'd been sitting on his tongue for hours.

"Hey, you're talking now," said Dustin. "That's a good sign."

"It's hard," said Will, enunciating each word. "I have to think each word to talk."

"Well, don't hurt yourself," said Mike. "How *did* you get your voice back?"

"When I came down after killing Auriga, I was able to talk. Each comedown... it affects me differently."

"That's rather alarming," said Dustin.

"And you're the boss," said Mike. "You're fucking twelve years old, Will, and they made you *Chief Mage*."

"Yeah, well, they were probably scared of being blown to atoms if they didn't," said Dustin.

"Did you ask for the position, Will?" asked Lucas.

"No," said Will. "They said I was the one with enough integrity and power to lead the Magi. But I don't know... I'm not a leader. And I can't get around easy... I hurt all the time... and it's exhausting to talk."

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, Will," said Lucas. "If there had been any other way off that island -"

"It's okay, Lucas," said Will. "What's done is done."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" asked Lucas.

Will shook his head slowly. "No. Nothing can be done for me."

They all looked at him, upset, and not knowing what to say.

Dustin finally asked: "Well, is there anything we can do to be sure you won't start screaming at us? A lot of people in this pyramid are concerned, especially your fellow Magi."

"Why *did* you kill Auriga, Will?" asked Mike. "I mean, not that we're complaining."

"I'm not sure," said Will. "I can't control the Eyebite. It... has a will of its own. But I don't think good people need to worry. I didn't kill any of you on the isle. I didn't kill any Magi last night."

But you would have killed us if you'd kept blowing the island to smithereens. Mike still didn't know how he had reached Will to make him stop.

"Okay," said Dustin. "I guess. But your room, Will. Jesus. One of these days, you're going to bring down the whole pyramid. And it won't matter who's good and bad."

"I know," said Will. "That's why I need to be alone as much as possible. So no one triggers me."

"Well," said Lucas. "You know I'm always here for you. If you ever need anything, or anyone to talk to, send one of the Magi to let me know."

Will smiled then at Lucas. It was a sad smile, as if Lucas had just announced that he was going away forever. "Thanks, Lucas. And I know you have to get back to your Brothers. Kanadius is looking for you. So I'll let you go." He stood up from his chair and began hobbling down the dais. His right hand kept twitching.

He walks like an old man. Like he belongs in a nursing home. How does a scream of death come from a kid this infirm?

"You're seeing Kanadius now?" asked Lucas, as Will came up to him.

"I see everything, Lucas." And then he hugged Lucas, clasping him in his frail arms. "Thank you... for everything you tried to do for me."

That stung. Mike cleared his throat. "Not to sound churlish, Will, but I was the one who tried saving you on the isle. Lucas was holding you down for Auriga's blade."

Will ignored Mike and hugged Lucas for a long time. Finally he let him go.

Lucas smiled at him and said good-bye, and then to Dustin as well. Ignoring Mike, he turned and left the temple.

Mike was ready to start throwing things. "Will, seriously -"

"Dustin," said Will, "you'll be here a while? Before going back?"

"Byers, I expect your Magi to fatten me up with a full-course lunch before I return to the city. Hell yes, I'll be here a while."

Will nodded and then turned to Mike. Up this close the Eye made him look monstrous. He still looked past Mike, not at him. "Come with me, Mike," he said. "We can talk in my chamber."

So that's it. Will has sided with Lucas and wants to tear me a new one. In private at least.

"Sure," said Mike. "Lead the way." *Your little Majesty*. He wanted to talk privately anyway, and ask Will about the Hand.

"Are you serious?" said Mike. He petted the wolf at his side, and the wolf licked his hands. Auriga's pet now his.

"He already likes you more than Auriga," said Will.

"Yeah, well, that's not saying much," said Mike, scratching behind the ear.

They were in Will's chamber, also formerly Auriga's. Will sat at the desk, and Mike was by the bed, bonding with his new friend. It turned out that Will had no intention of dressing Mike down. Will was beyond taking sides.

"Auriga was a terrible man," said Will. "But he treated his wolf okay."

Mike smiled. "Thanks Will. I'll treat him well too. I think Jilanka will like him. What's his name?"

"Sauce," said Will.

"'Sauce'?"

Will nodded.

Mike laughed. "Did Auriga let him drink booze, or is he a rude wolf?"

"Mike," said Will.

"Yeah?"

"Sit down."

Mike came over to the desk and sat in the visitor's chair. Sauce followed and sat next to him on the floor.

"How does the Hand feel?" asked Will.

"The pain's bearable today," said Mike. "Am I really going to be invincible?"

"Not entirely," said Will. "The Hand will cause your body to absorb any damage done to it, but only up to a point. If you're attacked by a hundred warriors, or if you fall more than a hundred feet... you could die in cases like that. But you'll also be empowered as a warrior. In D&D terms, the Hand will let you fight at five levels above your current one."

"Shit," said Mike, looking down at his withered appendage. It was hard to believe. The Hand seemed nothing like an artifact of lordly might.

He looked up at Will. "What about you? Are you still in pain?"

"I feel pain all the time," said Will. "It won't go away." He explained to Mike the stinging headaches that came from seeing things up to thirty feet. (He had left the room door open, and was looking over Mike's head out into the hallway.) And all the other things he could see without any pain at all. Mike listened, unable to believe any of it.

"Will," he said finally. "That means you're a fucking god."

"I don't like being a god," said Will. "I see everything."

Mike tried wrapping his head around it. "Everything - in any time - all at once?"

"I have to focus on things I really want to understand. But the Sight is always there. It's always happening. It's less focused when I'm with people and talking to them, like now, with you. But on some level I'm aware of everything that goes on in this world, even if a lot of it doesn't make sense."

"But you can actually see the future?" Mike insisted.

"Yes. Or alternate futures. Some future events are more certain than others."

"Do you know my future?"

Will nodded. "In your case, yes. I do."

Mike hesitated. *What the hell does that mean?* He wasn't sure he wanted to ask - or even *what* to ask. He tried another tack. "What are these visions like? Do you see everything in just a few seconds? Is it like a watching a movie at fast-forward speed?"

"Do you want to see?" asked Will.

Shit, no. Hell, yes. "I don't... I don't know."

"Give me your hand," said Will, holding out his own.

"Oh shit, Will. I don't want to see myself dying or doing something -"

"Not your future," said Will. "Your past. Something that's already happened. I'll show you how I see things."

Mike took Will's hand, cold and limp, and was instantly flooded with vision. He gasped unbelievably. The late morning of three days ago replayed itself as if he were an omniscient observer. It was indeed like watching a movie.

"Relax, Mike. Hold me and watch."

Relax? After your shitstorm on the island and blowing up your bedroom? And now you torture me with this memory? Mike tried to breathe deeply as he began to relive that harrowing morning. He'd been remade, just like Will...

... He waited outside the door of the Madaruan temple, a nervous wreck. Inside Jilanka was announcing Mike's arrival. He had told her the previous night - when he returned from the Isle - that he was renouncing the Brotherhood and wanted to give the Hand to the Maidens. Early this morning Jilanka told him that the Maidens wanted to receive his gift directly from him at the temple. But no man ever set foot in this temple. The penalty was execution.

He waited a long time. Finally the door opened and Jilanka came out. She looked paler than her own race.

"Are you okay?" he asked in alarm.

"She'll see you now," said Jilanka, her voice shaking, holding the door for him.

"Jilanka, what -"

"Just go in, Mike," she said. "Answer her questions honestly, and by the gods show her respect. Understand?"

He nodded, his stomach doing back-flips. If he died today, at least he had done plenty worth dying for. He hadn't just played D&D; for these past three months he'd lived it. He went into the temple, and Jilanka followed, closing the door behind them.

Inside, Mike stood where no man had stood for centuries. It was a shrine like the temples of Gorm and Usamigaras, dedicated to the old ways before the Zargonites came. Near the corner of the room opposite the door was an altar covered with a green and white cloth. There was a statue on the altar, about three feet tall, of a woman holding a sword and a sheaf of wheat. A white candle burned on each side of the statue. There were braziers to the side of the altar, burning with incense - an incense far more pungent (and pleasant, Mike thought) than the scents used by the Brothers, though less exotic than those used by the Usamigarans. It smelled like honeysuckle.

In front of the altar stood Madarua's Champion: much as her reputation suggested, as beautiful as she was strong, with not a hint of grace towards any who might defy her. What Mike would have given to see her and Kanadius go toe to toe.

Her Maidens formed a semicircle in the back. They had the customary attire: green shirts with chain mail, swords, and the bronze masks of a beautiful but grim looking woman. Mike approached the altar and stood before Pandora. He saw Jilanka put on her mask and join her Maidens behind him.

"So," said Pandora. "This is the alien Brother who has been bedding one of our own. And using mushrooms while shagging her right under our nose."

Angry murmurs filled the shrine.

The Champion's gaze fixed on him. "Jilanka had confessed her profane activities, and told me about the mission to the Island of Death. A mission that we were excluded from."

Mike cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. Your exclusion bothered me from the start. It's why I'm here today."

"You bring us the Hand of Gaius?" she asked.

Mike nodded and took the *bag of holding* from his belt. At once he heard swords drawn behind him. He raised the bag slowly to show he meant no harm. "May I?" he asked the Champion.

Pandora nodded.

Touchy little bitches.

He withdrew the Hand, blackened and withered, and offered it up to Pandora. She approached Mike and received it. She examined it carefully. "You realize that for doing this you'll be killed," she said. "Kanadius will execute you."

"I'll take my chances," he said, noncommittal. He was banking on Lucas. If Lucas objected to Mike being killed, which he almost certainly would, then Kanadius would probably defer to Gorm's Chosen.

Pandora looked at her Maidens. Moments passed and they seemed to silently agree on something.

She turned back to Mike: "What about taking your chances with those to whom you have extended a surfeit of good will? And whose Maiden you are clearly in love with?"

Mike frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I offer you a place in our Circle."

"Wha - *excuse me?*"

Pandora smiled. "According to Jilanka, you have already renounced your Brotherhood vows, even if you haven't informed the Brothers yet. So technically I'm not asking you to convert. Just to join. You believe in us enough to betray your vows and gift us with something that will give us an immense edge over the Brothers. And Jilanka has testified to your

sympathetic ear on certain issues of Maiden doctrine. And your skills as a warrior are well known in this pyramid."

Mike was bewildered. "Maybe I've completely misunderstood the Madaruan religion. Since when do you accept men as temple warriors?"

"It's actually happened before," said Pandora.

"It has?" He couldn't believe it. A male Maiden was an oxymoron.

"An extremely rare event, granted, given the arrogant nature of men. The Circle is an affront to feelings of male superiority, especially in matters of war. But there is the rare man who grasps our doctrine and sees its wisdom. There was Wyrion Sind, who converted from the Brotherhood in 236 AC, and Meshan Grympur, who was a hard-core Zargonite; he had a radical conversion to Madarua in 773 AC. Two of our greatest heroes. You, Mike Wheeler, would be the third male Maiden since the fall of the kingdom - if you accept my offer."

Mike knew from his history lessons in the Brotherhood that the current year was 1055 AC, and that the Cynidicean kingdom fell in 127 BC - when King Alexander and Queen Zenobia were assassinated. So in the span of those 1182 years, two men had somehow managed to become accepted as full members in an all-female cult. What had they done? Offered up Gaius's Tongue and Cock?

"Bear in mind," said Pandora, "that I don't make this offer lightly, nor purely out of gratitude. It's Jilanka's testimony about you, and what I see in you today, that impels me to bring you into our fold. Your offer of Gaius's Hand simply confirms our perception of you."

Mike cursed Jilanka for not giving him a heads up about this offer. Or had she not known that Pandora would make it? Did Pandora want an answer now? Would she and the Maidens be offended if he refused? Would Jilanka?

He fumbled for a reply. "It's... a very nice offer... and I'm flattered..."

"I don't flatter," snapped Pandora. "And I'm making you a serious offer, not a nice one. Take it seriously before you answer."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't mean to offend." Then he wondered something: "But hold on... when a male becomes a Maiden, are you saying that he has to, you know, literally *become a maiden*? I'm sorry, but there's no way I'm becoming a eunuch."

At that, Pandora laughed. All the Maidens laughed. Mike could hear Jilanka laughing too, behind him.

"I'm asking a serious question," he barked at Pandora. "Maybe *you* could take it seriously before you answer."

It was a bad thing to say. The Maidens hissed. No man spoke to Madarua's Champion that way, especially in her own temple. Some of them reached for their swords again.

Pandora stopped them with a gesture. Her eyes never left Mike. "I assure you, Mike Wheeler, that I take everything said in this shrine with the utmost seriousness. And no, you are not required to be a castrate. There is nothing *inherently* wrong or deficient in being male while serving the goddess. Unfortunately your ex-Brothers don't extend the same doctrinal courtesies. There has never been a female Brother, and I guarantee you there never will be."

Mike nodded, wanting more time to think. He could feel Jilanka's eyes on him from behind. *She will be spared punishment for sleeping with the enemy. Because I bring the Hand. And if I submit to them.* He felt pressures and implied threats, despite Pandora's benign words. *They want a male Maiden. More than anything.* It would increase the cult's legitimacy and help put to bed their reputation as all-out male haters. Theoretically anyway.

"You may take a day to consider this," said Pandora. "But if you refuse, you will never be offered again." Then she added, almost as an afterthought: "And don't worry about your drug habit. Jilanka has come clean about the details of that as well."

Mike flushed red and his heart began to race.

"She tells me that she knows how to mix mushrooms so that addiction isn't a problem and - even more incredibly - so that it is possible to turn off the drug effects, and back on again, through sheer will power. Is this true?"

Mike knew that lying would be suicide. He nodded.

The Champion's eyes narrowed. "Speak when you answer me."

He cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am."

Pandora nodded. "And it was she who taught you this? Not the other way around? She's not protecting you?"

"No... no, ma'am. How would I ever know a secret like that about mushrooms?"

"Because you're an alien from another world," said Pandora bluntly. "I don't know what kind of knowledge you have. Jilanka is a yokel who thinks with her twat. That she discovered this secret accidentally is nothing short of stupendous."

It's precisely her insatiable twat that led her to the discovery. Jilanka had needed to overpower men so that she could rape them. That naturally led her to use the sex craze/slow-time combo. Mike refrained from pointing out the obvious.

"Rest assured," said Pandora, "that Jilanka will be punished as she deserves. For breaking her oath repeatedly and concealing it from us. Not just the drugs, but her intimacy with you - while you still wore a Brother's mask." Pandora hadn't deigned to look at Jilanka throughout this. "She hoped that bringing you to us with the Hand might give her a pass. In this she was quite wrong. Her punishment will be severe. But she will not be expelled."

"How will she be punished?" he asked, feeling sick.

"She will be lashed forty-nine times. For using drugs. She will also wear a choke pear in her cunt for twenty-four hours. For her activities with you on that abominable altar."

Choke pear? What the hell is that?

"Afterwards she will be forgiven and the slate wiped clean. Indeed, moving forward, I am inclined to release all Maidens from the *Circle's* prohibition against mushrooms - if they are mixed so that they are non-addictive. But this is something I need to examine at considerable length. Regardless of whether you join us or not."

Mike suddenly realized how much he did want to join them. "I accept your offer," he blurted out, before any more doubts could paralyze him. "I mean... if you all really want to share your barracks with a guy."

Pandora's smile was warm, and faintly eager. "Then consider yourself welcome among the Maidens, Mike Wheeler, and on equal terms with the nine warriors standing around you." She put on her mask and faced her warriors: "*Maidens!*"

Nine women drew their swords, saluting their new sister: "*Welcome, Mike! Be true among us!*"

Mike, having no clue what the right response was, opted for humility. He bowed low to Pandora, and then turned and bowed to the Maidens. *Don't open your mouth. You'll make an ass of yourself.* He held each bow for a good fifteen seconds.

Pandora seemed pleased. "Now take your sword, Mike, and draw your blood."

Mike knew the ritual from the D&D module. He drew his sword and pricked his left forefinger. Then he smeared the blood on his sword blade. Approaching the altar, he placed the sword on it. Before Pandora could instruct him, he beat her to it: "*I swear to uphold the honor of Madarua, with my life and blood.*"

Pandora and her Maidens murmured approvingly (no doubt thinking that Jilanka had prepped him on this point). One of the Maidens had a brander. Mike was ready for this. He'd had the blue lightning bolt of Gorm

burned onto his right upper arm. He assumed that would be coming off at some point. The Maiden took his left hand, turned it over, and then pressed the tool into the inside of his wrist. Mike winced. The burn would feel uncomfortable for a day or two. She released him and Mike looked at his wrist. It was the sickle of Madarua. He was now a Maiden.

They thundered again: *"Welcome, Mike! Be true among us!"*

Another Maiden handed him his uniform - the bronze mask and green tunic of the cult. Mike removed his blue shirt of the Brothers (he'd already discarded his gold mask) and put them both on. Pandora tore the blue shirt into pieces and threw them on the floor. Then she held up a hand, and the Maidens formed a circle around him.

"Mike Wheeler is now our sister. We defend him with our life and blood, as he defends us. He serves with us, eats with us, fights alongside us. He will not sleep in our barracks, however. I have decided on an arrangement. He and Jilanka have been carrying out an unholy affair in the obscene temple shunned by everyone. Jilanka will be punished for this, as I have said, but from this day forward I give her and Mike's affair my blessing." She turned to Mike: "Provided that you agree to never set foot in that temple ever again. Instead, there is an old storeroom in the same area. I suggest you move in there at once. I decree that room to be under Maiden protection. Jilanka will be free to join you in a day, once I remove the choke pear from her troublesome twat."

Mike scarcely believed his ears. Not only had he been accepted as a male Maiden, he could keep his girlfriend. But he was sickened by the thought of Jilanka being lashed, and he didn't like the sound of whatever a choke pear was. He turned and looked for Jilanka in the crowd of masked Maidens. It was hard to tell who was who. Eventually he spotted her, and she nodded to him.

Very well.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Mike, facing Pandora again. "With your leave, I'll start moving into that room right away. I also have to tell the Brothers what I've done here." *Renounced my vows. Become a Maiden. Given the Hand away. Jesus, they'll cry for my blood. I'm sorry, Lucas...*

"Hold," said Pandora. "We're not finished."

"We're not?"

"No."

She nodded at someone behind Mike. At once he was seized by two Maidens, who forced him to his knees.

"Hey!" Mike shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Relax, Mike," said Pandora. "You are one of us. And we are gifting you as you have gifted us."

"What do you mean?" he asked, panicking.

"We are removing your right hand, and giving you the Hand of Gaius."

"*What?!*" shouted two voices at once.

It was Mike and someone behind him: Jilanka. His girlfriend was stunned. Clearly Pandora hadn't briefed her about this part of the bargain.

"This is as much for practical reasons as anything else. When the Brothers learn of your treachery, it will be war between us. They would stop at nothing to kill any one of my Maidens if she wore the Hand. With you they'll think twice."

"Are you crazy?" shouted Mike. "*Because* I'm a traitor, they'll want to kill me for wearing the Hand!"

"Your friend Lucas might object. And it's clear from everything we've heard that the Brothers obey Lucas as they do the word of Gorm. They would even defy Kanadius, if Lucas ever opposed his will."

Mike felt the walls closing in. "Pandora, *please*. I don't want the Hand." He saw Will going under the knife. "I don't want my hand chopped off." The devastating rage. "I don't want to be out of control." *To murder people*. Will, annihilating everything in sight.

She came up to him and held his cheeks. "Losing control is nothing to fear - if your heart is true. You serve the goddess, and her servants support you. I will help you."

"You'll help me." Who was going to help this bitch when the Hand cried for her blood?

Her claim that he was the only practical candidate for the Hand - against the threat of Gormish assassins - was a blatant lie. She had already said at the start that she believed Kanadius would want him executed for his treason. She was foisting the Hand on him so that if it proved uncontrollable - if its curse was too great - then Mike, as a male newbie, was expendable. Pandora would sooner execute him than another Maiden. On the other hand, if the Hand's power could be harnessed with minimal risk, then the Maidens would have their third male warrior in eleven centuries - a super warrior - and it would bathe the cult in a glow of tolerance for the opposite gender. A win-win situation for Pandora.

"I'll help you indeed, Mike Wheeler," said Madarua's Champion. She leaned over and kissed his forehead, and then nodded again.

One of his captors kicked his legs out from under him. When he hit the floor the other Maiden pulled his right arm out in front. A third Maiden

from the side produced a wicked-looking weapon - not a sword, but a sickle.

"No!" screamed Mike. "I don't want this! *I said I don't want this!!!*"
The sickle was raised high. The candlelight gleamed on its blade.
"No fears," Pandora chided, almost whispering. "No fears at all."
"Please!" said Mike. *I tried to save Will from this! I tried!*
The sickle looked wicked as it came down hard. Mike screamed.
And he went on screaming for a long time.

Mike pulled his hand away from Will. He couldn't relive the transplant. He looked down at the Hand - *his* Hand now - and shuddered. By tomorrow it would be fully healed. He wasn't sure what kind of person he would be.

"Thanks a heap for doing that to me again," he said.

"It's how I see things," said Will.

"In the blink of your Eye, literally," said Mike. That whole encounter had replayed in milliseconds, but it felt like he had absorbed it in real time, like a movie. "I can't imagine what it's like for you, seeing things like that every single moment of the day."

"I wish I didn't have the Eye, Mike," he said. His voice broke: "I wish I could go home."

Mike's eyes filled with tears. "I know. Me too." Real D&D wasn't all fun and adventure, not even half. It was mountains of curses and misery.

"I'm a monster now," said Will.

"Well, I'm glad you killed Auriga. He deserved it."

"I'm not," said Will.

"What?"

"I don't like to kill anyone. And I don't like *liking* to kill."

"I'm afraid that's going to happen to me, starting tomorrow," said Mike.

"You'll have it easier than me," said Will. "And harder."

"What do you mean?"

"The curse of the Eye is something I'll live with constantly. The curse of the Hand lasts for one day. The fifth day. That's tomorrow. You get it out of the way, and it's over."

Mike's bowels turned to water. "I'll be cursed tomorrow?"

"Yes. The five-finger curse."

Mike didn't like the sound of that. "What's the five-finger curse?"

Will didn't answer. His head bobbed slowly up and down.

"Will?"

Will blinked his right eye. "Yes... Mike?"

Jesus Christ. "What's the fucking five-finger curse?"

"The curse of the Hand."

Mike wanted to scream. "What *is* that? What is the curse of the fucking Hand?" Will was becoming a useless Yoda.

Will was shaking his head and muttering. He finally spoke: "You have to kill five friends, Mike."

Mike felt smacked by a ten-ton boulder.

"I told you, Mike... easier... and harder."

"You're saying I have to murder five friends?"

Will nodded.

"Well, I'm not doing that. How do I avoid the curse, or step around it? There's got to be a way, right?"

"No, Mike. It can't be avoided."

"I won't do it!" Panic began filling his chest. "I won't. Period."

"That would be a bad choice," said Will.

"Why is that?"

"If you don't kill five friends tomorrow, the Hand will make you slaughter innocent people every day of your life. You'll become a mass murderer."

"I don't have that many friends! I have you, Lucas, and Dustin. And Jilanka."

"They don't have to be close friends, and they don't even have to be current friends. Anyone who is or was a friend fulfills the curse. Any of the Brothers would qualify, even if they don't like you now. They were your friends for three months. Or any of the people you know in the city - in the Gormish stronghold. A lot of those people - and the kids especially - worshiped you."

"I'm not killing kids! I'm not killing anyone! I'm not a murderer, Will."

"It's either five people tomorrow or hundreds of people for the rest of your life. Choose the five, Mike."

"No, I'm not doing it," said Mike, feeling small and helpless.

"But you will, Mike." Will's voice conveyed a deep sorrow, for what he'd seen Mike do. On a future path that showed no alternative. "I'm sorry... but you will. I've seen it. And you have to. You must."

Mike barged into the temple of Gorm. His sword was drawn and his intentions quite plain.

"Hey!" shouted Krayzen, one of the Brothers. All nine of them were there, practicing drills, as Mike knew they would be at this time. They stopped short when they saw him.

"What are you doing here, Mike?" demanded Djibor.

"How dare you profane our temple!" yelled Azariah. "You filthy apostate!"

Mike breathed deeply, intent on carrying out what he set out to do - what Will told him yesterday that he must do. He wouldn't become a mass murderer. Five of these Brothers had to die.

"I'm going to kill some of you," he announced to his former Brothers. "Forgive me." *Madarua forgive me.*

They looked at each other, and then eight of them had their swords drawn. Krayzen ran around Mike and out of the room, bounding down the hall to the revolving passage. Mike let him go.

He's running to tell Kanadius. So be it. All that matters is that Lucas isn't here.

Kanadius was upstairs in this chamber. Lucas was with Jilanka, in her and Mike's room near the abandoned temple. She and Mike had coordinated a way to keep Lucas out of this mess. Jilanka sent for Lucas on false pretensions - that she wanted to speak to him privately about her and Mike's relationship, and concerns that she had about Mike. A decoy to keep Lucas occupied while Mike committed this terrible deed.

Only hours ago he had explained the curse to Pandora: what Will told him yesterday, and how he intended to meet the curse's demand with minimal cost. Pandora had grimly approved. Five lives were a perfect strike against Brothers - enough to do meaningful harm without wiping out the temple force altogether. The Brothers were oppressive, but a necessary evil against the Zargonites. If Kanadius himself were one of the casualties, then so much the better, she said.

Mike had no intentions of killing Kanadius. He feared the Grand Master's replacement too much. After what he was about to do in this room, the Brothers would call for a hothead to lead them - a militant or a fanatic or, even worse, Lucas himself. Mike couldn't abide the thought of Lucas in charge of this temple. His selfless righteousness had been a tough pill to swallow recently.

"I'm sorry for this," he said again. These eight men had been his friends only days ago.

"Is this you, Mike?" asked Gore. "Or the Hand?"

"Both," snarled Mike, as he charged them all.

They were shocked by his bold assault on eight temple warriors, but they were ready. Or so they thought. They hadn't a prayer. This was the fifth day: Mike wasn't invulnerable yet - that would come *after* he killed five of these Brothers - but he was unfathomably deadly. He had woken this morning to a fully assimilated Hand. A Hand that exulted in treachery.

Forgive me.

He leaped and whirled, and the Brothers shouted at what they saw. They couldn't strike him; he was way too fast and evaded their blades with some incredible sixth sense. He chose his five victims - his *friends* - randomly, in no particular order, honoring in his mind what they had done for him:

Hyme. My friend in theology. When I ridiculed dogma, you explained The Creed. The importance of texts and original meanings. Mike had no use for those original meanings, but thanks to Hyme he knew they at least mattered. A text wasn't open to any interpretation. Hyme: split up the groin and disemboweled.

Gore. My friend in training. When my sword got ideas, you gave it better ones. An extension of the arm; a part of the body; of the Hand. Mike wielded that Hand now, sword and arm, like an artist. Gore: run through the heart.

Lazur. My friend at the table. When food was short, you shared yours. Manyan, lentils, skritch, and dates. Spartan diets that had done Mike good; taught him frugality; improved his health. Lazur: cut open at the neck.

Djibor. My friend on the first day. When I made a fool of myself, you smacked me down. With a warrior discipline that wasn't unkind. Thanks to this man, Mike knew integrity. Djibor: straight through the eye out the back of the head.

All of them, friends, slain in moments. A sword did the job, and the Hand made it happen - with fluid ease.

And now a fifth Brother, to seal the curse. Mike leaped on him:

Coval. My friend when I didn't deserve one. That day I treated everyone like crap. Coval had taken it on the chin worse than anyone that day. Yet he defended Mike. Defended him to the teeth, seeing the light and goodness in this alien newbie. Coval: sliced from - no - *sliced* -
- what? -

Mike's blade was smacked away and Coval shoved aside. A figure out of nowhere danced in front of Mike, claiming the offensive, and ordered the remaining Brothers not to interfere. Mike faltered out of surprise that became rage. The one standing before him had no right to be here. Mike

had made sure of it; *arranged it*, by God, to have him out of the way, so that no heroics could interfere. Yet here he was.

Mike parried the attack as if batting away a fly. His opponent was the better swordsman. In their months of sparring matches he beat Mike three times out of four. But Mike was more than Mike, channeling a power that demanded blood - now from the most precious friendship of all.

No!

Yes:

Lucas. My best friend. For years since we were six. Through good and bad, we were friends writ for life. At school, at home, they'd had each others backs. Here in the Lost City just the same. Lucas: chopped - no! - chopped -

No!



"Run away, Lucas," he cried, swinging his sword, unable to resist the blood call. Lucas mistook the warning and doubled down. Every fiber of his being went into stopping this renegade's slaughter.

"*I said run away!*" screamed Mike, bashing Lucas's sword out of his hand. It went flying against the temple wall and clanged to the floor. Lucas stared at Mike. Mike tried to throw away his sword, then clutched it, craving the blood in front of him. Lucas shouted at Mike and backed away. Mike advanced. Lucas stepped back... and then stopped to look his friend in the eye:

"Jilanka told me your little plan. I feel sorry for you, Mike."

The look of pity on Lucas's face put Mike over. *Pity me? Pity me, you shit?*

He suddenly, and very genuinely, wanted to kill Lucas.

He clutched his sword ferociously:

"*I'll show you who needs pity!*" screamed Mike.

Lucas didn't move to defend himself as Mike chopped his head off. It fell horribly on the floor, a face he'd known forever, running red and lifeless. Like the bird man's. On that first day, when he and Lucas had taken this new world by storm. They'd grown up fast; fought hell hounds and clobbered hobgoblins. A day when friendship seemed eternal, and Mike would have died so his best one could live.

Lucas... I didn't... I didn't mean...

Mike froze seeing what he did, and dropped his sword. Fell on his knees and cried Lucas's name. He was sorry, he didn't mean it, he couldn't *help* it, please, please, this wasn't right...

He was seized by many hands. Yanked to his feet by surviving Brothers: Druids, Coval, Moser, Azariah. They shouted as one for the execution of the traitor and murderer - and to some, god-killer - Mike Wheeler. Mike could have broken free and pulverized them all. He had fulfilled the five-finger curse; he was already brimming with near invincibility. He just wanted Lucas back. And Hyme. And Gore. And Lazur. And Djibor. He kept saying he was sorry. The Brothers screamed and swore he'd burn in the Hells.

Then Kanadius was there. Krayzen had fetched him. The Grand Master stared at the carnage, then looked at Mike, his face as thunderous as Gorm's lightning bolt.

"Just kill me," Mike sobbed. "Please, now."

Kanadius drew his sword. "Only Gorm can save you now, Mike. Hold him down, Brothers."

The four Brothers positioned him for decapitation.

"Mike Wheeler, I sentence you to die," said Kanadius. "For treason against the Brotherhood, and for the treacherous murder of your former Brothers. Above all, for slaying Gorm's Chosen prophet, Lucas Sinclair, who was once your best friend. Do you have any final words?"

Mike shook his head, crying.

Kanadius nodded. "I will slay you and take back the Hand for the Brotherhood. In this we will be avenged. What we decide to do with the Hand will be long debated. May Gorm have mercy on your soul." The Grand Master raised his sword.

Hardly aware of himself, Mike threw off his captors and tackled Kanadius as if a football linebacker. His Hand grabbed the sword from the Grand Master's grip and sent it to the floor. He shoved Kanadius down, somersaulted over him, and then was up and running out of the temple. He was still crying. He had done all of this with little effort, let alone thought. The Brothers yelled in outrage. Kanadius told them to leave it. Mike was unassailable now.

The revolving passage still waited where Kanadius and Krayzen had left it. Mike took the passage to the south corridor.

He had wanted to die back in that room and still did. But his biology had other ideas. It craved survival, and Mike's reflexes had taken over. Those reflexes were on a whole new plane, now that the Hand's curse was fulfilled. He bounded upstairs to the second tier like a cheetah.

Lucas... I loved you!

And hated himself; he couldn't bear the thought of any person seeing him. Not even Jilanka, who had betrayed him anyway. She had told Lucas what Mike intended, so that Lucas would interfere and die by the Hand. No one to trust.

One place to run.

Up to the second tier, and into the room he'd shared with Lucas. He opened a drawer and took Lucas's sun-goggles; his own were downstairs with Jilanka. Then he was out and up, and up all the way. Out onto the pyramid top, where the sun blinded him, even through the goggles. He fell down, crying for Lucas. Pounded his right hand against the stone - cursing what he'd become, the Isle quest, Dustin's stupid poster, and ever having come to this world. If Nancy and his parents could see him now, if they knew even half his perfidies, they'd never own up to him.

Damn you, Will. You saw this. You saw it! Why didn't you warn me? Why didn't you tell any of us?

Eventually he got up and looked around. The ruins of old Cynidicea lay beneath him, and beyond, the vast blinding desert. Through his tears it looked desolate; sane; free of betrayal and hurt.

Trust no one. And hurt no one.

That's how it would be now.

Putting the Lost City behind him, Mike Wheeler walked down the pyramid steps, and out into the desert. To whatever lay beyond.

Part 3:
**The Dream of the Desert
Garden**

Chapter Twelve:

Warriors of the Eternal Truth

The shakes were bad, the panic attacks worse. And now these goddamn nightmares.

He dreamt that he was back in Hawkins, eating breakfast with Jonathan. Eggs, sausage, toast; his brother's cooking, which was almost as good as his mother's, less the helicopter nagging that came with it. Mom's plate sat on the table waiting. She had slept late and was throwing on clothes. Had to be at work soon.

Jonathan was surly, saying how everyone at school thought he was a freak. Will - who for some reason couldn't taste the sausage he was eating - told Jonathan that wasn't how he saw him. Jonathan looked at him warily: "How do you see me, Will?"

"With that ugly eye of his," said his mother, sliding into her seat across from Will. "Look at it," she picked up her fork and pointed it at him. "It's bloated, bloodshot, and doesn't blink. When he sees you, it's through the lens of a monster. It's how he sees me."

Will felt like a monster. He knew the Eye made his face look like a Halloween mask. But this wasn't how he saw his mom and brother. For that matter, he couldn't see them at all. The Eye didn't show anything from his home world. This scene was impossible; a dream. *And I am terrified.*

Jonathan and his mother were eating ravenously now, jabbing knives and forks into their eggs and sausage patties. Will tried to rouse himself. *Wake up.* But the dream held him down. His breakfast plate didn't smell good anymore. It was spoiling before his eyes. The eggs had turned green (like in the Dr. Seuss book) and the sausages were bleeding. Will didn't care about the food. He just wanted to *talk* - to Jonathan, and especially to

mom. He hadn't seen them in years... no, not that long, but it felt that long when you experienced everything, in all times, like a god.

Mom wouldn't look at him as she fed her face. With her mouth full she ranted at Jonathan: "He's a monster and murderer. I raised a psychopath for a son. A monster and maniac. Look what I raised." She pointed at Will, furious: "*Look what I raised! Look at that thing!*"

Jonathan was banging his knife and fork on his plate, as if trying to ward off his mother's wrath with a cacophonous drum solo. He began crying and called himself a freak.

"*Stop your sniveling!*" screamed his mother. Without warning she hurled her knife sideways. It hit the kitchen window and shattered it. "*Your brother is the freak! Look at him!*" She brought up her fork and plunged it down into the table top, where it stood vibrating like an accusation. "*Look at him!*" she repeated. "*He's a monster and he'll kill everyone he sees! Everyone!*"

Will shook his head, trying to will away the scene. *Stop seeing them. Wake up.* He was in bed. Not this perverted kitchen.

"*Everyone! Everywhere!*" yelled his mother, standing up, and clearly about to do something dramatic. "*My Will! He'll destroy the world if I don't destroy him, Jonathan!*"

Mom! No -!

Mom seized her breakfast plate and with the might of a Maiden winged it like a frisbee. Will gaped as it smashed into his head and threw him backwards in his chair. He fell to the floor and - and -

- and screamed as he sat up in bed. Sweating and breathing hard. He hoped none of the Magi had heard him. He looked with his Eye: they were all asleep down the hall. In sweeter dreams.

He sat for a while, crying. For the family he would never see again, and for the destructive person he'd become. The mother in his dream was a virulent fiction, but she was right about one thing: he had an awful power he couldn't control.

He lay back down, scared of closing his right eye. He needed more sleep but feared more nightmares. He wanted his mother - his real mother, who loved him unconditionally - but she was out of reach. In the days following Lucas's death and Mike's flight into the desert, Will had asked Dustin to send him back to Hawkins with the "Black Passage" spell. He'd had enough, period, and was hoping that the Eye's powers and painful effects would be nullified in his home world. He'd seen the future, of

course, and some of those visions showed him playing a role in what was coming for Cynidicea. But he was in no mood to respect fate. He was a kid who wanted his mother.

The spell hadn't worked. Dustin recited the incantation twice, just to be sure, but Will didn't go anywhere. The store clerk had either lied about how often the spell could be used (every 28 days, supposedly), or it worked in one direction only.

Probably the latter. The resurrection ("Zombie") spell had worked since Demetrius first used it to raise Lucas's twelve-year old body. A month later he had resurrected a child in the Usamigaran stronghold (who fell from the fortress wall), and then months after that a Cynidicean man (who was killed in the street by a drunkard). So the scroll spells were clearly reusable.

Lucas could have been raised a second time, if Kanadius had agreed to it. He had rejected Demetrius's request for Lucas's severed corpse, still believing resurrection to be questionable. There was some difference of opinion among the remaining Brothers, but Kanadius wouldn't risk it without a clear sign from Gorm. The deity had chosen Lucas once, and Lucas had seemed to fulfill his special role. As an exemplar of warrior integrity, he made the ultimate sacrifice: allowing his best friend to strike him down, so that a fellow Brother could be saved. There was no reason, said Kanadius, for Lucas to cheat death a second time. And no one knew where the Brothers had buried Lucas.

Nor did Will. His Eye had nothing to say on the subject. Will couldn't always see his Hawkins friends. It had to do with them being other-worldly; the Eye was native to this world. On top of that, Mike's future was especially hard to see since he fully bonded with the Hand. Somehow the Hand obscured future sight, or alternatively, wearing the Hand in itself made Mike's future indeterminate.

Mike, he thought. I miss home. Your basement. The four of us. Our games. Real D&D isn't fun. I remember being happy but forget what happiness was.

Drifting back to sleep, he thought of Mike's basement. His dreams weren't as bad this time.

A few hours later, he woke. He lay for a few minutes, dreading the day ahead of him. It would be a long one.

He rose from bed feeling like a cripple. Which he essentially was; Auriga had reformed him on the Isle. But in the four months without Lucas

and Mike, he'd become worse than a cripple. He was managing his headaches but paid for it in the other ways - the shakes, the panic attacks, the goddamn nightmares.

Will Byers was a drug addict.

He reached for the peach fuzz, on the stand by his bed. He always kept a supply within reach, and many more of the mushrooms were in his desk. 400 gold pieces a head. One every morning, one before bed. An expensive habit, but he would have killed himself otherwise. The headaches were a knife, twisting inside him. The grade-1 healing mushrooms neutralized pain. Not completely in his case: this was the Eye of Gaius, after all. Its effects could be dampened only to a point. But the drugs made it bearable. The knife went away and left a dull throbbing that lasted for most of the day. The second shroom at night let him sleep - with nightmares instead of pain. Cut off the nose, spite the face. The addict's burden.

A burden that Mike and Jilanka escaped, but not me.

For the millionth time, Will resented the fact that Mike and his lady friend had used drugs to "shag each other to kingdom come" - as Dustin put it - without addiction worries. How nice. Will wasn't interested in recreation. He just needed his headaches to go away. He had worked with Demetrius to procure healing mushrooms, and they had put Jilanka's theory to the test. He tried all sorts of combinations with the grade-1 healing shrooms - other healing shrooms, acid trips, sedatives, amphetamines. None of the combos cancelled addiction, and none enabled him to turn the effects on and off with his mind. Demetrius thought Will's mind had been compromised by the Eye, and Jilanka opined that his body was too frail to fend off addiction, but they were both passing gas. The answer was shown by the Eye when Will probed deeper with his omniscience: it was the nature of the healing mushrooms. They were the functional inverse of poison shrooms, healing instead of killing, and like the poisons could not be used in conjunction with other kinds to produce combo benefits. Anyone taking a poison would die. Anyone relying on healing was subject to addiction. No way around it.

Even Demetrius's prayers were useless. The priest would need to cast two prayers - *cure disease* and *neutralize poison* - on Will every day to keep him free of addiction, and people down in the Usamigaran community relied on those prayers. Disease was common in the undercity. Demetrius couldn't be Will's special savior.

The Zargonites were his saviors. Their gardens; the peach-colored shrooms. William Byers, the most powerful being in Cynidicea, was as much a slave to addiction as most residents of the undercity.

It took a while for the drug to kick in. When the pain was negligible, Will got busy preparing himself for a day of fireworks.

They started filing into his chamber early that afternoon. The cult leaders of the old gods. For the first time in ages, the leaders of the three cults would sit together as equals, and debate the fate of the Lost City.

Will knew that fate was grim, but his Eye showed alternate ways of it playing out. Things weren't entirely hopeless. The trick was to get these loggerheads to put aside their differences and band against the real enemy. Which wasn't the Zargonites.

Pandora and Fiana arrived, joining him and Demetrius. Fiana was the high priestess of the Madaruan stronghold, and completely humorless, though less combative than Pandora.

It was a miracle they had all agreed to this meeting. Will had summoned them only yesterday, and had arranged for the Magi to bring into his room a round table, so that everyone sat as an implied equal. A feeble gesture, truly. As if Arthurian intentions could paper over centuries of resentments and ill will. And Will was no mediator. He was relying on Demetrius to build bridges here today.

Dustin was always good at that too. Reconciliations. Dustin and Demetrius's personalities had blended significantly over seven months. Either one of them could have run this meeting better than he was about to.

Finally the Gormish representatives entered and sat. Everyone was present: Kanadius and Zoran for Gorm; Pandora and Fiana for Madarua; Will and Demetrius for Usamigaras. Temple leader and high priest; pyramid and city stronghold. Raen was the high priest for Usamigaras but had sent Demetrius in his place, given Demetrius/Dustin's close ties to Will. That was a problem right off the bat.

"Where's Raen?" demanded Kanadius.

"Raen sent me to represent him," said Demetrius.

"Already I don't like this," said Kanadius, looking at Will. "Demetrius is your friend, and you're the one who called this emergency meeting. It smacks of personal agenda, whatever we're here for."

"Demetrius is in the dark as much as the rest of you," said Will, ignoring everyone's stares. He was used to it. His Eye made him look monstrous. Especially as a child. "I've told him nothing yet."

"So you say," retorted the Grand Master.

"Honestly, Kanadius," said Demetrius, "can we not kill this meeting before it starts? All of us have equal voting power at this meeting. Each

cult has two members. There's nothing sinister going on here. Don't manufacture offense."

"I agree," said Fiana, before Kanadius could flame Demetrius. "Let's get on with it. I want Will to explain why he called this emergency meeting. And I hope he has a very good reason."

"We're about to be invaded," said Will.

They stared at him, incredulous.

"Invaded?" said Zoran. "You mean desert marauders? The pyramid entrance takes care of intruders."

"No, not marauders," said Will. "I mean a real army. A huge army. An army that has no concept of surrender. They'd be just as happy to die trying to conquer the Lost City as they would to conquer it."

Pandora laughed. "Then they'll get their wish!"

"I said a huge army," said Will. "About a thousand. How many warriors and magi and priests can fight for the old cults? About sixty, right?"

That silenced the table.

Demetrius finally spoke. "Seriously, Will, an army of a thousand? Where the hell are they coming from. Cynidicea is in the middle of nowhere. The nearest major town is, like, forty miles away."

"Distance means nothing to this army. They'd march three hundred miles to wipe out unbelievers. And that's what we are: unbelievers who don't follow the religion of the surface land."

Fiana was shaking her head. "Wait a minute. How do they suddenly know of us?"

"More importantly, who *are* they?" asked Zoran. "We know nothing about the surface world or what goes on up there. Our history books stop over eleven hundred years ago." The cults of the old gods had taken care to preserve their history. Each had an impressive library in the underground strongholds. Their ancestors had salvaged all the books they could when the surface city fell to invaders over a millennium ago. But that history was literally all ancient. It stopped in the year 98 BC, when the surface city of Cynidicea was sacked and burned.

"What's there to know?" said Pandora. "Invaders are invaders."

"The surface desert is - or was - a land called Ylaruam," said Demetrius. "But who knows what Ylaruam is like today. I've a feeling you're going to tell us, Will."

"For one thing, it's no longer Ylaruam," said Will. "It's Yshia. The Emirates of Yshia. Six emirates under control of a ruling Caliph in the city of Yshia, which used to be Ylaruam City."

Kanadius shrugged. "Names change. Who cares?"

"Everyone cared when it happened," said Will. "It was a little over two centuries ago, and the Alasiyan Desert hasn't gotten any peace since. Except for a small time recently. But as of last year, everything's back to warfare again, and it's not pretty. At all."

"You'll have to give us the details, Will," said Demetrius. "A solid history lesson. We don't have your god's eye view of the world."

"Make it fast," said Pandora. "I didn't come here to be lectured."

"Nor I," said Kanadius.

"Actually," said Zoran, "I'm with Demetrius. Look at this practically. We've always been chafing at our ignorance of the world our ancestors come from. Will's knowledge is something we should be using. Why else did we go the Isle to retrieve the Eye?"

"Fine," said Fiana, looking at Will. "Tell us, little man. What's the world like on the surface?"

Will took a deep breath and began. It was a tale of a mad prophet, who turned his nation into a land of holy war and terror. Who made life oppressive in all ways, especially for women. And who mandated a death sentence for anyone who did not follow the religion he established. Will was a terrible speaker, and was rudely cut off and barraged with questions. Demetrius refereed the table as best he could. In the end, everyone was properly educated. And seriously alarmed.

The gist of Will's spiel went as follows:

The desert land of Yshia consists of six emirates: Alasiya (the largest), Abbashan (the fiercest), Nithia (the oldest), Nicostenia (at the coast), Dythestia (the remotest), and Makistan (with grasslands and steppes). Cynidicea is technically in Makistan, but right on the border of Alasiya. Not that it matters. Everyone in the Emirates has always believed that Cynidicea is an abandoned ruins. It's been abandoned since it was destroyed in 98 BC. 1154 years ago. No one on the surface has had a clue about the underground city, or that descendants of the ancient Cynidicean kingdom still exist.

Until now, that is.

The important thing to understand, emphasized Will, is that all of these tribal peoples - the Alasiyans, Abbashanians, Nithians, Nicostenians, Dythesthenians, and Makistanians - are first and foremost Yshians, before any of their particular nationalities. For the past 225 years, they have all shared the same over-arching belief: that there are no gods, only the Eternal Truth; and that al-Kalim was the Prophet who revealed that Truth. Anyone who rejects the Prophet's religion is an infidel, to be converted or

slain. The Eternal Truth is thoroughly militant and oppressive. It's the religion of Yshlim.

"So what?" interrupted Kanadius. "We have our own nasty oppressors. The Zargonites."

Not quite the same thing, said Will. To understand it all, you have to go back to the Prophet. Al-Kalim.



He was a fanatic who single-handedly changed the culture of the Alasiyan Desert. He was from the city of Abbashan, born in 770 AC. This was back when the desert was the nation of Ylaruam, and much more peaceful. Al-Kalim began receiving visions in his forties and in his fifties became a militant warrior bent on subjugating all of Ylaruam to what he understood as proper Truth. He led inhumane raids, and in 824 AC, when

he was 54, he captured the village of Ylaruam and established it as his tribal seat. Over the next two years, other towns - Cinsa-Men-Noo, Parsa, and Ctesiphon, etc. - all fell and al-Kalim united the Makistani and Alasiyan tribes under the banner of the Eternal Truth. Then he took his holy war to the Empire. By 831 AC, every single Thyatian overlord had been thrown out. That was the year he founded the Confederated Tribes of the Emirates of Yshia - which is what the capital city has been called ever since. 225 years ago.

"There's nothing special about a religion based on warfare," said Pandora. "I lead a war cult. So does Kanadius."

Again, not the same thing. You and your Maidens don't forcibly convert those of different faiths. You don't systematically butcher those who refuse to convert. You don't live in a constant state of holy war. You aren't commanded by your holy book to subjugate the world under your beliefs, on pain of death, and to murder those who step slightly out of line. Neither are you, Kanadius, or your Brothers. *The Creed of Gorm* and *The Circle of Madarua* aren't like *The Raysh*.

"The *Raysh* is the holy book of Yshlim?" asked Demetrius.

Yes. And the *Raysh* requires jihad, holy war, against all peoples who reject the Eternal Truth. Jihad isn't optional, nor is it restricted to the warrior class. It's binding on every able-bodied male in the Emirates. To kill and/or be killed while fighting a jihad is the highest glory meriting the highest reward in paradise.

"I assume the Yshians have priests who peddle this fanaticism?" asked Fiana.

The Yshian clerics are called mullahs and they hold authority over warriors. They run the courts like inquisitions. They answer only to the Caliph at Yshia. The caliphs are the Prophet's successors; there have been nineteen caliphs since al-Kalim's death in 842. They have - every single one of them - been cold-blooded tyrants.

"Well," said Demetrius, "I'll never complain about life underground again. The surface sounds like hell. People have lived like that? For two centuries?"

Except for a brief respite, said Will. And a rather amazing one. Just fifteen years ago, in 1041 AC, the Caliphate was abolished and a Council of Preceptors took control of Yshia. The Preceptors nominally followed the Yshlimic religion, but so loosely that it could hardly be called Yshlim without winking too broadly. The Preceptors were in favor of modern and cosmopolitan values. They believed foreigners should be tolerated and allowed their religious beliefs. They controlled four of the emirates,

including the largest and most important one of Alasiya. Only in Abbashan and Nithia was Yshlim still strictly observed and enforced by the state. The four liberated emirates began to welcome ideas from the outside world, especially from urban and mercantile cultures. The Council of Preceptors outlawed jihads; it decreed holy war to be an antiquated concept - even though the *Rays*h said it was mandatory, and even though the Prophet had established jihad as an absolute pillar of the Eternal Truth.

The Preceptors ignored most of the *Rays*h. They picked from the Prophet's teachings whatever could be bent to serve a modern outlook - which wasn't a hell of a lot. The "Yshlim" they ended up advocating was a religion so massively truncated that it was dishonest to even call it Yshlim. The Preceptors had removed so many essential doctrines that it killed the patient. Conservative mullahs led movements of protest; jihadists committed acts of terror.

Fiana interjected: "I have a feeling, Will, that you're about to tell us the wonderful liberation didn't last."

It lasted for thirteen years. Then in 1054, the Preceptors were overthrown by the army of a fierce emir who came to power in Abbashan. The emir's name was Sayid al-Naji, and his jihad swept over the four emirates like the Nine Hells come to earth. Yshia City fell to the jihad, the Council was abolished, and the strict observance of Yshlim returned to the Emirates of Nicostenia, and Alasiya. Then, in 1055, the jihad came west to Makistan, and south to Dythestia. Those emirates were taken that year and Yshlimic Law was once again enforced everywhere in the land. Sayid al-Naji became the twentieth Caliph of Yshia.

"That was just last year," said Demetrius. "When you and your friends came to the Lost City."

"Yes," concluded Will. "The last major town - a town called Warqa - was being sacked when we arrived. Even though it surrendered. The rape and murder was really bad."

They got the point by now: Yshlim was systemically oppressive and unflinchingly expansionist. It required devout Yshians to wage war on unbelievers anywhere, and subjugate them under the boot of a dark-age tyranny.

"But the jihad is over, right?" asked Zoran. "All the Emirates are subjugated again."

"The jihad is never over," said Will. "The duty to wage war in Yshlim always goes on. It will push into other countries eventually. But even this particular jihad - Sayid al-Naji's war - is still in its mop-up stages. The

Caliph is finally turning his eye to Cynidicea. In about two weeks we're going to have warriors of the Eternal Truth knocking on our door."

Kanadius laughed. "Let them knock. That pyramid entrance is a death trap. Even for an army."

"I'm not talking about the pyramid entrance," said Will.

"What do you mean?" asked Demetrius.

"I'm talking about the hidden tunnel entrances that lead straight into the underground city," said Will.

"How the hell would they know about those?" demanded Fiana.

Breathe deep. "Mike."

They stared at him appalled. Then Kanadius slammed his fist on the table. "What a fucking surprise! Are there any limits to what that treasonous shit will do?"

"Watch your mouth, Grand Master," said Pandora. "What Mike did in your temple wasn't treason. It was the lesser of two evils."

"Let's not relive that," said Will, cutting off these two before they came to blows. "We can't fault Mike too much for mentioning the hidden entrances. At the time he had no reason to expect any blowback. He knew nothing about the Yshian people - nothing about jihad, or that Yshlim requires conquering unbelievers everywhere. He was three weeks in the desert, and had just been taken in by a family. All he did was tell his hosts where he came from. They were fascinated to learn about a civilization in Cynidicea, and Mike described it to them, not realizing that gossip would eventually find the wrong ears."

"But why the hidden entrances?" said Kanadius, livid. "Why did he have to reveal something like that?"

Will shrugged. "Like I said, he was in a no-man's land. He still is there, with the same family. He was careless."

"How did he even survive the first three weeks?" asked Zoran. "Before being taken in by this family? As I understand it, he left abruptly - into the desert with no food or water. Or weapons, for that matter."

"He wears the Hand of Gaius," said Will. He had told Pandora this months ago, when she came to him after Mike's departure. "On his second day he was attacked by desert marauders, and he killed them all with his bare hands. He took one of their swords, one of their camels, and all their money. He lived hand to mouth traveling northeast, crossing from Makistan into Alasiya, stopping at villages and paying for his upkeep. Soon he bought a horse and traded in the camel."

"He hates himself," said Demetrius. "He'll never forgive himself for killing Lucas."

"Don't even start," said Kanadius.

"Eventually," said Will, "something happened right outside one of the villages he was passing - it's between thirty and forty miles away from us - and a family ended up taking him in." Will wasn't about to explain that ugly affair.

"I know I've asked you this before," said Demetrius, "but *is* Mike ever coming back to us?"

Will shrugged. His Eye still showed different outcomes on the question of Mike's return to the Lost City. Mike was hard to See.

"Let me be clear on this point," said Kanadius. "The Brotherhood has a claim on Mike Wheeler. He is under sentence of execution, and I intend to carry that out if he ever comes back."

Pandora reared like a viper. "Lay a hand on my Maiden, Grand Master, and I'll feed you your balls. Mike Wheeler is no longer yours to claim."

"He most certainly is mine to claim," said Kanadius. "He violated the sanctum of our temple and killed half my warriors, including our chosen prophet Lucas Sinclair - who *also* happened to be Mike's best friend. He was one of us for three months. You owned him for three days. All of that *makes* him mine to claim. Your opinions about lesser evils are meaningless."

"I have owned Mike Wheeler for the past four months," said Pandora. "Just because he is in some self-imposed exile doesn't mean he has renounced the Maidens." She looked at Will. "Has he renounced us?"

Will shook his head. "No. He still considers himself loyal to Madarua."

"Well, there you have it," said Pandora.

"I don't give a mound of feces in Zargon's shithole what Mike considers himself," said Kanadius. "His crimes demand satisfaction."

"I agree," said Zoran. "I'm sorry, Will, and I'm sorry, Dustin - I assume Dustin can hear this, Demetrius. I loved Mike. The kids at the stronghold loved him. But his deeds speak for themselves."

"I don't know why Will and Dustin would want an apology from us," said Kanadius. "We're honoring Lucas. Lucas was their friend, as much as Mike is." He addressed Will and Demetrius. "How *do* you both feel about what Mike did to Lucas? Keep in mind that he was begging me to kill him - he knew what he deserved - before running off."

Demetrius spoke first. "Dustin has made it clear to me that he objects to executing Mike for something he never planned to do -"

"Never planned?" said Kanadius.

"Let me rephrase," said the priest. "Something he regretted having to do, lest he become a moral monster for the rest of his life. Five people had to die. It was that simple."

"A warrior of integrity would kill himself if faced with those options," said Zoran.

"But then the Hand would have become useless," said Demetrius. "We knew the risks when we gambled on Gaius's curses. *You* knew the risks, Kanadius, and accepted them."

"Don't put words in my mouth, Demetrius. Yes, I accepted the risks, not knowing what they were. And if I had been the Hand wielder faced with that decision, I would have - as Zoran said - cut the Hand off and killed myself."

"Good for you," said Demetrius. "But I suggest you get over your feelings for Mike Wheeler."

"How is my Maiden getting along with this Yshian family?" asked Pandora.

"He's about to be confronted by jihadists," said Will. "They're coming to get him now, as we speak. They know he's the source of the rumors about the Lost City, and as I mentioned, the Caliph wants to know if these rumors are true. The jihadists will arrive at the home he's staying in five days."

"That would solve our problem," said Kanadius. "I hope they kill him. You said it's an instant death sentence for anyone who doesn't believe in Yshlim?"

Will nodded. "More or less. Unless the person converts, or pays a special tax and is willing to be treated little better than a slave."

The Grand Master laughed in disgust. "Knowing Mike, he'll convert. He changes allegiances like the rest of us change clothes."

"He won't convert," said Will. "He's lived with the Yshians long enough now to know that he hates the Yshlimic religion with a passion. As I said, he's loyal to Madarua."

"Of course he is," said Pandora venomously. "He renounced the Brotherhood for the best of reasons. And he killed five of his former Brothers for better reasons."

Kanadius threw back his chair furiously and stood up. "I'll kill you right now, woman."

"I can easily beat you, old man," said Madarua's Champion, unfazed.

Kanadius laughed. "Then stand up and let's find out. I've never been beaten by a stupid woman in my whole life."

Will honestly wasn't sure which of these two would win in a heads-up match. He probed possible outcomes with his Eye, and they all showed about an even fifty-fifty chance for either one.

"I'd rather you guys not try to kill each other," said Demetrius. "We need all the strength we can muster against the Yshians."

"Agreed," said Pandora. "Kanadius is just being childish."

"And you," said Kanadius trenchantly, "are a flippant bitch who needs smacking down." He sat back down in disgust.

"I wonder, Kanadius," said Pandora. "Perhaps you're the one who should switch allegiances. If the Yshians treat women so badly, as Will says, you'd fit in well with them."

"It's probably their one good trait," retorted Kanadius. "If they know how to keep their women in place."

"You both have no idea what you're talking about," said Will.

"Don't lecture me, boy," snapped Pandora.

"Pandora, whatever you think of Gormish chauvinism, I assure you it's nothing compared to how the Yshians treat their women. The Yshians are inhumane. They even remove the - I think the word is 'clits' - from women's vaginas, so they can't enjoy sex."

Everyone at the table gaped at him. Then Fiana laughed. "You don't need to scare us with propoganda, Will. We get the message. The invaders need to be taken seriously."

Will sighed. "I'm not lying about anything I say."

Demetrius made a face. "You're saying that Yshian women have their clits cut out as a matter of general policy?"

"Yes."

"That's absolutely absurd," boomed Zoran.

"It's absolutely barbaric," said Pandora.

"I don't believe it," said Kanadius. "It's too off the scales. It's like Zargonite sacrifice, but mainstreamed into society."

Will explained: "It's a mandatory rite for all women in the strictest emirates - Abbashan and Nithia - and it's encouraged in the other four as well, in varying degrees. In those four places, on average, one out of three women have their clits cut out."

"Unbelievable," said Demetrius. "Is this rite required by the holy book? The *Raysh*?"

"If the *Raysh* required it, it would be mandatory everywhere, like the jihad," said Will. "It's required by supplementary religious texts."

"Speaking of the Zargonites," said Demetrius. "What about them? I mean, that's really why we're here, isn't it?"

Will nodded.

"What do you mean?" asked Fiana.

"I mean putting aside our differences," said Demetrius. "Suspending our hatreds. But that starts at home. With us first. We serve the old gods. We have to be better than we've been for the past millennium. The three cults used to be as one in the days of the kingdom. We need to regain that unity. Kanadius, Pandora, I'm looking at you."

"But that's still only a fighting force of sixty," reminded Will. "To have any hope of stopping an army of a thousand, we need more than just our unity." *Breathe again.* "We need the Zargonites."

Will knew that Demetrius was smart enough to have seen that coming, but the other four were aghast.

"You aren't serious!" said Fiana. She looked at Will like he was retarded.

"My understanding," said Pandora, "is that your Eye can unleash manifold destruction. Why do we need a fighting force at all?"

"It's not that simple," said Will. He'd seen alternative visions of him using the Eye against the jihadists, and none of them were pleasant. "I can't summon the death-scream at will, and I have little control over who or what it destroys. In one of my visions I brought down the roof of the underground city. I buried and killed us all."

"Well, yeah, that's a problem," said Demetrius.

Kanadius swore. "Will is right, unfortunately. Only the Zargonites have the numbers to fend off a thousand warriors. But that's making a deal with the worst devil."

"The Yshians are the worst devil," said Will.

"So you say," said Fiana.

"I'm telling you truth. The Eye doesn't lie."

"Let's put it to a vote," said Demetrius. "I vote that we ally with each other, and that we ask the Zargonites for a temporary alliance."

"And I," said Will.

"And I," said Kanadius.

"And I," said Zoran.

"And I," said Pandora.

"And I," said Fiana. "Provided the Zargonites agree to treat us as co-equals in this alliance. Just because they have the numbers doesn't mean Hazor becomes our supreme commander."

"Agreed," said Will.

"There is also the matter of Mike," said Kanadius. "I vote for his execution, if and when he returns."

"And I," said Zoran.

"Not I," said Pandora, seething.

"Not I," said Fiana.

"Not I," said Demetrius.

"Not I," said Will.

Kanadius was sour. "Don't expect me to ever be in the same room with him."

"And which of us is going into the lion's den to beseech Hazor?" asked Zoran. Hazor was the High Priest of Zargon: ruthless, sadistic, and insane. "He certainly won't agree to come to us."

"Step into the Zargonite temple?" asked Fiana. "Talk about taking one for the team. I'm not going inside that building."

"I don't think you should," said Demetrius. "You're a priestess. Zoran and I shouldn't either. As clerics of the old gods, we could all be vulnerable in that place."

"I'll do it," said Will. He knew he would anyway. He had seen it. "Kanadius? Pandora? Will you come with me?"

"To the temple of Zargon?" asked Pandora. She shrugged. "Fine by me."

"Of course," said Kanadius. "It should be the three of us. The leaders of our temples."

"I can count on you both? To suspend your hatred for each other?"

"Oh, I don't hate this bitch, Will," said Kanadius. "I just want to see her beaten and broken. One day I'll teach her that humility. But not today. Nor anytime soon. I know where my duty lies at the moment."

"Pay him no mind, little man," said Pandora. "Kanadius just wants to fuck me. He's never gotten laid. I can't waste hate on someone like that. He needs pity - and he certainly has mine."

Kanadius shouted, purple with rage: "If you think you can -"

"Yes, *thank* you," said Will. "Both of you. I'm sure you'll be models of diplomacy."

"When are you going?" asked Demetrius.

"We should try to secure an audience with Hazor in the next couple of days," said Will. "The Yshians will be here in two weeks. I called this meeting as soon as the Eye showed no future alternatives to the invasion."

Demetrius mused. "If we collapsed the hidden entrances..."

Zoran was shaking his head. "We need those as emergency escape routes. We can't rely on the pyramid as our only access point to the surface."

"And we can't ambush them outside the hidden entrances," said Kanadius. "It's all open desert out there, and we're Cynidiceans. We can't fight to save ourselves in sunlight. The only way to defeat these invaders is to ambush them as they come into the city. I mean, they don't know that we know they're coming. Right?"

Will nodded. "We should have the element of surprise."

"Unless," said Pandora, "they worry that Mike might try to come and warn us." She looked at Will. "You said they're going to reach him in five days?"

"Yes," said Will. "But Mike's future has become so jumbled in my vision it's impossible to say what he'll do. Ever since he was fully bonded with the Hand - the day he left us - he's been hard for me to See."

"He belongs with the Maidens," said Pandora. "I hope he remembers himself in the end."

Kanadius had the grace to hold his tongue.

"All right, then," said Will. "Thank you all for coming and agreeing to this. The three of us will go down to the city as soon - or if - Hazor agrees to meet with us." *And then things will really get interesting.*

As the Gorm and Madarua representatives left, his shakes started in. He wasn't going to make it to bedtime for the peach fuzz.

"Well played, Byers."

"What?" He looked at Demetrius, who had stayed behind. *No, not Demetrius. That's Dustin now.* The priest had retreated to lurker mode so the friends could spend time together.

"You lead better than most," said Dustin.

Will shook his head. "I don't think so. I just know more. I wish I didn't." His headache was also rousing from slumber. He needed an early fix. "Can you hand me that?" he asked Dustin, pointing to the bowl of peach colored mushrooms on the bed stand.

"Yeah." He passed the bowl to Will.

Will's hand jerked suddenly as he took it, and the bowl crashed to the floor. The mushrooms, four of them, scattered in different directions.

"Got it, don't worry," said Dustin, reaching over to pick everything up.

When the shrooms were on the table, Will took one and ate it fast. He closed his eyes as he tried to chew slowly, telling the fifteen minutes to *hurry up*. He hated his addiction; his tolerance was getting worse.

Dustin was concerned. "Do you need rest, Will? I can go."

Will shook his head, swallowing. "I want you to stay. I miss talking to you. About home."

"Yeah," said Dustin. "I wish I'd never gone into *Rotten Gargoyle* that day. Never seen that store clerk. I mean, there are things I've liked about sharing my body and life with a priest like Demetrius. He's a great guy. But Jesus Christ, look what it's cost us all."

They talked for hours, and then finally Demetrius took over and left for the city.

That night, Will went to bed thinking of Zenobia's crypt. And the Isle of Death. When the dreams came, they weren't of his mother and Jonathan. They were of friends dead and undead. And every bit as hurtful.

Chapter Thirteen:

The Jihad of Şayid al-Naji

He knew what they were as soon as he saw them.

Jihadists.

Not bandits, who plagued the village's environs like locusts, and who were filthy and less disciplined. These warriors were filthy too, in the way of unwashed, but they were uniformly dressed, in black pants and tunics, and they rode their camels in ordered formation. As they got clearer, Mike could make out the robed mullah riding in front, and the standard bearer to his left, bearing the image he didn't like to see: a silhouette of a palm tree growing in the desert, with a rising moon on the background. The symbol of the Prophet.

Jihadists, no question.

"Stay inside and out of sight!" said Faizan, ready to go out and meet the visitors. His son Malik glared at Mike with the usual contempt. Then they both went outside.

Mike did as they instructed. His presence here put his hosts at extreme risk. He sat in a chair by the hut's window, and angled himself so that he could watch what was happening without (hopefully) being seen in turn.

Faizan and Malik walked about twenty feet from the front door of their home, and waited as the mullah and warriors - about a score of them - came up to them.

"Peace be upon you," said the mullah, his voice rasping with hate.

"And upon you as well," said Faizan neutrally.

"I am Omar, mullah of the Tajha mosque in Sulba. Who are you?"

"I am Faizan Jalal. This is my son Malik. We're tailors for Suqatra, the village you passed on your way here."

"Who else lives in this house?" asked the mullah rudely.

"My daughter," said Faizan. "Areesha."

"No wives?" asked Omar.

Faizan shook his head. "My Ezma died two years ago. I've not remarried."

"You should," said the mullah bluntly. "A man needs wives to plow, and a full family keeps a household pure. Pure from blasphemy and hellish beliefs."

Mike swore under his breath, staying hidden.

"How may I be of assistance, mullah?" asked Faizan in a barely controlled voice.

"It's been reported that there is an infidel being given sanctuary outside the edge of the village. By you. The rumors say this filthy god-worshiper worships a whore, and he's been living with you for months. And that he tells strange tales. Tales of a lost city - an abominable city - that was supposed to have been wiped out centuries ago."

"I tend to ignore rumors," said Faizan sourly.

"Be sure that our rightly guided Caliph does not ignore them," said Omar. "When they hit the capital, His Excellency paid close attention. The jihad goes on. There is always unbelief to be rooted out - and pockets of that pestilence hidden where you least expect."

"I believe in the Truth," said Faizan proudly. "My family and I have lived by every word of the *Raysh*, even in the years of the Preceptors."

"Praise the Prophet for their passing," said the mullah. "Blaspheming heretics."

"Yes," said Faizan. "Praise the Jihad of Sayid al-Naji. My son here served in the war. Last year, when Makistan was taken."

"And yet you are harboring a god-worshiper?"

Mike tensed by the window.

"I am," declared Faizan.

"Explain yourself," barked Omar.

"I am honor bound to provide for the man. He single-handedly rescued both of my daughters from bandits. The bandits had already raped my younger daughter but not Areesha. The unbeliever rescued them both and returned them to me. He slew all of the bandits - eight of them - but they came from a large nest. Many more of the scum tracked him down - here, to my home that afternoon, after they asked around and learned where my

daughters lived. Almost twenty of them. The infidel protected my family and slew them all."

The mullah scoffed. "One man against eight and then twenty? You're lying. Or those bandits were a pack of cripples."

"They were all able-bodied and armed," said Faizan. "Vicious murderers."

"Bandit scum don't interest me," said the mullah dismissively. "A whore worshiper does. An infidel is an infidel. I enforce Yshlimic Law. The Law of the Prophet."

So it's true, thought Mike. Clerics were the ultimate authority in these lands. Warriors answered to them. He tried to imagine Kanadius and Pandora being bossed around by priests and priestesses. They would have shouted their clerics down with little effort. Priests did of course have authority in the Cynidicean cults - they led the communities in the underground strongholds - but not in military matters.

"My son and I have been educating the infidel," said Faizan. "Reading the *Raysh*. Explaining how everyone in our great Yshlimic nation will be governed only by the *Raysh* and Yshlimic law. How the Prophet, blessed be his name -"

"Where is he now?" interrupted the mullah. The height of bad manners.

Mike was sweating, not for fear of his own safety - he was nearly invincible - but for the safety of this family who was protecting him. The *Raysh* was quite clear: those who didn't follow the Eternal Truth had three options: convert to Yshlim, pay the *cordu*, or die. Mike would never convert to the barbaric religion of Yshlim, and he had no intentions of paying the *cordu* either. The *cordu* was the special tax that unbelievers could pay and live in the Emirates as little better than slaves. The *cordu* had evolved as a matter of practicality, giving the Yshians their chief source of income as they waged *jihad* on the world, and it was the means of keeping unbelievers subjected and humiliated. *Cordu* infidels could not hold positions of authority over Yshians; they could have only menial jobs; they could not build any shrines or temples to their gods; they had to make way if an Yshian approached on the street, and wear the black-and-yellow insignia on their shoulder (it reminded Mike of the Jews in Nazi Germany). While nominally protected, *cordu* infidels would in practice often be abused or beaten by Yshians with impunity. The *cordu* tax was by no means a benign practice. It was a mafia racketeer form of "protection". Mike would burn in the Hells before paying the *cordu* .

That meant the third option for him, a sentence of death - both on him and any Yshian believer who sheltered him. He wasn't worried about

himself. But he didn't want this family coming to harm, even though he didn't really like Faizan and loathed Malik with every fiber of his being. It was Areesha he cared about.

"He is inside the hut," said Faizan.

"Bring him out," ordered Omar.

"I will not do that," said Faizan.

The mullah looked as if he'd been slapped. "What did you say?"

Shit. Mike tightened his grip on the sword hilt strapped at his side. He continued watching through the window.

"The unbeliever is under my protection," said Faizan, "with full guest rights. I am honor bound to protect him for avenging the honor of my family. The laws of hospitality laid out in the zhariat provide for this."

The mullah flushed. "Don't you dare quote the Prophet's Law to me! Honor debts do not extend to infidels! Especially whore worshipers!"

"I'm not a cleric," said Faizan. "I don't know how to debate the holy texts. All I know is that I am a devout Yshian. I believe in the *Raysh*. I believe that unbelievers should be slain or subjugated with humiliation, just as you do. But I also believe in the virtue of honor, and honor applies to anyone. The unbeliever inside is under my protection, and he will remain so until I deem my debt to him repaid. If this means you will kill me - then blessed be the Prophet - so be it. I am not afraid to die. Nor is my son. We will oppose you and your men if you try to get past us."

"For now I just want to speak to him," snapped the mullah.

Faizan considered. "What about?"

"I do not answer to you!"

"Then my answer is no," said Faizan. "I will not bring him out here."

Mike sighed, knowing what he would have to do. He left his spot at the window and opened the front door of the hut.

As soon as he stepped outside, the jihadists drew their long bows.

Mike knew that Faizan had meant every word he said to the mullah. He and Malik weren't afraid to die. They weren't being cocky just because they knew Mike could have killed these jihadists in his sleep. Even if their guest had been infirm, they would have defended that guest as they were defending Mike now. They were devout Yshians, but they were honorable to a fault.

Yet it was more than honor: Faizan truly didn't want this matter to escalate. If Mike killed these holy warriors - which he most certainly could have - then the repercussions on the Jalal family, and indeed the entire village of Suqatra, would be devastating. An army of jihadists would return, burn the village to the ground, execute the Falal family, and hunt

Mike down. Mike was "nearly invincible", but the Hand had its limits; its sorcery could be exhausted. His body couldn't keep absorbing damage non-stop in a small time frame. Twenty men were no problem. Over fifty, he had to start worrying. Over a hundred, he could well be killed.

Mike put his hands in the air. Killing the mullah and these men was definitely out of the question. And he had made promises to himself in any case, when he left the Lost City. He was through with killing - unless it absolutely couldn't be avoided.

"Keep your hands up, infidel, and come out here slowly," said Omar.

Mike walked up and stood next to Faizan and Malik. The mullah regarded him hostilely. Mike glared up at him on his camel, coldly.



"You are the unbeliever who has been living here?" asked the cleric.
"For months now?"

"Yes," said Mike. "My name is Mike Wheeler. Mr. Jalal and I have an arrangement and I am not bothering anyone. Those in the nearby village almost never see me."

"Your presence is bothersome," said the mullah trenchantly. "It is poison. You are a god-worshiper. Yes?"

"Yes," said Mike.

"You worship a whore?"

Mike bristled. "I worship Madarua. She's not a whore."

"The Whore indeed," said the mullah. "That name hasn't been heard in the Emirates for centuries. Since the fall of Cynidicea. And you say you come from Cynidicea? From a city beneath the ruins there?"

Mike cursed Malik for his loose lips. Faizan's son talked to many friends in the village, and it could only be his gossip that started the rumor chain that eventually, over months, made its way back to the capital. "It's not much of a city, really," he lied, "but there are some descendants of the old kingdom down there."

"How many?"

"Maybe two hundred."

"Liar," said the mullah.

Mike flushed, wanting to disembowel the cleric.

"No one has heard of the Prophet in this city?" asked Omar.

"No one," said Mike.

"Everyone is a god-worshiper?"

"Yes. Most worship Zargon the Devourer. His priests are evil and practice blood sacrifice, which keeps the population controlled. But there are some followers of the old Cynidicean gods: Gorm - god of war, storms, and justice. Madarua - goddess of birth, death, and the seasons. Usamigaras - god of magic, messengers, and thieves."

"Ah yes," the mullah's lips curled in a sneer. "The Brute, the Whore, and the Sneak. The other one is just as false. They are all false. As are you, Mike Wheeler."

The Brute? Mike almost laughed. He had served in the Brotherhood for three months. Gorm was a teddy bear compared to al-Kalim. The Yshian Prophet had left a trail of more brutality in the past 230 years than any other religion in five times the amount of time. Including probably the Zargonites, who were thoroughly vile, but not expansionist like the Yshians. The demands of Yshlim were clear: the entire world must be brought under the Eternal Truth. It was the Yshian dream - the Dream of

the Desert Garden - to wipe out the worship of all deities, so that only the Truth remained; and so that all people everywhere lived under zhariat law. Mike couldn't imagine a more oppressive vision.

"And there are two entrances to the city?" asked Omar. "The pyramid and the underground tunnels?"

Mike was seething. He should have never revealed so much to his new family. At the time he'd been in the desert only a month, in this backwater region where the greatest threats appeared to be lawless unorganized bandits. He had been clueless then about the land's politics, the expansionist Yshlimic religion, and the eternal mandate of holy war to which every able-bodied Yshian male was subject. Anyone could be drafted by the mullahs at a moment's notice. If Caliph al-Naji intended to send huge numbers of jihadists to Cynidicea, things could get ugly. The pyramid entrance was a death trap; it was designed to hold off large numbers of intruders. But if the jihadists found the two hidden entrances outside the ruins, they would have easy access to the undercity. It would be a bloodbath. Unless Will could be triggered to unleash the Eye... but that could spell disaster for everyone.

"There's only one entrance," said Mike. "The pyramid. I don't know -"

"Liar," said the mullah. "Where exactly are the hidden tunnels?"

"I said I don't know," lied Mike.

"We're going to find them anyway."

"I said there's only one -"

"What happened to your hand?" asked the mullah.

"What?" said Mike, caught off guard.

"Your hand. Why is it black, unlike the rest of you?"

"It's... nothing. Just a birth defect."

"Liar," said the mullah. "It's the mark of a sorcerer, isn't it? It's how you killed all the bandits that your host speaks of."

"I'm not a sorcerer," said Mike.

The mullah smiled. "Do you think you could kill me and my men? Single-handedly?"

I could send you all to Hell barely lifting a finger. "I'm not interested in starting a fight."

"Do you think I fear you?" taunted the mullah.

I think you're too stupid to be scared. Though that wasn't true; Mike knew better by now. Stupidity had nothing to do with it. To die while killing - or trying to kill - infidels was the greatest glory for any Yshian. It guaranteed a believer everlasting life in the Eternal Garden.

Once Mike had finally grasped that idea - in one of his long evening conversations with Faizan - he'd realized how terrifying Yshian society was. It was one thing to esteem dying in a good battle. Gorm and Madarua - hell, any warrior deity - took that view. But to reward the murder of innocent people, for the crime of unbelief (belonging to a different religion) - and to reward dying for that cause as the highest act of righteousness - that took the guardrails off civilization. Jihadists couldn't be reasoned with; they welcomed death with open arms.

"No," said Mike, answering honestly for a change. "I don't think you fear me at all."

The mullah laughed. "You're going to die, infidel. Not today, perhaps, but when Faizan Jalal decides that his debt to you is repaid, I will be sure to have more than enough men ready to act. Try your sorcery against hundreds of Yshians waiting to take your head. Faizan!"

"Yes, mullah?" Faizan looked like he was swallowing bile.

"For how long do you consider yourself in the infidel's debt?"

"For a year, mullah," said Faizan. "Considering all he did for us. He has been with us for three months. So nine more months."

"The Caliph may have something to say about your honor debt."

"I will do as His Excellency commands, if it comes to that," said Faizan. "But short of a command from Sayid al-Naji himself, I will not revoke Mike Wheeler's guest rights. I repeat: I am a loyal Yshian and I follow the Prophet. I reject god-worshiping as an abomination. I believe in the *Raysh* and its commands to kill unbelievers like Mike Wheeler. But I am also civilized. I know what honor demands. And I believe that Truth can reveal itself to an infidel in mysterious ways."

"Save your hot air for your prayers. You'll need them." The mullah looked back to Mike. "Seeing you has confirmed the rumors for me, despite your obvious lies. I got what I came for. We'll be leaving now." He turned to go.

"Wait," said Mike. "What do you intend to do about Cynidicea? The people who live there are no threat to you at all. They just want to be left alone." He already knew the answer. The Caliphate didn't wage wars for defensive purposes, but to fulfill the *Raysh's* command to spread Yshlim to every corner of the world, and slay or convert people accordingly.

The mullah replied: "The people there are every threat - to the Truth and to themselves. We will bring the jihad to Cynidicea, put an end to god-worship, and slay those who refuse to heed the Prophet's words. Those who accept Yshlim will be brought out onto the surface and assimilated into the desert, as true Yshians." He spat on the ground. "In the meantime,

Faizan Jalal, think carefully for how long you wish to associate with this man. He's a liar, a whore lover, and a sorcerer."

The mullah and his warriors turned their camels and left.

"Father!" yelled Malik. "That was a disgraceful interview!"

"You question my judgment?" yelled Faizan. "Are you a man of honor or not?"

They had returned inside as soon as the mullah and his jihadists were gone. Areesha had emerged from her bedroom, having heard the entire altercation outside through her window. She sat next to Mike, who held her hand, while Faizan and Malik stood shouting.

"Well, are you?" repeated Faizan. "A man of honor? Or an uncivilized barbarian?"

"I am honorable!" yelled Malik. "And I am not afraid to die! But father, think of the shame this brings on our name - our village! The jihadists will likely come back and burn Suqatra to the ground! If they're not doing it right now." He glared at Mike.

Mike squeezed Areesha's hand softly and put his arms around her, just to infuriate her brother.

"If they come to burn us, then *daja* is *daja*," said Faizan.

Daja was a concept found in the *Raysh*. To Mike it seemed self-contradictory, meaning luck and fate; something given to chance but also destined.

"*Daja* is *daja*," agreed Malik, "and the purity of this household is under our control!"

"We live as we should," said Faizan simply, "and let *daja* take care of itself."

"And are we really to be in Mike's debt for nine more months?" asked Malik.

"I'm right here, Malik," said Mike. *You piece of shit.*

"Oh yes," sneered Malik. "You're always here. Eating our food, devouring our hospitality, feasting your lecher's eyes on my sister. By the Prophet, you will never marry her!"

Mike took abuse from Malik all the time, but there were limits to what he would tolerate. "I treat Areesha with respect. Which is more than I can say for you." He regretted it as soon as he said it.

"What did you say to me?" yelled Malik. He towered over Mike in his seat. "You dare challenge me in my own house?"

I'd kill you, you flaming bigot, but your sister would never forgive me.
Mike was in love with Areesha, and thus the whole problem.

"Malik," said Faizan. "Go outside and clean up the barn."

"He dares insult me!" Malik was livid.

"It's been a hard day for us all," said his father. "I'm sure Mike didn't mean what he said just now." He looked at Mike expectantly.

You're right. I meant far worse. Mike cleared his throat. "I apologize, Malik. You are an honorable man and an honorable brother. And I am ignorant. Still. Please forgive me. I am grateful for the life you and your family have provided me here."

Malik scowled. Then he stalked outside to finish chores.

"Father, please may I ask," said Areesha, when her brother was gone, "the mullah has the information he needs, correct? He said as much to Mike. He came looking for confirmation about Cynidicea. So he will leave us alone, yes?"

"No, you may not ask," said Faizan. "You ask far too many questions. A woman should hold her tongue and listen. You may leave this room, is what you may do. Now."

"Yes, Father," she said. "I'm sorry." She got up and left obediently, heading into the kitchen.

Mike got up to follow her, but Faizan stopped him. "I haven't dismissed you. Sit down."

Mike sat, simmering.

Faizan looked at him. "Malik can be difficult. And Areesha is a pest."

Malik is a wad of fifty hemorrhoids. And Areesha is pure grace.

"You have nothing to say to me?" snapped Faizan.

Mike flushed. "I feel like I'm a burden to you most of the time. And I put your lives at risk today. I'm sorry for it."

"Our lives were put at risk the first day you came here. Your filthy god-worshipping presence. Our lives were put at risk a week later, when my stupid idiot son shot off his mouth about you down in the village. *Daja*, and gossip, took care of it from those points."

"Should I have killed them?" asked Mike.

Faizan raised an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

I don't know. I wanted to kill them. Anything to stop or delay the jihad being sent against Cynidicea. "I think if I had killed them, your whole village area would suffer."

Faizan laughed. "If you'd killed them, every one of us in ten square miles would be crucified. But I'm asking about you. You're concerned for your friends." He wasn't asking, he was stating.

"Yes," said Mike. "I mean, Will can see everything, so I guess he knows what's coming. I guess. But I don't know. I don't know how everything is there." *Or if Will is even okay. For all I know, he's catatonic again and can't share information with anyone.*

Faizan grunted and shifted in his chair. "I'll remember your friends in my prayers. I pray with all my heart that this Lost City you come from is demolished and laid waste, and that survivors embrace the Eternal Truth. But I hope your friends are spared the slaughter."

"Thank you," said Mike.

"Are you leaving us?" the old man asked bluntly.

"What? No, of course not." The wounds there were still too fresh. He'd killed his best friend. There was no coming home after that. Or to she who betrayed him.

"Liar," said Faizan, without any malice. "I believe you'll go back. You've been away from your friends for four months now. Can't avoid your problems forever. You're welcome to stay here for another nine months, as I've said. But this home has become a crutch for you, in a land that clearly isn't for you. And I think you know that."

Later, Mike went outside to use the latrine. It was far down from the hut and past the barn. When he got to the latrine, he heard someone behind him. He stopped and turned around. It was Malik, raw with rage.

"Malik, I'm sorry for -"

The sword came out of nowhere, fast and unexpected. It buried itself into Mike's neck, and Mike staggered a bit. Anyone else would have been fountaining red, but only a few specks of blood flew from Mike. Anyone else would have been killed, but Mike's gash was already healing as Malik drew back for another swing.

Furious and fed up - Malik had never assaulted him before - Mike seized the sword blade and yanked it from Malik's grip. His hand barely bled from the slice he gave himself. He flipped it so that he held the hilt and then with the speed of a ninja swung the blade at Malik's neck. He stopped it less than an inch away. Barely in time.

Malik didn't flinch at all. His eyes poured venom as the blade hovered by his neck.

Mike threw the sword on the ground. "So much for your fucking honor, asshole."

Malik was unfazed. "If you had continued the blow, you would have decapitated me. Yes?"

"Of course," said Mike.

"Then why did you stop? You hate me, yes?"

"I don't like killing." *And I don't want your sister to hate me. Or be on difficult terms with your father, who is more than enough difficult as it is.*

"I have killed many, doing the Prophet's work," said Malik. "In the jihad last year, when Makistan was still in rebellion. And I will kill many more - enemies of Yshlim, infidels like yourself." He picked his sword up off the ground. "It was *daja* that stopped your blow, nothing more. Not your womanish feelings. And I am a man of honor. I wasn't trying to kill you, because I know it takes an army to harm you. I was seeing if you were man enough to kill me. You are not." He turned to go back in the barn, and then stopped to look again at Mike. "If those jihadists come back here, it's on you." Then he stalked off.

He's a devil, thought Mike. There's naught in him that makes him a worthy human being.

It was getting harder to control his animosity towards Malik. He couldn't believe he'd lasted three months under the same roof with him. He had wanted to kill Malik the first day he met him. That horrible day, and a crucial turning point for Mike, when he rescued Areesha and her younger sister.

He replayed that monstrous event whenever he looked at Malik. He saw a demon in that face, but it was really just the face of Yshlim.

He'd been riding his horse Legba around the outskirts of the village when he saw the bandits. Eight of them, assaulting two girls on their walk home. They were already raping one of them. Immediately Mike charged, astonishing the ruffians who couldn't believe that a single man was willing to take them on. Mike leaped off his horse and slaughtered every one of them in due course. The older girl identified herself as Areesha Jalal. She was grateful, but the younger one, Haniya, had been violated by three of the men. Areesha told Mike where they lived, and Mike had put them both on Legba and walked them home.

When they got there, Faizan and Malik flew out the front door, appalled. Mike introduced himself and explained what happened, as Haniya stood wailing in her sister's arms. At first the men thought Mike was lying. An infidel who defended the honor of two girls by killing eight men all by himself? Areesha swore by the Prophet that everything Mike said was true.

Hearing her oath, Faizan and Malik thanked Mike for avenging the family honor. Then Malik drew his sword, grabbed Haniya, and thrust his blade through the girl's stomach and out her back. Mike exploded and drew his sword.

"No!" yelled Areesha, grabbing Mike's arm. "Do not!"

Mike whirled on her. "Are you insane?"

"Please don't interfere!" said Areesha. "Haniya brought shame on our family. Malik has restored our honor."

Mike gaped at her. "What do you mean? What on earth did she do?" What could a fourteen-year old girl do to deserve being raped and killed?

"She did nothing," cried Areesha. "She was defiled."

Mike stood shell shocked as Areesha continued weeping, Malik carried away his sister's corpse, and Faizan came up to Mike and took the sword from his hand. He was unable to process what he had just witnessed. A brother had just murdered his sister in cold blood, for being an innocent victim of the worst crime. It made no sense at all.

And it was in that moment - of his twenty-second day in the desert - that Mike Wheeler had seen Yshian culture for what it was. Not just "radically different", but objectively inhumane, and not remotely comparable to what he'd left behind. Cynidicean culture was medieval, to be sure, but Mike had adapted to it. He had looked on it, dealt with it, and found reasonable answers for it in his philosophy. So had his friends. But the hurts he had seen on the desert surface went beyond that, and the sight of an honor-killing shattered him completely. His hatred for Yshlim would be reinforced over the next few months, as he learned about jihad and other demands of the *Raysh*. Mike was neither naive nor pacifistic. He'd been a Brother of Gorm, for Christ's sake, and now a Maiden of Madarua. But those war cults didn't endorse systematic murder. They didn't punish women who were raped; they didn't execute homosexuals as criminals; and they didn't kill people for simply having different religious beliefs. The Zargonites were evil, but if you could avoid the sacrificial knife, you could find a measure of happiness in the Cynidicean underworld - retreat into imagination and party your life away. Hell, the Zargonites encouraged it. Yshian life was innately cruel, and an open reminder of that cruelty. Mike saw all of this at once, in the moment Haniya was cut open by her brother.

It was also in that moment he had fallen hard in love with Areesha.

He was allowed to hold and kiss her, but only indoors. Sex was off the board, and he was not permitted in her bedroom. Her sexual honor was the family's honor, and Mike had to accept that, or he could say good-bye and never see her again. He couldn't possibly not see her again.

He had held her for a long time after his turning moment. He'd only just met her, but he was at once in love and fiercely territorial. He would be her guardian, lest she too fall prey to the obscene demands of honor. Faizan and Malik agreed to his request. They owed him a colossal debt. He had killed Haniya's attackers, and then many more of the scum when they came calling for blood. Faizan offered Mike a place in his home: food, a place on the floor to sleep, and the guardianship of Areesha. In effect this made Mike the bodyguard for the Jalal family, whenever the men were at home. Areesha seldom walked outside beyond the house anymore, and never without Mike's protection.



Malik had choked on some of this. He didn't like his father's concessions with Areesha. Mike had done the Jalals great honor, yes, but he was still an infidel, and Areesha was Malik's sister. He didn't like Mike touching her at all. Faizan silenced him, his voice slashing the air. This was his house, and he set the rules. He declared his terms reasonable and weighed proportionately to what Mike had done. Malik would abide by these terms, or he would be lashed by his father for disobedience.

Because of this arrangement, Mike had been able to carve out some joy in a joyless land. For three months he and Areesha had laughed with each other, held each other, and occasionally kissed each other. They talked about their lives, and marveled at the other's values. Mike told her about America, and she didn't believe most of what he was describing. The United States sounded like a fairy tale. But she believed what he said about Cynidicea. She told him about the Yshian way of life in the Emirates; there was virtually nothing redeemable about it. He told her as much many times.

"You're a nation of murderers," he said one morning, as he held her on the couch. The men had gone to the village.

"No, Mike," she said, always patient with him. "We are not murderers. Life and death are the same in the Eternal Truth. And for those who reject the Truth, better that they die and not spread their false beliefs like a contagion."

"I don't accept the Eternal Truth," said Mike. "I reject your Prophet. So you think I should die?"

"I don't know everything," said Areesha. "I believe there is hope for you, otherwise why would *daja* have made you part of this family?"

My fucking Hand made me part of this family. "I'm here because I love you."

She kissed his cheek. "I love you too. But you misjudge us."

Misjudge, my ass. He tried to imagine his sister Nancy getting raped, and then being honor-bound to kill her for bringing "dishonor" upon herself and her family. He smoldered with fury that any society could operate that way.

Aliens and worlds apart. It was no obstacle to how they felt for each other. They enjoyed their talks, and their disagreements. And during this time - his exile, as he came to think of it - Mike rarely thought of the Lost City. Opening those wounds was too much. He dreamt of Lucas some nights, and woke in a sweat, hating himself. The way he saw it, he deserved to be exiled in this terrible land. He dreamt of Jilanka other nights, and woke in a fever, wanting to barge into Areesha's bedroom and

take her with fury. He never did; he respected his host's terms. Sex would have trivialized their relationship anyway - diminished it, even. They shared something better than that.

But on the day after the jihadists came, there was a change in the air between them. The threat of holy war forced questions about Mike's self-imposed exile. He didn't want to talk about it but Areesha refused him the convenience of denial.

"You need to go back, Mike."

"I can't."

"You're hiding here."

"Areesha, I love you," he said.

"I love you, Mike. But there's no future for us. You know this. You will never be Yshian. Our time together has been so wonderful for me. But we've been playing, like kids - that's all."

"No... we haven't," he protested. *Don't do this.*

"We have," she said. "You might stay another nine months, but to what end? Your friends need you. The people in the pyramid need you."

"I thought you wanted a chance to convert me," he said.

"I know you abhor Yshlim," she said. "There's no path for you here in the Emirates."

"So you want me to go back to help my people against a jihad that you hope will defeat them."

"I want you where you *belong*," said Areesha. "Life and death are the same, Mike. Be at peace with that. Always remember me. I'll never forget you."

They both cried then as they held each other, knowing he would be off the next day.

Chapter Fourteen:

Torn Asunder

It was a fortress of spectacular horror and terrible beauty. Will felt the contradictions as he stood before the front gate for his second time. The other contradiction was that he *was* standing before this gate for his second time. He was a Magi. Only Zargonites were allowed here. Anyone else who entered was a sacrifice, slave, or intruder, and never came out again. William Byers was making history tonight.

He was the first guest of honor in the Temple of Zargon.

Black fire, protect me from the jaws of Hell.

Hell was an E-shaped structure made of obsidian rock. The gate was at the middle arm of the E, and as he stood waiting for the guards to open it, he looked up at the tower - the wide bastion called Zargon's Rise. The Rise was also obsidian, studded with glittering crimson, and windows that blazed in the night with hypnotic torch fire.

It is beautiful. What happens inside is not. Within these walls, the priests of Zargon conducted rites no child should be aware of, let alone exposed to. Will was a child in size and age, but he'd lost the innocence of ages. He had the health of an invalid, the physical limitations of an old man, and the knowledge of a god. All courtesy of the Eye.

Four days ago he had come here with Kanadius and Pandora. They'd made history too; they'd left the temple alive. Risked having their hearts ripped out, for an audience with a sworn arch-enemy, and to make a pact with him that he was just as likely to break. If Will did anything to displease Hazor over the next twenty hours, there would be no pact.

It was a tall order. Even with his omniscience, Will wasn't sure exactly what Hazor wanted from him tonight. He was supposed to attend the fifth-night ceremonies. To watch, query, and appreciate the most hideous rites of the week. To be in awe of Zargon the Devourer. All of this in a gesture of good will, for which in return, Hazor would marshal his forces against the Yshian invaders. The jihadists were due in seven days.

That was the deal: to honor the Zargonites and their inhumane practices. And it had to be Will, not Kanadius or Pandora. Hazor wanted to host the Eye child. Demetrius didn't like it, but Will assured him of his protection. Anyone who tried to harm Will Byers got incinerated by black flame. The Eye did have its benefits.

It also had a temper that could ruin everything.

He wasn't worried about the ceremonies upsetting him. Since receiving the Eye, he'd seen the torture that went on in this temple. But he did worry about being triggered. Hours of exposure to these inhumane rites might provoke the rage. The death scream. If that happened - if he let loose in this temple - then it was all over. The Yshians had won in advance.

The High Priest of Zargon was trigger material, being certifiably insane. Hazor brooded over imagined slights and exploded on a dime. Will would be walking on egg shells every second he was by the cleric's side. That was unacceptable.

To this end, Will had procured from Demetrius a grade-4 sedative mushroom, the mushroom called fade. It was a hard sedative, but it kept the drug user wide awake with enhanced senses - calm and stoned, with no stress or anxiety, yet also fully alert. Moreover, his body would be rejuvenated as if sleeping while on the fade drug, even when he moved about or engaged in discussion.

It was a caffeine and sleeping pill rolled into one.

He had taken the fade before arriving at the temple. The effects took ten to forty minutes to kick in, and would last between six to fifteen hours. More than enough to get him through the evening ceremonies. It was five o'clock now. The rites started at six and went to one in the morning. Will would stay the night and depart the temple tomorrow after sharing breakfast with Hazor. His room had better be nice. Hazor had promised him the best suite in the Rise. There would be a late supper in between ceremonies at nine, but Will seriously doubted he'd have any appetite. He prayed that wouldn't offend his host.

Green shroom, ward me from priestly wrath.

He hadn't bothered mixing the drug to make a combo, because he was already an addict. He'd brought a supply of healing mushrooms, and he'd

probably need to pop his evening one before the rites started. The pain in his head was already building claws.

The gate finally opened and a pair of guards came out. They wore gold horned masks, with tentacles coming out the sides and from under the chins. Will removed his silver mask of the cherub, so they could see who he was. They nodded and waved him through, and then began closing the gate. He hobbled like an old man into the wide room carved in smooth curves, with a vaulted ceiling more than twenty-five feet overhead. This was where Hazor had received them four days ago. The high priest had turned the room into a temporary audience hall - the first time an audience had ever been granted in this temple. Will, Kanadius, and Pandora had gone no farther than this room. Will would be going much farther this evening.

At the other side he came to a set of double doors inscribed with the face of Zargon. A face of oozing wounds and gross tumors, with a long horn protruding from his head, and a singular eye that bulged like that of a Cyclops. That eye made Will feel unnervingly at home, as if he were some lost cousin of the Cthulhu-like deity.

Do I knock? Or just open them? He looked over his shoulder back at the two guards. They stood by the gate ignoring him, and he knew better than to ask them for help.

He was about to probe the door with his omniscience, when the face spoke, demanding his name. *A magic mouth spell.*

"Will Byers," he answered.

"Whom do you serve?" The voice was guttural and wet, as if spoken through a wall of mud.

Will braced himself. "Usamigaras."

The face threw up an obscene laugh. "Filthy sneak." The doors parted and swung slowly inwards.

Then, with his Eye, he saw it: if the door hadn't identified him as the honored guest, the mouth would have drenched him with a stream of acid. *As if designed by Mike himself.* The D&D module hadn't provided any details for the Temple of Zargon. But so far, the real thing was a dungeon purely out of Mike Wheeler's sick imagination.

He walked through the open doorway, and in the next chamber gasped when he looked around. The walls were painted with scenes so lurid they looked like pornographic photographs from his home world. Sacrifice, rape, sacrifice, torture, sacrifice, bloodbaths. He stopped in the middle of the room and stared, turning himself slowly around to take in the full horror. He felt strangely tranquil at the sight of these barbarisms, and

realized the fade drug was kicking in. He turned some more, savoring the sedation while also feeling sharply aware. Yes. He might just get through tonight without vomiting or going crazy.

"Does it eat at you?"

He turned around. A priest stood by an archway opposite the double doors. It was Hazor. The high priest. He was unmasked and staring down at Will intently.

"What?" asked Will, tearing his gaze from the obscene wall imagery. "Oh. Not really. I'm sort of used to this art by now." Which was a lie. Nothing he had seen in any area of the pyramid or the underground city approached the level of depravity splashed across these walls.

"I meant the Eye." The priest had an oily smile. "Your Eye, underneath that mask. Which you may remove, if you wish. I imagine it takes its toll on the body. The Eye, that is."

"Oh," said Will, taking off his mask reluctantly, and putting it inside his robe. He was self-conscious of his monstrous look. "My Eye... it reminds me of Zargon's eye. But Zargon's power is in his horn."

"Hmm. Do you know everything about the Devourer?"

"Not everything," said Will evasively.

"He devours everyone and all," said Hazor.

"Even his worshipers?" asked Will.

"Especially his worshipers," said Hazor. "In the Centennial Feed of 449 AC, Zargon feasted in the streets on scores of citizens. He saved his high priest for last; a scrumptious desert. In the Feed of 655, he devoured almost twenty of his priests. In the Feed of 952, he turned a dozen of his priests into Whelps."

Thanks to his omniscience, Will already knew what Whelps were. Anyone unfortunate to be spat on or bitten by Zargon underwent a hideous transformation process that turned them into puddles of ooze that became mindless killing monsters. These Whelps then spread the same transforming disease with their own saliva and bites.

But Will didn't know about the particular centennial feedings that Hazor was talking about. He looked into the past with his Eye and saw that all of that was true. "I don't understand," he said. "Why would a god kill his own priests - especially his highest priest?"

"How can we preach that lives don't matter unless we lead by example?" asked Hazor.

"So if I want to kill you now, you'll let me?" asked Will, feeling empowered by the fade drug. He gauged the question wasn't too provocative, given the context of their discussion. His Eye was also telling

him that Hazor actually liked him. And Hazor hated everyone, including himself.

Hazor looked disappointed. "If that's your idea of scoring a zinger, don't become a philosopher."

Will accepted the rebuke. "What would you like me to do this evening?"

"As we agreed upon, when you were here with the coot and the slut."

"You want me to attend the ceremonies with you." *To watch, query, and appreciate.*

"The fifth-night ceremonies. Yes. The most important rites of the week."

Meaning the most obscene rites of the week. "Am I expected to do anything special? I told you before, I won't hurt or kill anyone."

"You won't have to get your hands dirty," said Hazor contemptuously. "Only your mind. But on that level I expect your full participation. Anything less, and you and your slugs are on your own against the Yshians."

Lovely. But he'd committed himself to this course of action. The old cults needed the Zargonites.

The fighting force that Hazor could muster wasn't enough to match the Yshian thousand, but it was enough to give the Lost City a chance, supplemented by a certain drug. The city had a total of about 1200 citizens: 1000 adults and 200 youths below age 18. Of the 1000 adults, 25 were priests and 36 were warriors from the Temple of Zargon. From the citizenry, 385 males and 46 females were able-bodied and would be drafted to fight against the jihadists. There were also a total of 60 goblins and 56 hobgoblins who could be called on from the caves. That brought the total Zargonite fighting force to 608.

The old cults hardly added much to add to this number - a total of 68. That meant a total of 676 Cynidiceans against 1000 invading jihadists. But it wasn't even that good. The citizens being drafted (the 385 males and 46 females) were inexperienced fighters, not to mention mushroom addicts. They would be cut down in no time at all - if not for another drug that Hazor would be giving them: the berserker mushrooms. The Zargonite temple warriors would be taking berserker shrooms as well. That would give them all a fighting chance.

Also, what the Yshians had in numbers, the Cynidiceans would make up for in spell power. All the cults had priests and the Usamigarans had mages. Then too there was the element of entrapment: the Yshians didn't know the Cynidiceans would be prepared for them. They knew nothing of

the Eye of Gaius and how Will knew their invasion was coming. All things considered, it would probably be about an even match.

For the city's survival, Will would choke down this night and call it righteous. He'd stroke a priest's ego and applaud the show. Fade and pain killers - and a shrewd omniscience - would get him through rites and sights that would scar any other kid for life.

"Very well, Hazor," he said. "You have my attention. Lead the way."

By midnight he was ready to turn in. There was still another hour, but he was past his bedtime - and way past his tolerance for death and torture. Hazor would understand. *And to hell with him if he doesn't.*

They sat next to each other up on the chancel. The high host and his magi guest. Below them, the worship hall was the pit of Hell itself: a vast eighty by sixty foot area where the priests of Zargon tortured and killed people, and the temple warriors came in shifts to revel in the agony. Up on the chancel, the sacrificial altar was stained with blood going back centuries. Fresh blood was splashed everywhere, on the block and floor. If Will hadn't already lost his innocence, he would have killed himself hours ago from the things he'd been made to watch. And from Hazor's fits of giggling.

They were the only two in the hall not wearing masks. The six priests performing the sacrifices wore the Zargonite standard: gold with the horn protruding from the head, and tentacles coming out the sides and below the chins. Will had requested to sit through the rites maskless, and Hazor had accommodated him by doing likewise.

He'd sit through one more. One more, and that was it. He was running out of questions to ask anyway. There were only so many ways to feign philosophical interest over how this body was broken, how this blood was shed, or how this woman's rape differed from that man's or this child's before all their lives were snuffed out.

Next to him, Hazor clapped his hand.

Down below, the next round began. The priests had finished dragging away the corpses of two women who had been made to carve each other to pieces on the altar (with false promises of freedom for the one who didn't pass out first), and now returned with a naked elderly man. They carried him up the stairs of the chancel and strapped him on his back to the altar; then they clamped him in with restraints. The man begged for mercy in a shrine of deaf ears and thirsty eyes. Temple warriors filled the hall below, relishing the victim's terror.

Another priest brought in a cage containing four rats. He ascended the chancel and placed the cage on top of the man's abdomen, and slid out the false bottom so that the rats scampered within the cage over the man's stomach. The man moaned in horror.

Hazor looked over at Will. "Can you guess what's next?"

Thankfully the fade drug was still working. Nothing could break Will's calm. Sheer fatigue was making him less alert though; more tired. "I'd guess the priest is going to lift up the cage, so the rats can... I don't know, eat the man's face?" *No, that's not right. The rats would just leap off the altar and run away.* Unlike many of the other rites he'd sat through tonight, Will had never seen a rat ritual in his visions.

The high priest chuckled. "Watch closely."

Three of the priests had tongs carrying red-hot burning coals. They applied the coals to the metal cage frame. Will frowned, still unclear as to the cage's purpose. Then the cage became slowly heated; unbearably so for the rats. They panicked and scurried faster across the man's stomach. The cage grew hotter. The rats turned desperate, and started burrowing through the only soft surface available: the man's stomach.

Jesus Christ.

Will's own stomach contracted, despite himself. The sheer nastiness of this rite took him by surprise. Beside him, Hazor was giggling uncontrollably.

It wasn't long before the victim was wailing in agony. With their claws and teeth, the rats were gnawing deep into his bowels, trying vainly to escape the heat of the cage. It went on for a long time - too long - until the rats were deep inside the man. Will watched as he quickly died from that point, and the priests got busy cleaning up the mess.

Hazor was enjoying himself long after it ended. "It's possibly my favorite," he said. "I always save it for the last hour." He looked at Will. "Now, what are your questions?"

Will had frankly had it with this question-and-answer game, and treating torture like an analytical exercise. He'd been very gracious for the past six hours - sitting through sacrifice, rape, sacrifice, torture, sacrifice, bloodbaths - all the while plying his host with dutiful questions. He'd almost even convinced himself that Zargonite barbarisms served the cosmos in an oblique way; bettered it, somehow, through its purity of sadism; its honest nihilism. But this rat torture - this late in the game - rubbed him real wrong.

"I don't have any more questions," said Will. "That was disgusting and despicable."

The high priest froze; didn't move at all. He looked like a child whose favorite toy had been broken. Then his face twisted angrily.

Will cursed himself. *Undo that, you fool, if you want to save this city.*

"I'm sorry, Hazor," he said. "I didn't mean to offend. It wasn't disgusting. It was... inspiring, like everything else I've seen tonight. But I can't keep up anymore. I'm still a kid, even with the Eye... it's late and I'm tired. Would you mind... could I go to bed now?" *God, you sound lame. If the Eye didn't protect you with black fire, rats would be eating into your bowels right now.*

Hazor's face was still purple with rage. On impulse, Will reached out and touched his shoulder, apologizing again. That seemed to reach the high priest. He simmered down and flashed his oily smile.

"Of course, Will. It is late, and you've been a fine guest. The Eye has done wonders for your enlightenment." He put his hand on Will's thigh. "You know, some of the legends say that Gaius served the Devourer. I take those legends seriously. Perhaps this temple is your real home." He caressed Will's thigh with his sweaty palm. Then he clutched Will's groin.

Will reacted violently and leaped from his chair. He stepped away; out of Hazor's reach. He was breathing heavily, even through the fade drug; angry at being touched like that. "Sorry," he said, not sorry at all. "Can I... just go to bed now?"

Hazor's eyes glinted with malevolence. "By all means. My acolyte will take you to your suite. It's the best one in the Rise - aside from mine of course. Perhaps I'll visit you later and join you in bed." He laughed when he saw Will's expression. "Then again, maybe not. Sleep well. You will rise early and we will have breakfast together, before you return to the pyramid." He turned and snapped his fingers.

From a corner of the hall stepped a masked acolyte. He must have been standing in the shadows for the past six hours. He beckoned Will to follow him. Will bowed low to Hazor, wanting to punch the man's face, and then left the hall.

As he followed the acolyte to the Rise, he began burning with fury over being touched. The bird man swam into his vision. He hadn't thought of the bird man in a long time. He began to sweat and feel sick. When the acolyte went up a flight of stairs, Will fell to his knees and vomited. He saw the bird man's face, then Hazor's. The two blended into one.

It would have been worse without the fade drug, but it was still a bad spell. Hazor had triggered him. Not the Eye - that would have been

catastrophic. But Will didn't need this right now. *Get a hold of yourself, Byers.* He closed his right eye and breathed deeply, down on all fours.

He heard tittering ahead. It was the acolyte. He'd come back for Will and was laughing at him. Waiting for him to get up. Will forced himself to stand and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He needed a glass of water. Some of his late supper was on the floor. He'd managed to eat more than he expected. He and Hazor had feasted on steak that the high priest revealed only afterwards was human: a teenager broken on the altar. Fade had kept it down. Trauma had just brought it back up.

"Is there a pitcher of water in my room?" he asked the acolyte.

The man laughed, spun a 180, and then went back up the flight of stairs.

Acid head. Like every other Cynidicean outside the old cults.

The stairwell took them up to Zargon's Rise. Offensive imagery swirled around the walls: the usual fare of rape, sacrifice, and dismemberment. At the top the acolyte led him down a corridor to another stairwell that led to the floor of the priest suites. The special suite reserved for Will was at the end of a wide hall with black carpeting that muffled all sound. The entry to the suite was a set of double doors that slid apart, decorated with the image of a nude pregnant woman, staring wide-eyed. The acolyte stopped at the hallway turn and gestured for Will to go down into the suite.

"Thank you," said Will. "Before you go, what if I need anything?" He wasn't expecting a real answer.

The acolyte stared at Will through his mask. Then he reached inside Will's robe and removed the cherub mask that Will had kept off throughout the night.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

The acolyte held up a finger to shush him, and then placed the silver mask gingerly on the floor. He pulled aside his robes and exposed himself, urinating on the mask. He pissed for a long time.

"For God's sake," said Will. "You know what, you get to keep that mask. It's your tip for walking me here." He left the acolyte and went down to his suite.

We're relying on acid-head space-shots to defeat jihadists.

When he got to the double doors he gasped in horror. The image of the pregnant woman wasn't an image, but real. She had been preserved somehow, embedded *in* the door panels - inside the surface along the split that divided the doors. Her corpse was in effect sealing the doors shut. To open them would mean sliding one right and one left, which would rip the

body in half from head to groin. He probed the door with his omniscience, but the Eye wouldn't penetrate this morbid contraption.



He looked back behind him. The acolyte was done relieving himself. He had left the cherub mask on the floor and was watching Will. The Eye showed the man's facial expression under the mask. The man was elated; eager for Will to open the doors.

Will sighed in disgust, beyond caring at this point. After all the evil tonight he'd seen inflicted on the living, he wasn't worried about desecrating the dead. He grabbed the door handles and slid them apart.

They opened with ease, and to Will's great shock the woman came alive - if she had ever been dead. Her mouth began screaming as her body was torn asunder. She split into halves, and her unborn child was bisected

inside her. The fetus wailed on both sides of the open doorway. Will was aghast, literally stunned out of his mind. He couldn't fathom the depraved mind that had devised this door.

There was tittering behind him. He looked back and saw the acolyte giggling hysterically, just like Hazor. This was why he'd been invited here. To see the whole canvass of Zargonite sadism. To look on every bit of it and despair.

The woman screamed and begged to be killed. For her child to be killed. Will was getting angry again, despite the fade drug. He hurriedly grabbed both door panels and tried to slide them closed again, but they wouldn't budge. He kept trying. The woman and her baby had been torn asunder *but were still alive*, feeling the prolonged pain of being ripped apart without dying from it. The doors still wouldn't move. Will ran his hands over the surface, helplessly trying to reach the woman encased underneath.

As soon as he did that, the Eye showed everything. Whatever high-level magic protected the door from divination, physical touch dispelled it. And the truth was even worse than he thought. The pregnant woman hadn't been put here recently. She'd been trapped inside this door for centuries - killed over and over again every time someone entered or left the suite. When the doors opened, they stayed open for fifteen minutes, and the woman (and her conscious fetus) felt the pain of being torn in half and dying *for fifteen minutes*. When the doors automatically closed after that duration, the woman and her baby magically came back to life, only to wait for the next time the doors were opened.

It was possibly the most unbearably cruel punishment a human being had ever been made to endure. The woman - Phael was her name - had been killed like this at least a thousand times. Her son Efrum was a fetus, but thanks to the Zargonite enchantments, he had the cognitive capacity and speaking skills of a five-year old. Will could only imagine what Phael had done to earn this hell, when the Eye showed that too. Three hundred years ago, she had affronted the high priest of Zargon: managed to get him in a compromising position, and then castrate him. This was her eternal reward.

Phael. I'm sorry. I want to help.

To Will's astonishment, Phael responded telepathically. So did Efrum. They were still physically screaming - to the acolyte's delight - but anyone who touched the door surface could read their thoughts too. Their desperate appeals reached him, for some reason. He felt a righteous anger he hadn't known in a while.

Phael: *Destroy this evil. Please.*

Will: *How? How do I do that?*

Efrum: *Mom, help me!*

Phael: *I don't know. Please. Find a way.*

Will: *This is deep magic. Beyond my Magi powers.*

Phael: *Please. Help us. We die long and hard every day.*

Will: *I wish I could -*

Efrum: *Mom! It's ripping me, tearing me! Mom!*

Will: *- I wish I knew how... Wait... Mom? Is that you?*

Phael: *What are you doing?*

Will: *Are you... really here?*

Phael: *No... stop touching us... stop touching us!*

Ephrum: *Mom! It's hurting me! Hurting, Mom! It's hurting -*

The Eye flared horribly inside Will's head, feeling twice its size. It pulsed - *no* - throbbed - *no* - pounded - *no* - pushing, pushing, *pushing* him toward that inexorable purpose it was made for...

No!

He fought it. He really tried. But Efrum's cries had opened a door that no amount of will could shut...

"MOM!" screamed Will.

His rage blew the doors apart. The panels exploded and the two halves of Phael and her fetus with them, showering Will with gore. Through the din of his death scream he heard faint echoes of their cries, as if their souls lingered, unable to acknowledge liberation or flee the place that had jailed them. Souls in need of comfort.

Will had none on hand. His face contorted like a demon's. It was worse than the previous two times - on the Isle and in his chamber with Auriga - when he had retained at least a vestige of control. Now his wrath was indiscriminate; it wanted anyone and everything. Had Mike or Dustin been standing here, he would have torn them apart. Drug addiction had made him susceptible to the Eye's worst.

He stood rigid, arms locked at his sides, hurling his fury through the blasted doorway. The suite that had been prepared for him became Hiroshima. The acolyte behind him had fled, disappearing around the corner. But Will didn't need to see him; only to See him. His scream tore backwards down the corridor, and before the acolyte could reach the stairs, his head exploded. Helpless to the curse that throttled him, Will kept raging against an abomination done to a mother and her son.

The stairwells lurched. Cracks leaped through stone - in walls, floors, and ceilings. All around him, Zargon's Rise began to crumble. With the

Eye, Will saw priests and warriors throughout the tower. They had less than a minute for any final prayers.

When the Rise collapsed, Will fell with it, battered all the way down by rock and ruin. Black fire enveloped him, and he didn't feel a thing.

And he didn't stop screaming.



Chapter Fifteen:

Everything Unholy

Legba was blowing hard when they reached the broken wall. It was just as Mike had left it, a beaten reminder of ancient glory. But he'd left in the blinding heat of day. This was the desert night, under a full moon and biting cold.

He'd punished the horse to get here, doing it in three days, having no idea when the jihadists would arrive. Hopefully Will had seen them and everyone was forearmed. But Mike knew that Will's prescience was up for grabs. Will could see everything, theoretically, but it didn't all come automatically. Omniscience was too much in that way for the human mind. Sometimes he had to focus to See, and that meant knowing what he was looking for to begin with.

The broken wall was broken as ever as he cantered up to it, bypassing the hidden entrances. They were tunnels into the ground, a quarter mile outside the wall. Two of them, spaced about three hundred feet apart. Built to function more as emergency exits than entrances, in case something happened to the pyramid. Mike wanted to stop and be sure they were hidden and locked down, but he wasn't about to chance it for fear of Yshian spies.

Legba carried him through the ruins and up to the pyramid. The statues of Gorm, Usamigaras, and Pandora loomed larger as he got closer. He suddenly couldn't wait to get inside. Knowing that welcome would be in short supply.

The horse was on the verge of collapse when Mike let him stop. He hated what he had to do next. There was no place for Legba in the Lost

City, and it was impossible to get a horse down the statue ladders anyway. He swung off the horse and reached up to pet its nose. For four months Legba had been his best friend. His previous ruffian owners had abused him. Mike's eyes filled with tears and he hugged Legba for the last time. The horse snorted, exhausted and thirsty. Mike stepped back a few steps and drew his sword. *Good-bye old friend.* With two hands he swung the blade. Legba's headless body fell on the sand. In the moonlight the blood ran black.

I killed my best friend when I left, and did it again when I returned. Heads off in a stroke. He sheathed his sword and looked up at the gods. He saw what they were thinking. He didn't deserve any friends.

He climbed the pyramid steps to the top, bypassing the door into Tier 1 which was a death trap. At the top he looked out over the land, scrutinizing for invaders. It was quiet as Sheol, but he couldn't see far in the night. *I beat them,* he thought, confident it was true. *I beat those bloodthirsty killers.* But by how many days?

The holy trinity seemed somehow alive as Mike walked under them. He realized how badly he missed it here. For months he'd suffered through diatribes against god-worship, bigotries against infidels, and non-stop venom from Areesha's brother. It was worth it for her, but he saw clearly now that Yshia could have never been home to him. It was a land of virulent hate and suffocating oppression.

He knelt before Madarua and mumbled an orison from the *Circle*, praying that Pandora wouldn't take his balls for running off. When he finished, he stood and opened the secret panel on Madarua's leg that led into the hollowed cylinder, and descended the ladder to Tier 2.

Darkness covered him in his downward climb, and he cursed, pausing to take a torch from his pack and light it. He wanted his magic sword back - or another magic sword - that made fueled light unnecessary. He'd come prepared when he left Suqatra, buying a couple of torches in the village the morning of his departure.

He reached bottom in the statue machinery room, and took the door that led to the stairwell going down to Tier 3. It also led to the room he had shared with Lucas, if he were to ignore the stairwell and continue down the corridor.

Which of course is what he did.

At the door of his old room, he put his ear to it, trying to determine if the chamber was occupied. This was Brotherhood territory, and while Mike didn't fear for his safety - he wore the Hand of Gaius - he didn't want to intrude or cause offense. He had betrayed his Brothers and cut them

deep. They'd never forgive him and that was just. Hearing nothing, he pried the door open. It was dark inside, like the hallway, but someone could have been sleeping. He thrust his torch inside the room and saw no one. He went inside.

The Brothers had left the room unoccupied. The two beds he and Lucas had used were still there, but the sheets and pillows were gone. There was the table and two chairs, and also their treasure chest. He guessed it was empty. He put his torch in a wall clamp and sat on his old bed. Reached down and opened the chest. Empty indeed.

Mike...

He looked up, startled. "Lucas?" He looked around the room. *There's no one, you fool.* He wanted his friend back so badly he was hearing him.

It was too much then. Mike broke down and cried. Hard, harder than he'd ever cried, emptying himself of months of suppressed hurt and self-loathing. He remembered Lucas, the nights in this room when they'd stayed up late talking and laughing, instead of getting the sleep their bodies craved. Their childhood in Hawkins, back when anything seemed possible, and they were prepared to take on the world together. Mike had believed friendship was pure, and nothing could shatter that sacred bond.

Lucas...

He cried as he felt what it really meant to suffer. It went on for a long time. Eventually he quieted, and when he did he froze; someone else was in the room. To his right, by the door to the Brothers' treasury. He turned slowly, and saw him. His would-be executioner: Kanadius. The old warrior looked harsh enough to swallow nails.

Mike wiped his eyes. He didn't get up from the bed, though it would have been appropriate; he didn't think he had the strength to stand in front of Kanadius. He waited for the Grand Master to speak.

"You hurt for what you did."

Mike nodded.

Kanadius was unmoved. "It's good that you suffer. Did you just arrive? From the desert?"

"Yes," said Mike.

"You've not seen Pandora?"

Mike shook his head.

"Are you still sworn to Madarua?"

"Yes."

Kanadius nodded. "Then go downstairs to your Maidens. Get out of here. Don't ever let me see you in our rooms or temple again."

"If you want to kill me, I won't stop you this time," said Mike. He meant it.

"No. I'm letting you go because I'm bound to. And because it would probably take a hundred swords to kill you anyway."

"Kanadius, I have to tell you something. I have to warn you -"

The old warrior cut him off. "We know. The Yshians are coming. They'll be here in five days."

"Will?" asked Mike, relieved.

Kanadius nodded. "And thanks to you, those bastards know of the secret entrances."

"I know. I'm sorry. I had no idea -"

"And thanks to Will, we're all going to die," said Kanadius. "Both of you have brought destruction on Cynidicea."

"What?" Mike felt ice in his blood. "What do you mean? What did Will do?"

"Ask Pandora," said the Grand Master. "I don't have the stomach - or the time for you - to talk about it."

"Okay, fine." Mike stood up. "But, can I... I know I have no right to ask this. But, did you keep my sword when I dropped it? Can I have it back? Or did you give it to a Brother?"

Kanadius looked disgusted. "If you think any Brother would wield the sword that cut down Gorm's Chosen, then you're a fool as much as a traitor. But yes, I have it. It's stored in the treasury, and I'd like it out of my keeping. Wait here." He turned and walked into the room he came from.

Mike felt like a slug as he waited. He hated himself more than he could bear.

The Grand Master returned with Mike's enchanted sword and gave it to him. As soon as Mike grabbed the hilt, the blade filled the room with its clear light. He went over to the wall and put out the torch.

"For all the good that blade will do you," said Kanadius. "Thanks to you and Will - the Hand and the Eye. In fairness, I bear some of the blame. I accepted the risks of Gaius's gifts. Gorm will judge me accordingly."

Mike had to say one more thing: "You didn't let Demetrius resurrect him." Already knowing this without being told. "Why not, if Will and I are such trash in your eyes? If things are so bad, don't you want Lucas back?"

"It doesn't work that way, Mike. You don't get off that easy. Your friend's death is something you'll have to live with."

"I'm not thinking of myself! I'm trying to understand you! You believe that Lucas was Gorm's Chosen, even though he was resurrected. The

lightning tattoo appeared on him during the initiation rite. Why wouldn't you want your chosen prophet resurrected again?"

"I don't owe you an explanation!" Kanadius shouted.

"Okay!" said Mike. "I'm not challenging you. I'm just trying to understand. Do all the Brothers not want Lucas back?"

"We miss Lucas," said Kanadius. "But bringing him back isn't for us to decide. Just because Gorm used Lucas to reveal his will doesn't mean that resurrection is suddenly a good thing - and it's certainly not to be exploited for self-serving reasons. I believe that Lucas fulfilled his role. His time on this earth is over."

"How?" asked Mike. "What role did he fulfill?"

"He sacrificed himself for a fellow Brother by letting his best friend kill him," said Kanadius trenchantly. "That's as exemplary as a prophet can be."

"I guess the others agree with you," said Mike, stung. "Have any new Brothers joined to take the place of those I killed?"

"They don't all agree, actually," said the Grand Master. "Our 'fanatics', as you once called them, have urged that we allow Demetrius to resurrect Lucas. Especially now that Will has destroyed any hope for us."

Mike had no idea what Will had done, but the fact that Azariah and Moser were pushing for Lucas's resurrection surprised him. Then again, maybe not. The fanatics had believed that Lucas was Gorm come again. They despised resurrection more than the other Brothers, but they also believed Lucas was a god, and thus not bound by the taboos against resurrection.

"We have two new Brothers since you left," the Grand Master continued. "Roose and Garoman passed their initiation rites." Mike remembered the two young men from the stronghold. "Don't come anywhere near them, or the rest of us. Now for the last time, get out."

Mike bowed to Kanadius to show respect, and then left. He went down the corridor and took the stairwell to Tier 3, wondering what the hell Will had done. *Three guesses, genius. He was triggered and killed people; he killed people and destroyed things; he killed lots of people and brought down buildings.* He sprinted down the stairs and the hall to the revolving passage, and pressed the button next to the door.

Another wave of nostalgia hit with the grinding of the turntable. Mike forced back tears. He had used this passage so often, like people from his home world used elevators in the big cities. The passage rumbled and stopped as it aligned with the southern door. Mike opened it.

He stopped as soon as he stepped inside. Someone was opening the door aligned with the northern corridor. His heart raced. *Please don't let it be a Brother.* Relief flooded him when he saw it was a Maiden. Then panic took hold when he saw who it was. Their eyes locked.

"Mike?"

She hasn't changed. Still wandering everywhere. She used this passage more than all the Maidens - and Brothers and Magi - combined.

It was four months and he still hadn't come to terms with his feelings for Jilanka. She'd sent Lucas after him, all but knowing what Mike would be forced to do. He hated her; loved her; wanted to kill her, but needed that other thing they'd done so often.

Not a word as he stalked towards her. She met him in the middle, and they attacked each other hungrily, kissing and clawing and until the clothes were off. They had their unholy way right on the floor of the passage, mindless for brutality - unfazed in the least as to who might happen by. If it was the end of the world, honestly, who cared what anyone thought?

"What's it like out there?"

Their old routine: she held him and stroked his hair, using questions to subtly accuse. His guard was always down after sex. But now there was Sauce. The wolf had bounded around the room yipping during their love-play. He had remembered Mike and was jubilant over his return.

"Awful," said Mike drowsily. He was exhausted from the three-day ride and their two-part bang. First on the floor of the passage, then again here in their old bed. Without drugs; he didn't need them after four months of abstinence. "You'd hate it."

"Yet you stayed out there. For months." Massaging his temples. "Couldn't have been that bad."

Oh, it was. And this is paradise. Mike hadn't slept in a real bed or had sex while staying at the Jalals. A floor mattress was his bed; Areesha his platonic doll.

He drifted, but Jilanka wouldn't let him sleep. "You belonged here. With us." She squeezed the back of his neck hard. "With me. In this room."

"Ow," he said. This room had been theirs for four days, after his grisly induction into the Maidens. He'd been given a Hand, and she'd been given a choke pear up the cunt. Nothing like the week before - their insane fuck-fests in the abandoned temple close by - but they had become more

intimate here, in more tender moments. Pandora had cruelly humbled them both.

"Did she expel me?" he asked.

"Pandora?" said Jilanka. "No, of course not. When she met with the cult leaders - it was like, nine days ago - Will said that you hadn't renounced the Maidens."

"Will's right." *Christ, that kid sees everything.* He shrugged off his weariness and sat up next to her. Sauce left his spot on the floor and leaped up on the bed to lie at their feet.

"He misses you," said Jilanka. The wolf had bonded with Jilanka, and she'd let him have the room to himself during Mike's hiatus. She had taken care of him, fed him, and taken him down on her trips to the city. More than Auriga had ever done for him. But he'd gotten lonely without anyone living in the room.

"You need to tell me everything," said Mike. "How is everyone preparing for the invasion, and what the fuck did Will do to make things worse?"

She explained to him the deal. The tentative pact with the Zargonites, contingent on Will's behavior as their honored guest. That was two nights ago. Apparently things went fine - right up to the final hour of the ceremonies, at midnight, when Zargon's Rise exploded like a bomb. Then the rest of the temple began to blow apart. In the end, the Temple of Zargon was a pile of rubble.

The Usamigaran priests and Magi had rushed across the street. Their stronghold was across from the Zargonites, and the explosion had sounded like the apocalypse. Demetrius, Raen, and Shira worked with their five Magi, and between *levitate* and *telekinesis* spells, managed to liberate Will from burial under twenty feet of rock. They took him into the Usamigaran stronghold. He was near catatonic, in the same way he'd been after decimating the Isle of Death. He didn't respond to anyone and didn't say a thing.

"Except one thing," said Jilanka. "Your name."

"Me?" asked Mike.

"Once in a while he'd croak, 'Mike', according to Demetrius."

"Who explained all this to Pandora," said Mike.

"Pandora met with all the cult leaders the next day, and Demetrius told them everything he knew. And then Pandora summoned us to give us the bad news."

Mike swore. "The Zargonites won't help us anymore. Obviously."

"Most of them are dead, anyway," said Jilanka. "The Usamigarans saw the temple survivors retreat into the Catacombs - which if you ask me is pretty stupid, even for Zargonites. Demetrius says less than a quarter of the temple force survived. Maybe five or six priests and about twenty warriors. Hazor was one of them though."

"Piece of shit," said Mike. "He had to be the one who triggered Will."

"I don't know," said Jilanka. "If that were true, wouldn't Hazor be among the dead?"

"Maybe," said Mike. "I don't know. Will keeps asking for me?"

"Yeah. You need to go see him. He's still down in the stronghold. Demetrius is taking care of him, I guess. Or Dustin. Or both."

Now Mike saw what Kanadius had meant by the the Hand and the Eye being responsible for the Yshian victory. Because of the Hand's curse, Mike had killed his Brothers, including Lucas, which caused Mike to flee into the outside world, where he revealed the Lost City's existence. Because of the Eye's curse, Will had destroyed the Temple of Zargon, killing their alliance with the Zargonites - their only chance against the Yshians.

"Well, then what's the plan?" asked Mike.

"There is no plan," said Jilanka. "We wait, defend ourselves as we must, and then die as we must. There's nowhere we can run. You know that. Will explained it to the cult leaders: the surface world is an Yshian hell. Their 'Dream of the Desert Garden'. It's coming for us."

"And you accept this?" said Mike, feeling helpless. *Of course she accepts it. What choice is there?*

"We can't arm the people and give them berserker drugs. They don't respect the old cults, and most of the mushroom supplies were stored in the temple. A lot of the drugs are gone now."

"Do you think the gods are laughing at us?" asked Mike. "We went to get the Eye and Hand in order to bring down the Zargonites and their drugs." Well, not the drugs necessarily. The Usamigarans had no problems with mushrooms, if they were taken willingly by adults, and Mike and Jilanka had thought the drug war waged by their fellow Brothers and Maidens was stupid. "Now that we've succeeded bringing down the Zargonites, it turns out that's exactly what's going to kill us." *There's no end to Gaius's curse.*

"I think Gaius is the one who is laughing at us, somewhere," said Jilanka, as if reading his mind. She leaned over and kissed him. "Mike, we need to make the most of the next five days. I'm not scared of dying. I'm

scared of dying alone. I'm glad you came back. Can you... forgive me for Lucas?"

No. But I can't forgive myself either. He hugged her. "This room is ours for the next five days. And to hell with anyone who tries saying otherwise." *I'm a wretch like you. We deserve each other.*

"Pandora told me to leave it untouched, in case you came back," she said. "She won't object."

Mike sighed. "I know I need to see her, and the rest of my sisters. I was coming down to do that. But I'm so tired. It's late. First thing tomorrow?"

"They'll wonder where I am," said Jilanka. "Go to sleep. I'll tell Pandora you're back and we'll see her in the morning."

Mike was already asleep.

Pandora ripped his face the next day, but not half as bad as he'd expected. He was still counted a Maiden. For what it was worth. Madarua's Champion could afford to be gracious. They were all going to die or be enslaved in four days.

Mike spent the morning with his sisters, who accepted his return in varying degrees of indifference. They too had resigned themselves to the inevitable outcome of the invasion. Like their Champion, they were going down fighting, with praises on their lips to the goddess. Mike was proud to be among them.

In the afternoon, he went down to the city to see Will. The Eye Child was being cared for by Dustin/Demetrius in the Usamigaran stronghold. It was a repeat of Auriga's babysitting after the quest to the Isle. Will was - on the outside, at least - a near vegetable. When he started to shake, he was fed his painkiller mushrooms. Once in a while he'd stand up to walk around his room, or go to the latrine, but his legs didn't cooperate well.

Mike sat by his chair and held his hand, trying to stir any discussion. Will croaked his name a few times, but nothing else. Until Mike got up to leave. It was evening by then, and Will suddenly reached out and seized Mike's arm. For the first time he looked directly at Mike, his Eye bulging with intensity.

Surprised, Mike sat back down. "Yeah? What is it?"

"*Feed me,*" croaked Will. He sounded like a dying parrot.

"Uh, okay, yeah. I'll get something from the kitchen."

But when he came back with a tray of light supper - soup, bread and a bit of manyan - Will ignored most of it, except for a few spoonfuls of soup. He repeated himself, looking intently at Mike: "*Feed me.*"

"I don't understand. You want something else?"

Will shook his head. "*Feed me.*"

Mike sighed, clueless.

He stayed with Will a while longer and then returned to the pyramid. Sauce and Jilanka were waiting. He tumbled with the former, in a playful wrestle, and then got in bed to tumble with the latter. All the while he couldn't stop thinking of Will. He'd been trying to tell Mike something but didn't have the voice for it.

Feed me.

The next two days were an exercise in non-preparation. The clerics of the old gods invited to shelter as many citizens in their strongholds as they could accommodate, but most of the people didn't care. They were acid heads. News of war made them laugh, and cry, and prance in the streets. Masks and costumes were all the refuge required.

The Temple Magi had joined the other Magi down in the stronghold. They belonged with their chief, even if he was catatonic. The Temple Maidens and Brothers remained in the pyramid, with Pandora and Kanadius presiding over rites heralding an apocalypse on par with Ragnarok. This was the first time the Lost City had suffered an invasion since the Goblin War of the fourth century. The Zargonites had subjected the goblins and made them their bitches, giving them the cliff caves above the lake. Thanks to Will, there would be no Zargonite salvation this time. Hazor and his remnant flock apparently had no intention of fighting the Yshians. They had fled the Catacombs to the pyramid, and taken over the Rooms of Judgment on Tier 9. Right above the tier of their hideous god.

The day before the Yshians were due, Dustin came looking for Mike. It was early afternoon, and Mike was in his room resting. Jilanka was down in the city, trying to enjoy the last day of her life. She needed her space and to walk the streets alone. Mike answered the door. Dustin stood there looking pale; he was sweating like a pig.

"What happened to you?" asked Mike.

"Never mind," said Dustin. "You need to come with me, right now."

"Demetrius?"

"No, Dustin. You need to come with me, Mike."

"Why? Where?"

"You'll see."

"Is it Will? Is he -"

"Mike!" yelled Dustin. "You need to come *right now*." He turned and left the room without waiting.

Mike swore and hurried to catch up. He followed Dustin to the revolving passage. Inside Dustin pressed the button that began rotating their end of the hall to the southeast door: the Temple of Gorm.

"Hey!" shouted Mike. "I'm not going there!"

"Uh yeah, actually Mike, you are," said Dustin.

"I'm banned from there, you idiot! What's wrong with you?"

"You're not banned anymore," said Dustin.

The passage stopped, locking in place at the door he'd fled so long ago. Cries for his death had trailed him to the desert surface. There was no way he was going down that hall. "Dustin, what's going -"

Dustin told him to shut up. Mike followed him, fingering the hilt of his sword. *Kanadius wants another swing at my neck, and he's finally worked his nut up. It's the end of everything, so why not?*

When they reached the temple door, he froze at what he saw. Nausea smacked his gut, and he drew his sword reflexively.

"It's okay," said Dustin. "Put it away."

It was not okay. There was a head hanging on the wall next to the door. *Nailed* into the wall with a long iron spike. Kanadius's head.

Mike looked at Dustin. "What the fuck?"

"The fanatics rebelled," said Dustin.

Mike's nausea turned to disgust. "They're in charge now?" That would mean Azariah was the new Grand Master.

"Not exactly," said Dustin, throwing open the door. "Go on in."

Mike steeled himself for anything as he strode into the temple, but he was not, *absolutely not*, prepared for the person waiting for him inside. He cried out when he saw him and stopped dead in his tracks.

Oh God.

Lucas Sinclair looked healthy and radiant as ever. He wore the garb he'd always worn as a Brother of Gorm, including the chainmail armor he must have been buried in. His head was firmly attached, with no signs or scars of Mike's brutal handiwork. His magic sword was strapped to his side. And there was something new: he wore a crown.

Lucas!

Mike stood looking at his friend, not daring to approach any further. Dustin stayed by the door. Flanking both sides of Lucas in front of the altar were the remaining Brothers, all seven of them: Azariah, Moser, Druids, Coval, Krayzen, and two that Mike didn't recognize. Their swords were drawn and their eyes rained judgment.

"Lucas," Mike began, his eyes spilling tears. "I'm sorry..." *I'd do anything to take it back...* "I'm sorry!" He put his face in his hands and cried then, as he had cried in their room four nights ago - the rattling cry of self-loathing and unendurable shame.

He sobbed and sobbed until his hands were being gently pried away. He looked up. Through waterfalls he made out Lucas, saying things that weren't right. Forgiving Mike as he didn't deserve. Embracing him, announcing the badness between them past. Mike clung to his friend, unable to accept the absolution. They stood like that until he finally did.

"I don't understand," said Mike, wiping his eyes. "You... Kanadius...?" *What's that crown you're wearing?* And why did it look familiar?

"I'll explain everything," said Lucas. He turned to the Brothers. "Give us the room. I have a lot to say to Mike in private. And Dustin."

Azariah protested: "Your Grace! Are you sure about that?" The Brothers looked uneasy with leaving Lucas alone.

"Yes, I'm sure," said Lucas. "I'll be fine. Thank you all - for everything you've done."

The Brothers sheathed their swords, bowed low, and left the temple in single file.

Mike's mind was reeling. *Your Grace?*

Dustin closed the door when they left and joined Mike and Lucas.

"Well, friends. Here we are. The priest who won't die, the maiden who can't die, and the king who keeps dying."

"What does that make Will?" asked Lucas.

"Oh, he's the kid who may as well be dying," said Dustin.

Mike was too stunned for humor. "The Brothers made you *king*, Lucas? What do the other cults say about that?"

"The Usamigarans are giving me their support," said Lucas. "It's your tribe I'm worried about, Mike. In a few minutes we may get some fireworks on that front."

"I'm lost," said Mike.

"Dustin," said Lucas.

Dustin told the story. Lucas's grave had been kept secret in the Brotherhood, so that the body couldn't be stolen and resurrected. Kanadius firmly believed that Lucas had fulfilled his role as the Chosen. Other Brothers, led by fanatics Azariah and Moser, began to take a different point of view - that while resurrection was indeed an abomination, Lucas, as the incarnation of Gorm, wasn't bound by the taboo. Now, with the Zargonite alliance in shambles, they needed their deity back. The Lost City was about to fall. Kanadius wouldn't budge. Last night four Brothers

revolted: Azariah, Moser, Krayzen (a former militant), and Roose (one of the newbies). They killed Kanadius, dug up Lucas's grave, and this morning summoned Demetrius to their temple to resurrect Lucas.

"Demetrius didn't need to be asked twice," said Dustin. "I was telling him to do it. I mean, I always hated Azariah and Moser - and Hyme, before you killed him, Mike - but I wanted Lucas back."

"Everyone's a fanatic now," said Lucas. "Not just the four who rebelled. All seven of them. And I'm sure as hell not in a position to judge."

"What made them think you can save the city?" asked Mike.

Lucas laughed. "Nothing but stupid blind faith."

"Or not so stupid," said Dustin. "Lucas may not be Gorm, but he does have a special role cut out for him. Even if the Brothers understood jack shit about it."

"Which is?" asked Mike.

"When Demetrius raised me," said Lucas, "I sat up on that altar with another sign. Another tattoo." He held up his left palm. There was an imprint of a black crown, looking exactly like the one he was wearing.

"I've seen that crown before," said Mike.

"It was Queen Zenobia's," said Dustin. "When I vaporized that bitch, it fell to the floor in the crypt. Remember, Mike, you warned us not to touch it."

"Bad advice," said Lucas. "We should have ignored you. I sent the Brothers down to retrieve the crown as soon as we saw the tattoo." He paused. "And I sent Demetrius and Shira to get something else, when the Brothers came back."

"When they came back, they crowned Lucas King of Cynidicea," said Dustin.

"With a queen's crown?" asked Mike.

"The crown is the whole key to my undead/resurrected nature," said Lucas. "If someone is killed by Zenobia's touch, and then resurrected, that person can wear her crown and command undead."

"What?" said Mike. "How do you know that?"

"I just, like, saw it, or understood it, when I put the crown on," said Lucas. "I know I'm not wrong."

"How many undead are we talking?"

"Hundreds," said Lucas. "A whole army. No undead will harm someone who was killed by Zenobia and wears her crown."

"Both parts are essential," said Dustin. "That's why the Isle recognized Lucas as already undead and didn't turn him into a zombie. The way it turned the others who went ashore. Because he had died from Zenobia's

touch. But the zombies didn't recognize him as one of their own. Because he needed the crown."

"Now that I have it," said Lucas, "I can summon every zombie linked to that Isle and they'll do as I say. We have an army. To stop the Yshians."

Mike couldn't believe what he was hearing. "That's incredible." But how many zombies remained in the nexus world bridged by Vark's Ring? "Will killed hundreds of those zombies." At least three hundred, maybe closer to four.

"There are hundreds more," said Lucas. "Remember our history lessons? All the ash that was put on that island?"

Mike remembered his studies in the Brotherhood: up until the eighth century AC, the Isle had been used as a dumping ground for the ashes of the dead. Then, in 773 AC, Vark's Ring became what it was, and anyone who went to the Isle was killed. Something mysterious had happened. Whatever it was, the ash of every corpse had been raised into a zombie. That was over seven hundred years worth of dead, transformed into undead.

Eat that, you Yshian shits.

If Lucas could summon hordes of zombies, they had more than a fighting chance. One zombie was as deadly as any jihadist, if not more so.

"Well, the crown looks pretty unisex anyway," said Mike.

"That works for another reason too," said Lucas. "One that should be arriving any moment."

Dustin went to the door and listened. "Yeah, I think I hear the revolving passage." He looked at Lucas. "They're coming."

"Who's coming?" asked Mike.

Lucas went to the altar against the far wall and made sure the candles had enough stick left. He looked inside a box sitting on the altar and then returned to the center of the room.

"Lucas, who's -"

There was commotion outside the temple door. Dustin opened it, looked back at Lucas, and nodded.

Mike tried seeing out into the hallway, but he could only see a few of the Brothers, guarding the doorway.

"Let them all in," said Lucas.

Dustin opened the door for everyone outside. The Brothers walked back in and assumed their positions in a protective arc in front of Lucas. Mike and Dustin stepped to the side a bit as the newcomers entered.

Mike's bowels turned to liquid. It was Pandora and the Maidens, led by Demetrius's colleague, the Usamigaran priestess Shira.

For a Maiden to step inside the Temple of Gorm was a capital offense.

Shira joined Dustin and Mike at the side of the room, as Pandora and her Maidens filed in quietly. The air was brutally tense. The Maidens gripped the hilts of their swords, ready to draw for any reason. All of them were present except Jilanka, who was down in the city.

Dustin leaned over to whisper. "Shira already told them about Lucas."

Mike nodded. *I'll bet she did.* Pandora would have never agreed to an audience on Brotherhood soil if Kanadius were in charge.

"Thank you for coming, Pandora," said Lucas.

Madarua's Champion looked like the wrath of heaven come down. "I'll say this to start with. Kanadius looks more handsome out there on the wall than he ever did attached to his body. For that I applaud your Brothers. But I assure you, Grand Master, I am *not* a feeble old man, and if you try -"

"You will address King Lucas as His Grace!" shouted Azariah.

Swords flashed in the air. Every Maiden had drawn, except Pandora. The Brothers responded in kind. Pandora glared at Azariah contemptuously.

"Brothers, stand down!" Lucas sounded like a king right then, and Mike felt a surge of pride as the Brothers immediately obeyed the man they had crowned. His friend was not only commanding like a monarch, he was being regally diplomatic, by not taking umbrage at his guests who had drawn first.

Lucas looked at Pandora apologetically. "Please forgive Azariah. His loyalty got the better of him. And please feel welcome here. I didn't invite you here to provoke or entrap you. I have a proposal, which you may accept or reject, with no fear of retaliation either way."

Pandora frowned, as if not expecting this. *She came expecting battle. She hates the Brothers so much she thought they wanted the satisfaction of killing all the Maidens before the invasion killed everyone.* She knew nothing about Lucas Sinclair. He didn't burn bridges, he built them.

"For centuries the three cults have been at each others' throats," said Lucas. "Barely tolerating each other, and for no reason other than to serve as a holding action against the Zargonites. If you ask me, that's a shitty place to be for people who are supposed to get along."

"There are reasons why we've been 'at each others' throats'," said Pandora. "You've been in this world long enough to know them, and you're smart enough not to dismiss them."

"Of course," said Lucas. "And I don't intend to rehash all those reasons. I'm confident in saying that all three cults have their strengths and prejudices - and I'm as guilty of prejudice as any other. Our differences in opinion can't be changed overnight, and a lot of that difference should probably not be changed. I mean, look: the cults of Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras used to get along fine *with* all their differences. I propose that we reattain that unity in diversity. Shira has told you that I can summon an army of undead from the Isle, and lead them into battle against the Yshian invaders. We have a chance at living another day, and if that happens, it could mean more Yshians coming after us. We can't go on broken and fragmented. We need the *kingdom* of Cynidicea back - even if it stays underground. I'm asking you to let me be your king." He paused. "And I'm asking you, Pandora, to be my queen."

The Maidens hissed in breath. Mike was taken completely by surprise. The proposal sounded gracious, but it was offensive from the Madaruan point of view.

Pandora's eyes narrowed. "You have balls, Brother, I'll give you that. Perhaps a black sac has more juice than a white man's. But I'll cut that sac off before you ever make me your bitch."

"I'm not asking you to be that," said Lucas. "I'm asking you to reign with me as an equal. That you and I be co-rulers. You having just as much power and authority as me."

Now it wasn't only Pandora and her Maidens who were stunned. The Brothers gasped and looked shocked. Clearly Lucas hadn't told them about this part of the deal.

Mike kept a straight face but inside he was laughing. Lucas was shrewd. By withholding his egalitarian intentions from his own Brothers, he had gained a ton of credibility in Pandora's eyes. Had they reacted not at all to the generous offer, Pandora would have expected some hidden snare that Lucas and the Brothers were keeping from her. This way, she saw that Lucas was being completely transparent.

Lucas walked to the altar and lifted the box he had checked earlier. He reached inside and produced another crown. All eyes were on him as he carried the crown and stood before Pandora.

"This is King Alexander's crown," he said. "Demetrius and Shira got it from Alexander's crypt, after the Brothers retrieved Zenobia's. The queen's crown is mine by necessity. Pandora, will you wear the king's, and share the rule of Cynidicea with me as an equal?"

Pandora gaped. "You want my answer right now?" she demanded.

"If you need time, then by all means," said Lucas. "But... time is something we're rather short on."

"I don't need time," she said curtly. "Indecision makes a lousy leader. You'll have my answer now." The temple held its breath. Mike honestly had no idea what she would say.

She faced Lucas squarely. "The histories say that Alexander and Zenobia were co-rulers in practice if not name. There's precedent there. But let's hope we do better than they did - and better for Cynidicea. I accept your proposal. And I will hold you to your vow of co-rulership."

Lucas smiled and the room relaxed; everyone's relief was palpable. Even the zealots on both sides - Azariah and Moser from the Brothers, Bray and Esranet from the Maidens - looked moved.

Shira came up to stand next to Lucas and Pandora, as the Brothers left Lucas's side and joined the Maidens in front of him. Everyone in the hall faced their new king and queen. Lucas handed Alexander's crown to Shira, and the priestess nodded to Pandora. The Champion knelt and Shira placed the crown on her head. As Pandora rose, Shira stepped back to the side and heralded the new monarchs:

"Between the years 766 and 127 before the first Thyatian emperor's crowning, sixteen monarchs ruled Cynidicea. Now, almost twelve centuries later, the kingdom is come again! Hail Lucas Sinclair of the Brotherhood! May his thunder roar! Hail Pandora Shave of the Maidens! May her footsteps shake the earth!"

Everyone shouted: "*Hail, King Lucas! Hail, Queen Pandora!*"

"The seventeenth reign will be a co-reign of equals, as Brothers and Maidens work to celebrate their differences, and Magi are allowed their freedoms. Let the reign begin!"

"*Hail, King Lucas! Hail, Queen Pandora!*"

Mike's eyes watered. *You deserve this, Lucas.*

There were no speeches from the king or queen. None were necessary. And as the ceremony ended, Mike stood in awe of Lucas Sinclair who was everything unholy: a commander of the dead, who wasn't undead and yet was; a king who wore a queen's crown, promising a redemption that could undermine the cult he'd sworn to uphold. Mike wanted Lucas to himself desperately - after all this time and what he'd done to him - but his friend was already deliberating with his queen, and surrounded by subjects wanting to bend his ear. *The price of kingship. He wears it well.*

Chapter Sixteen:

Feed Me

The attack began at dawn. It was dawn in the Lost City when the ceiling lamps swelled in sudden brightness, regardless of what the sun was doing on the surface. The lamps were huge orbs that radiated magic light for twelve hours, then dimmed to a bare glow for the same duration to let it be night. They were fastened to the ceiling by clamps - gods only knew how the first Zargonites had gotten them up there - hundreds of them, spaced at the right intervals to give the undercity the light it needed in all the right places.

Crouched behind ruined buildings by the lake bridges, Mike wondered about the upkeep of those lamps. The Zargonites were no longer in power and wouldn't be replacing orbs that ran out of magic or needed recharging. Another problem for Lucas and Pandora to think about. They'd put the Magi to work on it.

Next to him, Jilanka swore. The invaders were entering the city. Being quiet but not terribly cautious, as they had no clue what was waiting for them. A thousand of them, supposedly. Will had said about 300 of the jihadists were being supplied by Sayid al-Naji from the town of Sulba. The caliph had also ordered the Emir of Makistan to send 700 jihadists from Parsa, since Cynidicea was technically in Makistan, though close on the border. So a thousand total, and no reason to question Will's judgment. Still, Mike wished the poor kid wasn't zoned out. Sometimes his visions changed, and his original prediction was two weeks old. An updated report would have made everyone feel better.

"Get ready to smash these fuckers," said Mike, waiting for Lucas's signal.

"You want to keep score?" asked Jilanka. She had told Mike she'd thought of taking a berserker mushroom, but in the end chose to respect her king and queen's prohibition against drugs. Besides, she had nothing but contempt for the Yshians. To rely on drug-rage would be an admission that she couldn't kick their asses straight up. She was high enough - on confidence. And confident enough to want to keep score against her boyfriend who wielded the Hand. Mike thought of Gimli and Legolas at Helm's Deep.

He also thought of Aragorn taking the Paths of the Dead. Behind Mike and his Maidens stretched a horde of 340 zoombies. Over on the other side of the lake, Lucas and Pandora commanded the Gormish warriors with another 340. Each side was supplemented by Magi from the Usamigarans. Between the 680 zoombies and the sixty warriors and mages from the old cults, the Lost City was defended by 740 against the thousand invaders. Lucas believed it would suffice. Mike wasn't so sure. It all came down to the strike force of these zoombies. He knew their savagery, but worried about their discipline and obedience. So far, though, they seemed to be obeying Lucas's commands to a tee. Even on this side of the lake, by proxy, under Mike's command.

At first Mike had resisted command of the south side, and told Pandora the night before:

"You should be leading the southern attack," he'd said. "You're the queen."

"As your queen, I delegate command as I please," said Pandora, her eyes blazing.

"Of course," said Mike. "I mean, yes, your Grace. I just think you're better for morale than I am."

"Nonsense," said Pandora. "You wield the Hand of Gaius. Your near invincibility will ignite morale more effectively than any crown. What good is the Hand if it's not put to visible use? You're perfectly suitable to lead the Maidens."

"Yes, your Grace."

"If you want to second-guess me, you can use that Hand to scrub the latrines."

"Yes, your Grace."

"And it's better that I command the Brothers anyway. Some of them have a weed up their ass about taking orders from a woman. Lucas and I agreed they need to get used to obeying their queen - right away."

Inspired by this wisdom, Mike had chosen Jilanka to share command of the southern force. He'd signal when to charge the invaders, but let her manage everything up to that point. Lucas and Pandora were right. Share the rule.

The zombies started growling. They could smell the invaders three hundred feet away. Mike looked back and silenced them with a downward slash of his hand.

Edgy little fuckers.

Only hours ago, Lucas had summoned this undead army and led it across the lake. It was like something out of both the Bible and *The Return of the King*. Demetrius had prayed a *control water* spell to part the waters of the lake. Lucas had walked down to the Island of Death, entered the remains of Vark's Ring, and summoned every zombie that his crown would channel. It might have been a thousand - a perfect match for the invading army - but because Will had slain over three hundred zombies during their quest, it left less that could be summoned at any given time. Lucas was able to summon 680 of them. The zombies had materialized, fawning over Lucas like dogs snapping for prey. They followed him back through the parted waters. Citizens came to watch - in varying degrees of alarm, nonchalance, or laughter. With acid you could hardly predict.

The results would be predictable enough if the drug heads didn't steer clear of the west side. Priests from all the strongholds were organizing efforts to keep citizens safe in their homes.

Come on, Lucas. What are you waiting for? The northern forces were supposed to signal to Mike when the king was ready to charge. Mike could see jihadists pouring in the northern entrance, and he cursed Lucas again. They had to act soon. They couldn't stay hidden in this light, and couldn't afford to lose the element of surprise.

Seconds later, from across the lake, came the *dancing lights* signal from one of the Magi.

Mike motioned to everyone behind him and led the charge. He ran over one of the lake bridges as Jilanka bounded over the other. The other Maidens and the zombies rushed behind them both. Ahead of them at the southern entrance, the Yshians were appraising the interior of the Lost City. Then they saw the defenders and cried in alarm, drawing their cruel-looking scimitars.

No need for silence anymore. Holding his sword high, Mike screamed as he ran straight at the them: "*Kill these fucking desert freaks!*"

The Yshians screamed back: "*Panna-jois!!!*"

Mike knew what *panna-jois* (pronounced "panna-zhwah") meant from his months of living in Yshia. It was a holy litany: *kill the infidels.*

Infidel me, assholes.

With twenty Maidens and over three hundred zombies, Mike Wheeler smashed into the horde of some five hundred invaders. His sword was everywhere at once, inside the gut of one Yshian, through the neck of another, chopping off the arm of a third. His right hand was a blur, his sword blade impossible to get a fix on. He sliced a fourth one down, and then plowed deeper into the horde.

"Panna-jois!!!"

The shriek came from behind, and a scimitar lodged itself halfway into his neck. Mike felt the odd sensation of being wounded fatally without blood or pain or loss of momentum. The wound closed and his neck healed in seconds, as he spun to face his attacker. The Yshian gaped, unable to believe his eyes, and raised his scimitar for another swing. The Hand of Gaius gave the man his own medicine: Mike's sword buried itself halfway into his neck - and then went all the way through, sending the head rolling.

The furious cries of the Yshians were drowned by shrieks from the undead. The zombies tore the invaders apart limb from limb; for every zombie that was killed, two jihadists went down. The undead were feral; one and half times as fast as a human being, and twice as savage as a devout jihadist. They feasted from their kills as they leaped on the next invader.

"Panna-jois!!!"

Mike was exhilarated by blood lust, imagining Malik's face on every screaming jihadist he cut down; the murderer of his own sister, for the crime of being raped. How Areesha could live with Malik and call what he did honorable. Mike killed and killed, took wounds that healed, and realized that he had thrown himself so deeply into the enemy that he could barely see his own army anymore. He caught sight of a Maiden being run through by a jihadist. He saw a zombie turning an Yshian into raw hamburger. A blade came out of nowhere and went into his stomach - his reward for stopping to stare. Furious, Mike grabbed the blade with his hand, tore it out of him, turned, and disemboweled the Yshian with his own scimitar.

"Paaaanna-joooois!!!"

Mike swore. That was a voice he recognized, and it wasn't far. He was pushing in closer to the western wall. Then he saw the figure. It was Omar, the mullah from Sulba, who had interrogated him at the Jalal home. The

cleric was frothing at the mouth - in a towering fury that the tables had been turned on his invasion so quickly.

Mike roared, slashing his way forward. He was going to kill Omar with his bare hands. Two jihadists attacked him, and his leg took a slice before he felled them. Then the mullah was right before him. His eyes locked on Mike and widened in shock. Mike laughed. Omar knew nothing of Will and the Eye; he obviously thought Mike was the reason the city was so well prepared. *Good. Glad you think that.*

With both hands he threw his sword at an Yshian coming straight at him. It spun in the air and smacked the jihadist's head with the pommel. The man cursed and kept coming. Mike ignored him and lunged at Omar, seizing the mullah by the arms. Omar screamed. Calculating, Mike spun the mullah around at the moment his attacker brought down the scimitar that would have cut open Mike's back. Instead it bisected Omar's face, from his forehead down to his chin. For good measure, Mike bear-hugged the mullah's neck, heaved, and snapped it. He dropped the corpse at his attacker's feet.

The jihadist yelled in fury at what he'd been made to do, and raised his weapon on Mike - and then his head went sailing as a sword took it off. Mike saw Esranet standing before him. She was the deadliest swordswoman aside from Pandora, and judging from the blood she was covered with, she had evidently killed as many Yshians as Mike. He looked around and saw other Maidens nearby, and zombies pouncing on jihadists. Unbelievably, there were few invaders left standing.

"That was too easy," said Esranet.

Mike looked at her, smiling. "Zombies. They put us to shame."

She made a face. "Your Hand put us to shame. You should kill yourself." She walked off scowling, and casually stabbed an Yshian lying on the ground, half-dead.

Even in victory that bitch is foul.

And then it was over. Five hundred Yshians lay slain around the southern entrance. The invaders had killed about half that many zombies. Between eighty and ninety of the undead remained, feasting now on Yshian corpses. Eight of the twenty Maidens had been killed: three from the pyramid temple, five from the Madaruan stronghold.

It was a better victory than anyone had dared hope for - assuming that things had gone just as well on the north side.

Mike looked over and saw that Lucas's forces were killing off the last Yshians. There was no surrender. Per the commands of *The Raysh*, every jihadist went down dying, in order to obtain the highest reward in the

afterlife. Their attempt to bring the Dream of the Desert Garden to Cynidicea had massively failed. But there were plenty more Yshians out there, and Mike was sure they would come in stronger numbers. The jihad went on. Always. Those who denied the Prophet had to be slaughtered.

We'll be ready for them. Between Will's Eye, my Hand, and Lucas's crown, we can defend this city.

But that self-assurance rang hollow. What if the Caliph sent ten thousand jihadists next time?

"How many?"

He turned and saw Jilanka, bathed in gore. "What?"

"I killed five. You?"

"I don't know," said Mike. "Thirteen, maybe fourteen." Including that filthy mullah. *Burn in Hell, Omar.*

She laughed. "That Hand is handy. Let's go see our king and queen."

Mike looked up at the north end, where zoombies were satisfying their appetites. Mike thrilled to the savaging of the invaders' corpses. He spotted Lucas and Pandora amidst the carnage, talking to the surviving Brothers. "Yeah, let's go."

"Maidens!" called Jilanka. "To our king and qu -"

She was interrupted as screams pierced the air, high and shrill. They came from all the way over on the east side of the city - the hub of the population.

Mike swore, fearing they had been fooled by a decoy army. Had another jihadist army come down the pyramid? But no, that was impossible. The pyramid entrance was too well defended, and the pyramid itself a death trap on all tiers for the uninitiated.

Then he saw what was over there, and his day turned black.

No.

"Madarua," breathed Jilanka, unbelieving.

You can't be serious.

It towered high in the air, at least thirty-five feet. Its head was reptilian, with a horn that curved upward above its single eye. Mike knew it all from the gaming module. The mouth dripped saliva around razor-sharp teeth. It had six "arm" tentacles, three on each side of its torso, ending in razor-sharp talons. It moved by slithering forward, on six "leg" tentacles. He could see the arm tentacles lashing the air like whips, seizing people on the streets, raising them high in the air - and then shoving them into the maw, to be swallowed in a slurping gulp.

Zargon. He'd been loosed.

"A Centennial Feed," said Jilanka. "We're fucked, Mike."

So this was Hazor's revenge. In return for his temple and priests being wiped out, he was unleashing a Feed right on top of an Yshian invasion. Demetrius had once told him that the high priest had a magic device that could release Zargon from his lair - a teleportation device that worked only once a century.

Feed me. Will hadn't been asking for food. He had seen the future and channeled the beast's hunger.

The Centennial Feed was the most sacred tradition to the Zargonites, the most appalling one to the old cults, and the most feared one by the Cynidicean population. It was an apocalyptic threat because of what came from Zargon's mouth. His saliva was an acidic slime that reproduced death on the spot. Anyone spat on by Zargon, or bitten by his teeth, collapsed into a puddle of ooze that began transforming into a Whelp of Zargon: a mindless Cthulhu-like amoeba that spread the same disease with its bite. There was no shortage of victims, because they were acid heads. They feared phantoms, not their own Deity; many embraced death or transformation. Those who ran and hid weren't necessarily safe: Zargon's tentacles reached through doors and windows.

A Centennial Feed lasted for three whole days.

"Fucked," repeated Jilanka.

"Not if I can help it," he said. He rallied his team. "Maidens! To the main avenue!" He barked a command at the zombies, who broke off from their own feed. They readied to follow Mike, still bound by his proxy command until Lucas released them.

As they raced back over the bridges to the east side, Mike looked left and saw Lucas and Pandora's group doing the same. They were closer to Zargon than he was. The creature was on the main avenue between the strongholds of Gorm and Usamigaras. In front of the communal dormitories, where he could do plenty of damage.

More screams tore the air.

They reached the main avenue between the Usamigaran and Madaruan strongholds and turned left. On their immediate left, the Zargonite temple lay devastated; a mountain of rubble, courtesy of Will. Down the street about three hundred feet, the Devourer was terrorizing the population. Masked Cynidiceans dashed about everywhere, whooping in ecstasy. Others knelt in the street, praying - some to the monstrosity before them, others to gods that never existed. A few recited elaborate scripts, using the main avenue as a theater stage. Others had sex with the nearest person. The beast was indiscriminate: he made them all his feed.

"Mike!" Jilanka and the Maidens had stopped.

"What?" he said, stopping, out of breath.

"We're not going down there," she said. "You can't kill Zargon - not even with the benefit of the Hand. He's a god."

God, my ass. "He's a cretinous monster." But the more he thought about it, he knew she was right. Whatever his precise nature, Zargon couldn't be killed. In D&D terms he had a whopping 342 hit points. And that blasted horn: if you did somehow manage to miraculously kill him, he would simply regenerate and return to life. The only way to permanently kill Zargon was to remove his horn and destroy it in the lava pit on the west side of the city. Zargon was effectively a god; practically invincible.

Unless Will could kill him.

Mike looked at the Usamigaran stronghold on their right. Will was in Demetrius's chamber, still catatonic. Demetrius had returned to the stronghold after parting the lake's waters for Lucas. *Do I try?* Mike had no idea how to trigger Will.

There was a sudden furor down the road. Shrieks of rabid animals. Lucas's zombies. Scores of them were assaulting Zargon, giving the acid heads a temporary reprieve. Behind him, Mike's zombies howled, craving a target. He barked a command, sending them to join the attack on Zargon, and to leave any people alone. They poured down the street in fury.

"Oh, that was a shitty idea," said Jilanka.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

Jilanka began answering, but was cut off by a cry from one of the Maidens:

"Our king and queen!"

Lucas and Pandora were running down the street towards them. They had emerged from a back street onto the main avenue just slightly ahead. They were alone without the Brothers.

"What do we do?" asked Mike, when they arrived. "It's a Centennial Feed!"

"We retreat to the strongholds," said Pandora, in a tone allowing for no debate. "And take any citizens who wish to come. Most of them won't."

That's where they had probably sent the Brothers: to the stronghold of Gorm.

Lucas nodded, catching his breath. "Get inside and stay away from windows. Our strongholds are defended with outer walls, but take nothing for granted. It's going to be three days of Hell, especially for the Zargonite citizens." He looked down the street. "That thing is fucking huge."

The chaos down there got worse. There were weird moaning sounds - like people drowning in mud.

"Shit," said Jilanka.

"What's happening?" asked Lucas.

"Not to criticize you, Your Grace," said Jilanka. "But all those zoombies? They're not doing any good, and they're being bitten. In a few hours they'll be Whelps of the Devourer."

Pandora swore. "I'd forgotten about the Whelp legend."

"And they're undead," said Jilanka. "Try to imagine a zoombie Whelp. We're going to see plenty of them."

Mike cursed himself. There were nearly two hundred zoombies attacking Zargon. He was beating them off like flies and either killing them - strangling them with his tentacles swallowing them whole - or spitting on them, and letting them collapse into a puddle of ooze. It must have been the pools of ooze making the weird moaning sounds; they were beginning the hideous transformation process. They'd be Whelps in a few hours.

"Great gods," said Lucas.

More citizens were arriving to play or pray in the street. Mike couldn't believe it. It was too surreal. Zargon roared, still smacking down the zoombies. His tentacles lashed everywhere. He killed, devoured, and transformed by his whim. And the people played hopscotch under his nose. Took off their clothes and danced. Sang songs, prayed prayers, and masturbated to ecstatic climaxes.

They were all about to become the next feed - to die or be made into Whelps.

"Let's get inside," said Pandora. "Maidens, into your stronghold! I'll be joining you there."

The Maidens obeyed their queen and left for the Madaruan fortress. Except Mike. Jilanka looked back at him, and Pandora frowned.

"Your Grace," said Mike, addressing Pandora. "Would it be okay with you if I join the Usamigarans? Will is there, and he doesn't say much except my name. Maybe I can reach him. And if I can reach him, maybe he can kill Zargon."

"Maybe he can also bring this city down around our ears," said Pandora.

"Maybe," admitted Lucas. "But I think it's worth a try. To slay this beast once and for all."

Pandora hesitated and then nodded. "Very well."

"I'll use backstreets to get to the Brothers' stronghold," said Lucas to his queen. "Between me, you, and Raen, the three strongholds will be in good hands."

Mike walked up to Jilanka. "I'll see you in three days."

"Good luck with Will," she said, and then left with Pandora.

Lucas looked at Mike before leaving. "We kicked their asses."

"What?" said Mike.

"The Yshians," said Lucas. "That was good work."

"For all the good," said Mike.

"All we need to do is wait out this Feed," said Lucas. "Or if Will can be reached..." He left it hanging.

Mike nodded. "I'll try. See you in three."

Lucas left, and Mike walked over to the Usamigaran stronghold. He hailed the gatekeeper, who recognized him and threw open the double doors. Mike went inside, glad to get away from the slaughterfest.

It was three days of unremitting hell. Zargon left not a street uncovered - as long as he could fit down it. The east side of the city was his stomping ground, but he went everywhere, sniffing all corners. He moved by sliding; reaching out with his leg tentacles to pull himself forward. As he went, he left slime and body parts behind him.

The only place he avoided was the west side. Somehow he knew the lava pit could be the end of him. But many of his Whelps were drawn over there, especially the zoombie Whelps. They'd been feasting on Yshian corpses when they had to break off at Lucas and Mike's commands. Now they finished their feast in a new form - as slaves of the Devourer.

The Whelps were insidious because, unlike their Master, they could hide in shadows. By the second day, the streets had been cleansed of all rhapsody. Those who saw Zargon as cause for celebration had been devoured or Whelped. Everyone else hunkered in their dorms and boarded up the windows. They came out for air, when the Devourer was hunting somewhere else, because they needed food. They plundered abandoned shops and raced back home. But some of them strayed. They were still acid heads after all. And the Whelps were waiting to pounce, in alleys and around corners.

And then there were kids. Mike was on top of the outer wall of the Usamigaran fortress when he heard two of them screaming not far below. A Whelp was assaulting them. It looked like Zargon was up in the area of the mushroom gardens; far away for the moment. Mike raced down and out the front gate of the stronghold, ignoring the advice of the gatekeeper that he stay inside. It was probably sound advice. He had the Hand, but he

doubted that Gaius's enchantments made him immune to being Whelped. The Hand protected against damage, not transformation.

Outside the gate he saw the kids right away: a boy maybe eight and a girl maybe ten. An amoeba-like mass with four tentacles was lashing at them, its jaw slavering. It had the kids cornered against the wall of a building. Mike yelled and drew his sword, glad that it was magical. He doubted that normal weapons would harm a Whelp. When the kids saw him racing to their rescue, they made a dash for it. That was a mistake. The Whelp was ignoring Mike, fixated on the kids. One of its tentacles snapped the air and snagged the girl like a lasso. She screamed and Mike swore, running harder. The Whelp pulled the girl close, opened its jaw wide, and spat. Brown slime drenched the girl and took effect at once. She shook as if with a fever of a hundred and ten - and then collapsed into a pool of ooze, right as Mike reached her. The boy wailed. Mike slashed the Whelp with his sword. The creature moaned and backed off in surprise, not used to being hurt. Mike grabbed the boy and picked him up with his free arm, and then ran back to the stronghold right away. He got the kid safely inside, and had him sent to the communal hall. The boy kept crying for his dead sister. Gods knew who or where his parents were, if they were still alive. Slaughter and transformation were everywhere.

But at least the goblins are safe. Halle-fucking-lujah. The goblins lived in cliffs on the west side of the lake, and their caves were accessible only by ladders and handholds cut into the rock. Zargon and his Whelps didn't bother trying. Living inside cliffs had its benefit during a Feed.

Through it all, Will remained a stone. Mike tended to him, brought him his meals, and tried coaxing him into more awareness. He would croak Mike's name occasionally, but nothing more, not even his previous mantra.

"'Feed me'," said Mike. "I had no idea what you meant." *Just tell me it ends okay. Tell me we can pick up the pieces and get this kingdom off its ass and back in the running.*

And then Will did look at him. His Eye bulged with a bad promise. "Back."

Mike sat up straight. Had Will just read his mind? Was he saying yes, that the kingdom could get back on track, like in the days of yore? But then why did Will look like demons were standing in front of him?

The answer came on the third day, in the late afternoon. Mike was on wall patrol when suddenly a concussion shook the air. It sounded like an earthquake, rumbling the city's ceiling hundreds of feet above. Mike looked up and around. Zargon was over by the ruined buildings where

Mike had waited to ambush the Yshians. It didn't look he was doing anything to cause this.

A sharper convulsion came. Mike swore as huge chunks of rock came crashing down on buildings and into the streets. One struck the wall he was standing only a few feet away.

He raced down into the courtyard where he saw a guard. Mike asked him if the city had ever had earthquakes before.

"Earthquakes?" the guard said. "Are you insane? Someone is *doing* this to us!"



Mike thought of going to see Raen, but he needed answers, not counsel. He left the stronghold through the gate and went out into the main avenue. Not a soul was anywhere to be seen, but plenty of rock that used to be the

ceiling. Mike looked up. Most of the ceiling was still there - but it wouldn't be for long, if this went on.

The next concussion reverberated like an indoor thunderclap. More ruin came down. A piece of rock smashed Mike's head; if not for the Hand he'd have been out cold or dead. When the dust settled, he heard laughter off to his left. He peered through the dust and walked towards the sound. The laughter grew louder. Then the dust cleared, and his bowels almost burst. Less than a hundred feet ahead he saw Hazor. He had seen the high priest twice before at a distance, when he was down in the city on errands, and from about the same distance he was now. The High Priest of Zargon was standing on top of the building to the Catacombs, shrieking laughter. His arms were spread wide in the air, welcoming the apocalyptic onslaught.

The crazy son of a bitch had prayed an *earthquake* spell. In an underground.

"*Hazor!*" yelled Mike, running toward the Catacombs building.

Another convulsion ripped overhead. To his left, a boulder smashed the wall of the Madaruan stronghold, tearing a curtain of it off. Around him, rock fell everywhere. Hazor roared approval.

He's committing suicide. And taking every goddamn Cynidicean with him.

Mike reached the building and looked up. "*Cancel that prayer, Hazor! What the fuck is wrong with you?*" Mike had no idea if the prayer could even be cancelled.

The priest looked down on him, his eyes lit in ecstasy. "*Yeeeeesss! All prayers cancelled! All of them! The Devourer heeds them not!*" He shrieked more laughter, as the ceiling took another dump.

"*Hazor!*" Mike screamed, dodging rock. "*You're going to kill us all!*"

"*Yeeeeesss!*" laughed the priest. "*All and everyone! The Devourer claims the world!*"

Mike knew he was being stupid trying to talk Hazor down. This was what the high priest wanted. How did one negate an *earthquake* spell? It couldn't be done. You'd need a *wish* spell or some equivalent miracle.

He turned and ran back to the Usamigaran stronghold. He had no idea what to do. There *was* nothing to do. The roof was about to bury everything.

When he reached the front gate, he heard a cry from the northern end of the road. He looked and saw someone running towards him. The figure shouted his name.

Mike's heart leaped. "*Lucas!*" He waved his hand high.

The next tremor brought down so much rock and dirt that Mike thought it was the end. But the ceiling hadn't collapsed yet. He yelled at Lucas to hurry. The King of Cynidicea dodged death in every direction, and finally met Mike at the gate. They took cover under the overhang.

"What made you come out in this shit?" demanded Mike.

"I got a flare from Demetrius," said Lucas. That meant a *sending* prayer: a telepathic message. "He told me to come here right away, and to risk my life if necessary. What the hell does he want?"

"Fucked if I know," said Mike.

"What are you doing out?"

He told Lucas about Hazor. Lucas couldn't believe what he was hearing. As Mike finished, Lucas swore and pointed.

Mike turned and and looked. "Holy shit," he said.

Zargon was at the Catacombs building, looking down at his highest servant. The servant who had visited him weekly in the pyramid. The only human being allowed on that bottom tier. The only one with the privilege of feeding Zargon, whether weekly or centennially.

Who now had the privilege of being the feed.

Zargon swiped Hazor into the air, snapping the high priest back and forth. Rock rained down, some of it on Zargon's head. The creature was unfazed. He toyed with Hazor some more, and then used his talons to rip the priest open. Hazor was still screaming in ecstasy as his disemboweled body was chewed to pieces by the beast he'd served his whole life.

It made no difference. The earthquake couldn't be stopped.

The ceiling tremors became more constant as Mike and Lucas rushed through the gate, across the courtyard, into Demetrius's chamber. The priest was waiting for them and Will was in his chair. His Eye stared monstrosly at them as they entered.

"Thank the gods," said Demetrius, looking at Lucas. He turned to Mike: "Where the hell were you?"

"I went outside," said Mike. "Hazor caused the earthquake. And Zargon just ate him."

"I figured it was Hazor," said the priest. "Good riddance. Not that it matters."

"Demetrius, why did you bring me here?" demanded Lucas. "The people of this city need me to do something. I'm their king."

"Your people don't stand a chance," said Demetrius. "I'm sorry, Lucas. This city is coming down and nothing can stop it. And Zargon has fed on the population like never before - there wouldn't be much of a kingdom left to rule anyway."

"I don't accept that!" shouted Lucas.

"Why *did* you want us here, Demetrius?" asked Mike.

The priest looked at Will and then at them both. "To send you all home. All four of you. You three and Dustin. And to say good-bye. It's time for me to let myself die, as I should have on that first day you all came here. After I killed my brother."

"Whoa, slow down," said Lucas. "We've been through this already. There's no future for us in our world."

"Lucas, look around you," said Demetrius. "As of now, there's no future for you in *this* world."

Another convulsion tore through the city. More rock came down. Through the window of the room came faint but horrible screams. Homes were being destroyed. People were dying.

"Demetrius," said Mike, "you just told me a few days ago that the 'Black Passage' spell doesn't work in the reverse direction. You said that you tried to send Will home and the spell failed." This was during Mike's exile in Yshia, shortly after he killed Lucas.

"I lied," said the priest.

"Obviously I never heard about this," said Lucas.

"Listen to me," said Demetrius. "I was selfish. I love Dustin and sharing his body with him, and it made it easy for me, since he likes me too. I love all of you. I didn't want to see any of you go. You were aliens and offering this city a fresh hope, even with all the setbacks. And then the Brothers asked me to resurrect Lucas, and then, of all things, Lucas restored the monarchy. But it's all for naught. This city is gone."

"No," said Mike. He knew he was in denial but didn't care. "I mean, there's always recovery after a Centennial Feed. It happens every century."

"There's never been an earthquake," said Demetrius. "Never a high priest so insane and bent on revenge that he wants to self-destruct. The city is caving in. Most people will die, and those who don't will wish they had - with Zargon and his Whelps on the loose."

"I'll take my chances," said Lucas. "If these people are going to die, then I can die with them. I'm their *king*, Demetrius."

"Ditto," said Mike. "These people are my own. Besides, I can't go back to Hawkins ten years older and with this Hand. I'd be a freak. They'd put me in a lab."

"No," said Demetrius. "When I said I lied, I was lying about a lot."

"What do you mean?" asked Lucas.

"I told Will that the 'Black Passage' spell didn't work in reverse after trying to send him home. But the reason it didn't work is because I wasn't

reading it properly. In order to get back to your original world, the spell has to be *read* in reverse - you have to read the spell backwards. I knew this, but like I said, I didn't want any of you to go."

"So?" asked Mike.

"I lied about more than that," said Demetrius. "I mean, I'd been keeping crucial information from you all along. When you read the spell in reverse, it sends you back in reverse. Your *bodies* reverse, biologically, to the state they were in when you left, and they arrive at the exact point in time you left."

"Are you fucking serious?" said Mike.

"That's a shitty thing to keep from us, Demetrius," said Lucas.

"I know," said the priest. "And I won't blame you to hate me for it. I was selfish. I wanted to keep living, and I wanted you all, as Dustin's friends, to stay here too. There's no point in any of that now. I can send you back, leave Dustin's body, and you'll return home as twelve-year olds. Will won't have the Eye and Mike won't have the Hand. And no one will have missed you."

Mike was poleaxed. "But -"

Another concussion: a storm of rock pulverized the stronghold. The floor and walls shook. People in the fortress were screaming now.

"No arguments, please," said Demetrius. "It makes no sense for any of you to die, when you have your original lives to live for. Your families to go back to. *Please*. Come here."

Demetrius embraced them then, and drew them close to Will. He took out the scroll and prepared to read. Mike looked at Will, then at Lucas. They nodded to each other.

"Take off your armor and weapons," said the priest. "Your boots too. The less weight, the less likely the spell will malfunction." They hurriedly did as he instructed, throwing their boots and metal aside.

And as Demetrius began the incantation, Mike wept. For the Lost City he'd come to love; for Jilanka; his Maiden sisters; for everyone who was about to die. But also positively, for the life he was returning to. *Home. I'm going home. We're going home...*

The spell read backwards sounded like a prayer from the Grim Reaper. The words were thick as syrup. They clung to the body and worked it over, sent it spiraling back to a long forgotten point. Mike felt himself breaking apart, then coming together, and falling apart again. *Oh God, what's happening?* He was still in Will's room in the stronghold, but also in the Black Passage, straddling two worlds. Breaking down and reassembling. His mind ballooned as it shrank; his body a contradiction. Terrible

amounts of time seemed to pass in the space of no time at all, and as he finally came together for good, he heard the spell end.

And then Demetrius's fading voice, as he let Dustin go and himself die: *Remember me kindly, boys, if you've the grace for it. I love you all.*

Mike cried, unable to say good-bye. As he and his friends disappeared, the roof of the Lost City came down entirely, as final as the end of an age. Heavier than sorrow, greater than loss. Nothing would revive Cynidicea; few would remember it.

Mike would remember it though. Or so he thought, as the blackness swept him away.

Epilogue:

Fading

He knew before he raised his head that he was as a kid again. He'd been so long and tall that his truncation was obvious - an emasculation felt in every bone. Without thinking, he reached for his sword, but of course that security was gone; discarded in a room now demolished.

The air was warm as he opened his eyes. He was on his stomach, his head resting on a soft floor: fabrics of orange, green, and brown. The rug by his gaming table.

For a long moment he lay still, fearing to get up and look at his surroundings. He was terrified that everything he'd been through was a dream - or that his friends might try to persuade him of that. He needed reassurance it had all been real: the pyramid; Demetrius; the mushroom gardens; Jilanka; the desert; Areesha; the invasion; the feeding...

"Holy shit," said someone standing over him.

He levered his arms under him, pushed himself to his knees, and stood. And at that moment Mike Wheeler realized how much he'd missed home.

It hit him hard, seeing his basement and all the familiars - the gaming table, couch, wall posters, the stairs going up to the kitchen. Then his friends: Lucas, who was already on his feet; Dustin who was slowly getting up; and Will, who was still on the floor. Lucas was the one who had spoken. He was doing a slow 360, taking in the room they had played in so often.

"We made it, guys," said Dustin. "Jesus, we really made it back."

"And we're kids again," said Lucas. "How do we go back to being kids?"

"Will," said Mike, moving to help him stand. "Are you okay?"

Will stumbled a bit as he rose. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Look at me," said Mike, holding the sides of Will's face. Two normal hazel-colored eyes stared back at him. *Thank the gods.* He hugged Will fiercely, relieved for his friend's liberation.

"Your hand looks fine too," said Will, when they disengaged.

"Yeah, dude," said Mike, holding up his right hand and waving it around. "Like it was never there." *But it made me invincible.* He felt a pang of loss. They had reclaimed themselves, but at the expense of miracles that wouldn't come again.

"We need out of these clothes," said Lucas.

Mike only then registered that they had on Cynidicean attire. They were way too small for these adult clothes, except for Will. They were barefoot too, having thrown aside their cumbersome war boots (and Will his bedroom slippers).

"We need to save these clothes forever," said Dustin. "They're our only souvenirs of the Lost City."

"Yeah," said Mike absently. And they were something else: the assurance he craved. The proof that what they had lived through was real and not a dream.

"I'll get some clothes from my room you guys can borrow," said Mike. "For you too, Will. Your mom would freak out if you came home dressed like that."

"Will, what made you do it?" asked Lucas.

"Huh?" said Will.

"The Temple of Zargon," said Lucas. "You demolished that fucking thing."

"It was a nightmare getting you out of that wreck," said Dustin. "All the Magi who had *levitate* and *telekinesis* spells were putting in overtime."

"Oh, you guys," said Will, suddenly looking sick. "You'd never believe... the things I saw in that temple..."

"Hey!" said Mike, catching him. "Are you okay?"

Will looked pale and not okay.

"You need the bathroom?" asked Mike. "Come on." He walked Will over to the basement bathroom. Will went inside without shutting the door, fell to his knees and was promptly sick.

He saw too much, thought Mike. *Not just in that temple, but everywhere in the world, with that Eye.* A child's mind couldn't take so much evil and trauma. Probably no one could, really.

Will threw up a second time and then came out, looking a little better. He rejoined them and sat down at the gaming table. "I'm okay. But I don't want to talk about anything I saw in that temple."

"It's okay, Will," said Lucas. "We have some idea. Kanadius told us about Zargonite sacrifice. I'm glad I never saw what they did in those rites."

"I killed so many people," said Will, putting his face in his hands.

"Whoa, Byers," said Dustin. "You killed nasty people. The temple priests and warriors? They deserved to die. The zombies on the island? Seriously. And Auriga? Don't shed a tear."

"There were innocent slaves and captives in the temple," said Will.

"Jesus, Will," said Dustin.

"You couldn't even help yourself," said Mike. "You had to be triggered. None of us had any idea how to trigger you."

"It was my mom," said Will.

"What?" asked Mike.

"When I saw threats to a mother, I think that's what set me off," said Will. "Not the first time. On the isle, it was just the shock over the Eye surgery. But Auriga told me he did something really bad to his mother. And in the temple I saw a mother and her kid..." He shuddered.

"Will, you have no idea how much I hated having to hold you down for that Eye transplant," said Lucas.

Mike felt sick remembering that. For a moment he relived his fury with Lucas. Then he remembered his shame over killing Lucas.

"Listen carefully, Will," said Dustin. "You were never a bad person."

"Yeah, I was the bad person," said Mike. He looked at Lucas, hating himself all over.

Lucas shook his head. "You were cursed, Mike, just like Will."

But I remember wanting to strike you down, not just feeling compelled to. I remember choosing you over Coval, as my fifth kill. I remember despising your pity, hating you and envying you. How much could be absolved and forgiven on account of a curse?

"Maybe," said Mike. "But I think I failed you."

"Don't talk to me about failure," said Lucas. "I was king and I failed my people a hundred percent. They all died. They're dying *now*, in that other world."

"Cut yourself some slack," said Dustin. "It was a fucking earthquake, Lucas. In an underground. Fucking Hazor."

"Which was my fault," said Will. "Hazor did that because I -"

"Stop already!" said Lucas. "Maybe we're all just a mess."

"Lucas, you would have made a great king," said Mike, meaning it completely. "You and Pandora... I would have followed you both forever. You and she could have made Cynidicea great again."

"Agreed," said Dustin. "But forgive me, I can't for the life of me imagine you sharing a bed with that woman."

Lucas looked thoughtful. "We did. Or the floor anyway."

"What?" Dustin and Mike said at the same time.

"That night," said Lucas. "After our crowning in the temple of Gorm. Dustin, you and Demetrius had already gone back down to the city. And Mike, you and Jilanka were in your room. The Brothers and the Maidens decided that Pandora and I should - you know - for good luck against the invasion the next day. They forced us into the shrine of Madarua and barred us inside. And said we could come out only after we 'sealed our marriage'."

"That's hysterical," said Dustin.

"The only time I got laid," said Lucas. "The day of my crowning."

"More times than I did," said Dustin. "Demetrius tried for me. He asked Shira one night if she wanted to. He was going to let me drive during sex, but Shira told him to fuck off."

"You'll get there some day, dude," said Lucas.

Dustin looked at Mike. "We won't talk about all the filthy times you got laid."

Mike was conflicted thinking about Jilanka. He missed her already, missed what they did in bed, and yet he didn't *feel* those desires now that he was a kid again. He wanted to feel them. And then didn't; feelings like that would only torment him, now that she was gone forever and probably dead.

"I need to get home, guys," said Will. "My mom is going to kill me. I wasn't supposed to come here today."

"None of us should have come here today," said Dustin. "And I am going to kill that fucking clerk at *Rotten Gargoyle*."

Lucas looked alarmed. "I don't know about that, Dustin. I think we should steer clear of that store, until we know that guy is gone. I mean, who the fuck is he to have a scroll like that?"

"Wait here, Will," said Mike. "I'll get some clothes for all of us. We all need to see our families again. But I don't have four pairs of sneakers."

Mike raced up the stairs and checked around the house before going to his room. He knew everyone would still be gone; his parents were out with baby Holly, and Nancy was over Barbara Holland's. He couldn't wait to see them all again.

A half hour later, the boys looked like Americans from the '80s, courtesy of Mike Wheeler's wardrobe. They went outside and rode their bikes home barefoot.

That night Mike was in his room, leafing through his comics. It had been forever since he read a comic book, but frankly they weren't doing much for him. The stories seemed silly and overblown, with the superheroes winning too easily. Reality was a cruel teacher. Mike knew the costs of being a hero. And the devastating consequences of failure.

He heard the front door bang open downstairs and immediately forgot about the X-Men. Nancy was home. Mike's heart raced as he heard her come up the stairs. He leaped from his bed and rushed out to meet her. She was at her bedroom door when he cried her name and flew into her arms, hugging her desperately.

"Michael, what the *hell*?"

He kept hugging her, his head against her chest. It felt so good to be home.

She finally pried him loose and looked at him, alarmed. "Michael, what's wrong? What happened?"

He almost laughed at the question. "Nothing," he said, turning around and going back to his room.

Dumbfounded, his sister followed him down the hall. She stood inside his doorway, looking at him as if he'd grown two heads. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine," said Mike, getting back on the bed, and opening another comic. Spiderman. More silliness. Will was the true Spider Child.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what that was all about," said Nancy.

"It's nothing, Nancy. I was just happy to see you."

"To *see* me? We see each other every day."

"I missed you today," he said honestly. "Is it okay to miss my sister once in a while?"

She stared at him for a long time, then threw up her hands and left.

He knew she was going downstairs to tell their mother. And his mother would report that Mike had done the same thing to her hours ago, and she was just as mystified. They'd worry and they'd obsess. Let them. They'd get over it. He had more to get over than curious displays of affection.

A lot more, as it turned out.

The four boys didn't see each other again until four days later. It was Friday, August 5, and the heat hadn't let up. Mike missed the desert climate. The village of Suqatra had been scorching but at least dry. Indiana humidity was brutal.

Usually they saw each other every day, or every other, during summer vacation, but they'd needed time alone. To be with their families, and to process the fact that they weren't adults anymore - or in Will's case, a godlike seer - and that they were back in a world where they couldn't solve problems by killing people. Their thinking had become medieval, and it clashed with the personas they had rewound to.

Mike's basement was the eternal haven. There they could solve the world's problems and their own. At the gaming table, no subject was too daunting or out of bounds. And on that Friday they did an oral tally of the pros and cons of this world and that. This world had flushing toilets, movies, bikes, games, cars, and all sorts of good food - donuts and pizzas especially. That world had magic, swords, spells, monsters, gods, and the stuff of epic legends. In the end it was a draw. Only Will came down squarely on the pros of this world. He had suffered too much in Cynidicea.

But they were all glad to be back. They rode their bikes that afternoon in the miserable heat, savoring the paths they'd always taken. They went to Sattler Quarry and imagined the Isle of Death out there, with zombies waiting for Lucas to summon. Then they went to the movies to escape the heat. Two films caught their eyes: a fantasy called *Krull* and a new release called *Risky Business*. Normally *Krull* would have been the no-brainer, but they had lived and breathed fantasy for too long. They needed a dramatic change.

They loved *Risky Business*. Mike thought of Jilanka as he watched Tom Cruise fuck that gorgeous blonde through the night. The others thought it was the most racy sex they'd ever seen, but for Mike it was nothing. He and Jilanka had put to shame every whore in the multiverse. And yet, as he watched Cruise and the blonde go at it on the stairs, he felt an emptiness where fire used to be. The sex show was more amusing than arousing; Mike didn't get aroused anymore. He felt like he had been erased in some way.

When the film ended, they left for home on their bikes, promising to see each other soon.

They saw each other next on the following Monday afternoon, one week after their return from the Lost City. As they ate cheese and crackers,

and talked more about their re-acclimation into modern America, Mike noticed an alarming development: they were forgetting some of their experiences in Cynidicea. And not just details, but whoppers.

Mike couldn't recall if it was the Maidens who had rooms on the second and third tiers of the pyramid, or if it was the Brothers. He remembered having his own special room with Jilanka on the third, but couldn't remember where the rest of his sisters lived and slept.

"Sisters?" said Lucas. "You were never a Maiden, stupid. You were a Brother. And it was the Brothers who had rooms on both tiers. Their barracks was on Tier 2 and their temple was on Tier 3. The Maidens and the Magi had their barracks and temples on Tier 3."

"Lucas, I *was* a Maiden," said Mike.

Lucas looked at him uncertainly then laughed. "You fucked a Maiden, and I married one. You and I were Brothers, Mike. Don't be silly."

"We started out together as Brothers," said Mike. "But later I... joined the Maidens." He avoided saying, *I betrayed the Brothers by stealing the Hand and giving it to Pandora*. How could Lucas forget this?

"Yeah, Lucas," said Dustin, making shapes with his cheese. "Mike joined the ladies. And Will got sick and I had to take care of him down in the city."

"Sick?" asked Will.

"Yeah," said Dustin. "You got a nasty disease. Remember, you could hardly talk? You ate mushrooms and got poisoning from them. I think."

"No," said Will. "The Eye triggered me. And" - he struggled to think - "I caused an accident in my room. And you took me out of the pyramid."

"That was earlier," said Dustin. "Your accident in the room. Man, I forgot about that. You really destroyed that room, Byers. But that accident snapped you out of it - whatever daze you were in at the time. That's when you became the head librarian. For the Magi."

"He became the Chief Mage, you idiot," said Lucas, glad to be the one to rub someone else's nose in a piss-poor memory. "Not a librarian."

"Oh," said Dustin. "Yeah. Christ, how could I forget?"

We're all forgetting, thought Mike, suddenly scared. *We're forgetting what happened, because the spell was supposed to rewind us back to our original points, as if nothing happened. It did that to our bodies... but our minds are only slowly catching up.*

He didn't share that thought with the others. He was too scared they were true. They couldn't be true.

I don't want to forget.

Over the next few days, Mike did his best to keep his memories sharp but found that was difficult. The harder he tried, the more he lost. It made him panic. What he and his friends had shared in the Lost City was sacred; miraculous. Terrible and tragic, yes, but precious too. They were life-defining experiences outside the reach of most people. Yet it was all starting to feel like a fleeting dream. The more he chased thoughts of what he was forgetting, the more they skipped over the horizon.

By the weekend - nearly two weeks after their departure and return - the events of the Lost City had become so fragmented they seemed almost unreal. The miracles were leaving him, and Mike found that to be far more terrifying than any of the horrors he faced in Cynidicea. Was this the same as dying? To lose things of great value and be unable to prevent their passing? To have those things fade in front of you, just out of reach as you grasped in vain?

That night he called Lucas on his walkie-talkie.

"Yeah, Mike. Over."

"Lucas, I was thinking. About that day you were crowned in the Lost City." *When you hugged me and forgave me.* "Do you think you would have made me your knight? Over."

"What are you talking about, Mike? Over."

"I mean... if things had worked out there. Would you have made me a knight, like, your special guard? Over."

"You mean in our game?" asked Lucas. "Over."

"No," said Mike, feeling frantic. "It was real. Don't you remember? I... I killed you, Lucas, and then you came back, and we charged the hordes of those Muslims, or whoever they were. Over." Mike was in tears and trying to be quiet about it.

There was silence at Lucas's end.

"Lucas? Don't you remember?" *Say you remember.* "Over."

"Mike, I... I have to go. Over and out."

"No, Lucas, don't hang up!"

But the talkie was already dead.

Mike threw himself onto the bed and buried his face in his pillow, crying harder than ever before in his life.

The next day he lost more memories, and before breakfast he sat down and wrote what he could remember. He wrote names down too, but some of them looked wrong, and it was a struggle to put faces to any of them.

That night his obsessed mind dreamt it all: Queen Zenobia and Lucas dying as a child. The ghost who ripped away years of their lives. The bird-man who molested Will, and then died at the hand of Mike's rage. Magic mushrooms, and the wild sex that Mike's body was no longer equipped for. The Isle of Death. The Eye, the Hand, and the misery that followed their uses. His murder of Lucas. The jihad. Life in the desert, with a sweet girl whose sister had been raped and executed. His return to the city. Lucas's crowning. The Yshian invasion. Zargon, his Whelps, and the horrible Feed. The earthquake... and everyone dying...

Mike woke up screaming. He screamed for a long time, and then began crying - the deep cry of adult hurt. His mother flew into his room and clutched him to her, terrified, asking him what on earth was wrong. Nancy, roused from sleep, stood in his doorway, biting her fingers. She had never seen Mike like this.

His mother gave him a sleeping pill, and stayed in his bed holding him until he drifted off.

Two days after that, on Wednesday, August 17, Mike stood looking into his bottom clothes drawer. It was the drawer he used for costumes, mostly Halloween outfits, and it was in this drawer he had placed his Cynidicean clothes over two weeks ago.

He looked at the clothes for a long time. They drew memories, but only barely. He'd lost so much of the Lost City that he'd become convinced it was all a dream, that he'd confused with their D&D campaign. The clothes removed all doubt: those eight months had been real.

But it meant nothing if that time couldn't be remembered.

It has to be done.

Mike removed the clothes from his drawer and folded them neatly into a plastic garbage bag. He was calm, Stoic even, as he tied up the bag and brought it outside to the trash. It was time to stop fighting and let go of the memories. They were almost all gone anyway.

It was for the better, he told himself as he walked back into the house. He was a child of twelve, not a drug-popping warrior who betrayed his vows, murdered his friends, and shagged a girlfriend sixty ways to Sunday. Experiences like that would come later, as he grew older in this world. When they did, he hoped that his experiences in the Lost City would inform him on a subconscious level, so that where he failed before, he might do right a second time.

But he would stop looking back. It was time to look forward and *live* as Demetrius had urged them to live, and reclaim the magic of childhood - not the magic of spells and curses, but of innocence that opened kids to raw possibilities.

He went inside and closed the front door, and with it the final page of his life in the Lost City.

That weekend, on Saturday morning, an excited Mike Wheeler came thundering down the stairs to answer the front doorbell.

"Move it, Nancy!" he yelled, pushing her aside and opening the door.

"Jesus, Mike!" She had been reaching to open it herself.

The trio was on his doorstep, all smiles. They'd parked their bikes in the driveway and brought their packs of D&D material. Dustin had a box of donuts too, from the local bakery.

"Did you get lemons?" asked Mike, letting them all in.

"'Did I get lemons?', he asks," said Dustin, throwing down his pack in the foyer, and flipping open the box lid for all to see. "Here we have lemon donuts - three - jelly donuts - three - chocolate glazed - three - honey-dipped - three - and French crullers - four. That's sixteen donuts, four for each of us."

"You guys are going to be sick," said Nancy, looking at them from the living room archway.

"You're sick," said Mike.

"I love these crullers," said Will, taking one right away.

"Jesus, help yourself, Will," said Dustin.

"So will I," said Lucas, snagging a jelly and biting into it. "Mm. These are good."

Mike took a lemon.

Dustin turned to the living room. "Do you want one, Nancy? I can do with three."

Nancy rolled her eyes and walked off.

"Come on, guys," said Mike, his mouth full of lemon gel. "Downstairs. I have something to show you." He picked up Dustin's pack for him and led them all downstairs to the basement.

At the gaming table, the dungeon master screens were up and the dice were out. Mike was ready to punish them.

"This better be a good module," said Dustin, putting the donuts on the table and sitting down. There were cold Cokes that Mike had brought

down, and he passed one to everyone. "We haven't had a good game in over a month."

"Yeah, not since the Lost City," said Will, sitting as usual across from Mike, and facing the staircase. "This summer went by way too fast."

"Tell me about it," said Lucas, taking his place across from Dustin, with his back to the lounge area and the TV. He opened his can of Coke. "The last three weeks have been a fog. We hardly saw each other at all."

"It was too hot," said Mike. Since yesterday, the highs had been down to the low 80s, and the infernal humidity was gone.

"So what do we have?" asked Dustin.

From behind the dungeon-master screen, Mike produced the module, showing them the cover: *The Forgotten Temple of Tharizdun*.

They peered at it, eager.

"What is that thing?" muttered Lucas.

That "thing" on the module cover resembled a unisex featureless humanoid surrounded by writhing snakes of various colors - black, purple, green, and yellow. It was deeply unsettling.

"Wow, that's creepy," said Will, all excited.

"You'll find out soon enough," said Mike. "It's going to be a weird adventure. But before we start, I've got even better news. I'm designing my own module."

"Gods help us," said Dustin.

"It's going to be a killer," promised Mike. "And *this* is what you have to look forward to." He opened the Monster Manual to the "D" section, turned to a page, and slapped the book down on the table. He pointed to an awful looking creature.

They leaned over to look.

"The Demogorgon?" asked Will.

"Jesus," said Dustin, reading the description under the creature. "We're in deep shit."

"That thing is a nightmare," said Lucas.

"Just you guys wait," said Mike. "I started mapping out the dungeon last night. It's going to be a campaign that will take at least ten hours to play."

"When will it be ready?" asked Lucas.

"Not for a while," said Mike. "I'm putting a lot of thought in it. Maybe in a couple months. I'll try to have it done by Halloween."

"Ten hours," said Dustin. "It took us almost that long to play the Lost City."

"Yeah," said Mike. He felt a sadness, for some reason, when Dustin said that. "But the Demogorgon will smoke the Lost City."

"Well, cheers to the Demogorgon," said Lucas, raising his Coke. "And Mike's killer module."

"To the Demogorgon!" they all shouted, clicking their cans.

Mike smiled, relishing life - friendship, D&D, donuts, and all that was good and fun. If there was more to it than that, he didn't care to know. The dice rolled and the quest took off. He put his friends in a bad place, and they had to enact bizarre rituals to escape. They hollered, protested, threw the dice, and laughed.

It was a great, great game.

Timeline of Cynidicea & The Emirates of Yshia

- 766 BC Gorm founds the Kingdom of Cynidicea. He becomes its first reigning monarch.
- 716 BC Gorm's reign ends. He becomes a god that same year - the lawful neutral god of storms, justice, and warfare.
- 682 BC Madarua becomes the third reigning monarch (Queen) of Cynidicea.
- 669 BC Madarua's reign ends.
- 460 BC Madarua becomes a goddess - the neutral goddess of birth and death, and the changing seasons.
- 385 BC The hobbit Usamigaras becomes the eleventh reigning monarch (King) of Cynidicea.
- 380 BC The Church of Zargon is founded by the madman Damodes.
- 308 BC Usamigaras's reign ends.
- 291 BC Usamigaras becomes a god - the chaotic neutral god of magic, messages, thievery, and assassination.
- 284 BC The three gods -- Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras -- come down from the heavens and dwell in Cynidicea with their subjects for a month.
- 159 BC Alexander becomes the sixteenth reigning monarch of Cynidicea. His queen Zenobia effectively rules jointly with him.
- 127 BC Alexander and Zenobia die of a strange wasting disease that the priests of the three cults are unable to cure. They are the last reigning monarchs of Cynidicea.
- 126 BC The priests of Zargon gain control of Cynidicea. They convince the people that only they know how to guide them properly. Zargon stalks the city at night, killing people at random.
- 121 BC The Zargonites declare their faith to be the only legal one in Cynidicea. Worshipers of Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras are captured and fed to Zargon,

and many more flee the city, spreading their tale. Some worshipers manage to hide their allegiances, and work covertly to overthrow the Zargonites.

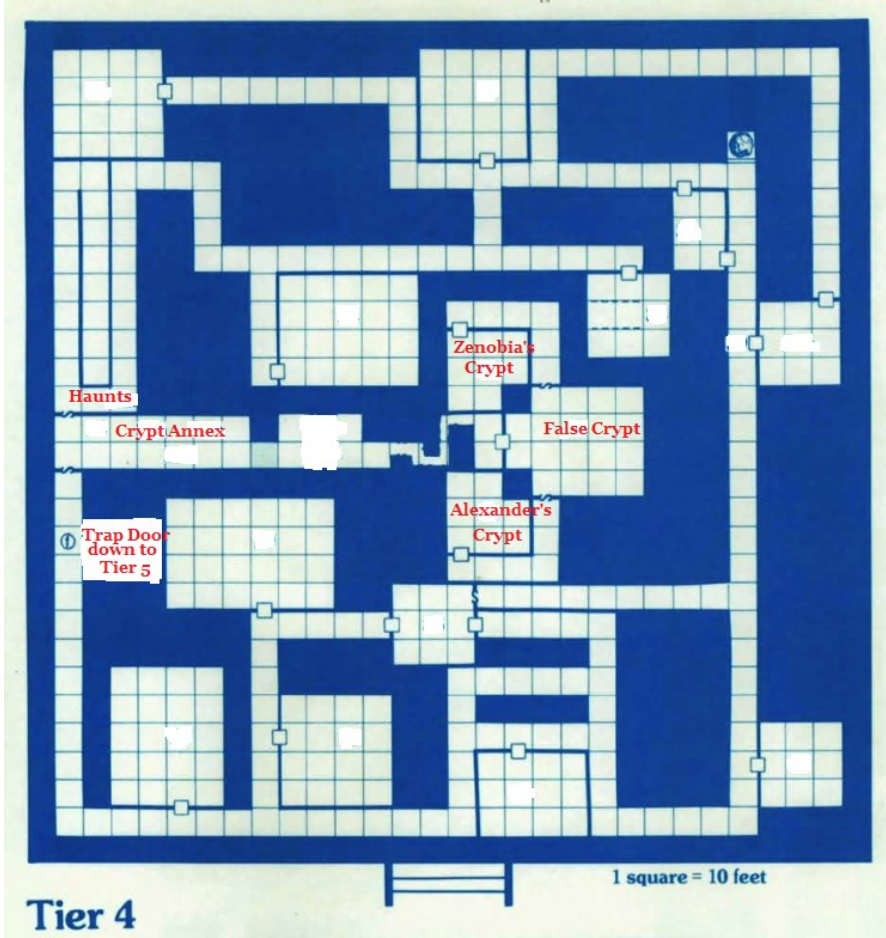
- 109 BC The priests of Zargon cultivate and distribute fungal psychedelics to the people, saying that it will calm their fears and allow them to transcend their bodies so they may enter a better world. Many citizens take these drugs, and begin losing their drive. Work becomes shoddy, the irrigation ditches are no longer maintained, and the army loses its discipline.
- 98 BC Cynidicea is burned and destroyed as great horde of Antalian warriors sweeps in from the north. Some Cynidiceans manage to flee with the clerics of Zargon underground, to a large cavern beneath the city. There they begin to rebuild.
- 50 BC The underground city of Cynidicea is completed, and the Zargonites rule mercilessly. Followers of Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras set up their hideouts in the ruins of the pyramid. They control the upper levels, and are left alone.
- 249 AC Strongholds are established in the underground city for the cults of Gorm, Madarua, and Usamigaras. The few citizens who are disaffected with the Zargonites, and don't want drugs in their food and water supplies, join one of the three cult communities.
- 770 AC Birth of Suleiman al-Kalim, a cruel warlord of the desert nomads in Ylaruam.
- 824 AC At age 54, al-Kalim captures the village of Ylaruam and establishes it as his tribal seat. He changes its name to Yshia and establishes the religion of the Eternal Truth.
- 826 AC Al-Kalim captures Cinsa-Men-Noo, Parsa, and Ctesiphon, and unites the Alasiyan and Makistani tribes under the Eternal Truth.
- 831 AC The founding of the Confederated Tribes of the Emirates of Yshia. Al-Kalim is the first Caliph of the Emirates.
- 842 AC Death of the Prophet al-Kalim. Nineteen caliphs will rule the Emirates of Yshia until 1041, and strictly enforce the observance of Yshlim, the oppressive religion of the Eternal Truth, as laid down by al-Kalim.
- 1041 AC Fall of the Caliphate in Yshia. A Council of Preceptors is formed to guide the emirates, favoring a more liberal and cosmopolitan rule. Abbashan and Nithia are the only places where Yshlimic Law remains strictly enforced.
- 1054 AC Fall of Yshia City to the jihad of Sayid al-Naji. The Council of Preceptors abolished, and strict observance of Yshlim is now enforced in the Emirates of Abbashan, Nithia, Nicostenia, and Alasiya.

1055 AC Al-Naji's jihad comes west to Makistan, and south to Dythestia. They are taken, and Yshlimic Law is now strictly enforced everywhere again in the Emirates.

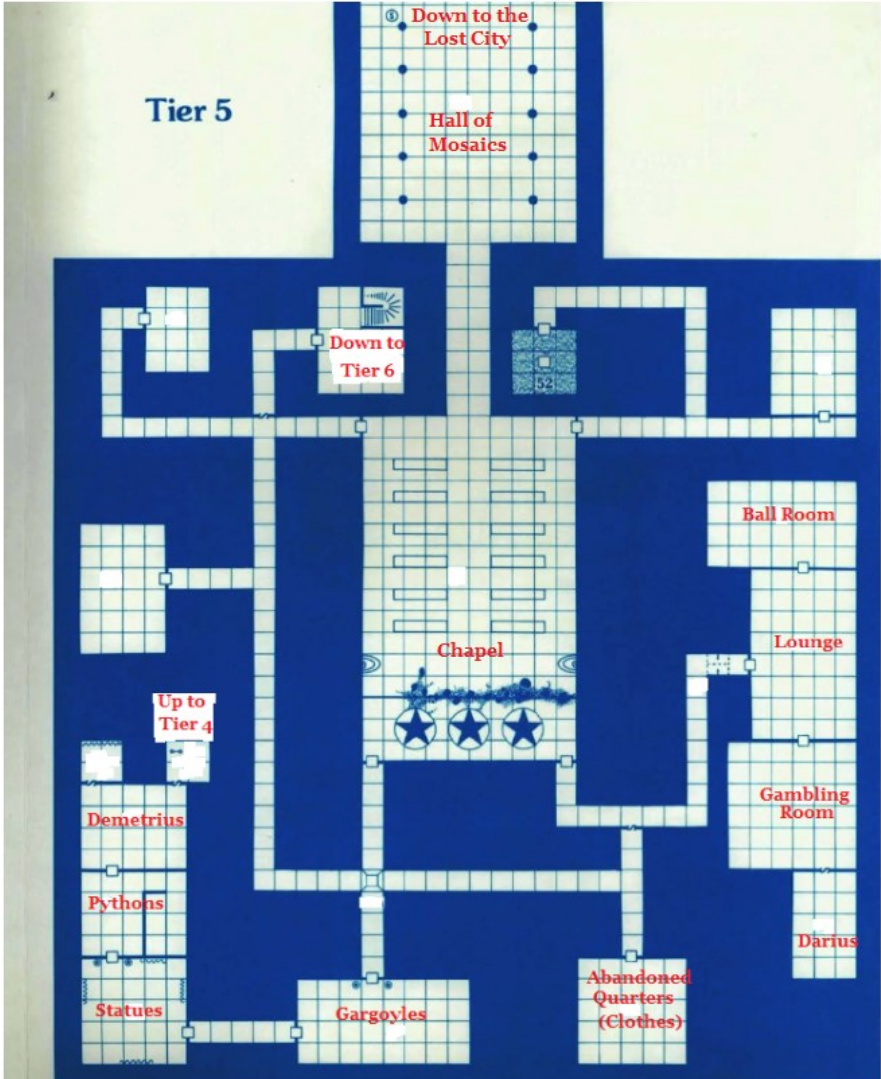
1055 AC The Stranger Things kids arrive in Cynidicea, in the eighth month of the year.

1056 AC In the third month, Yshian forces come to Cynidicea to subjugate the underground city. The Cynidicean monarchy is briefly restored after 1183 years: Lucas and Pandora are crowned the seventeenth monarchs, to co-reign as King and Queen. Leading an undead army, they crush the Yshian invaders. Three days later, the underground kingdom is caved in by the Zargonite high priest, destroying Cynidicea once and for all.

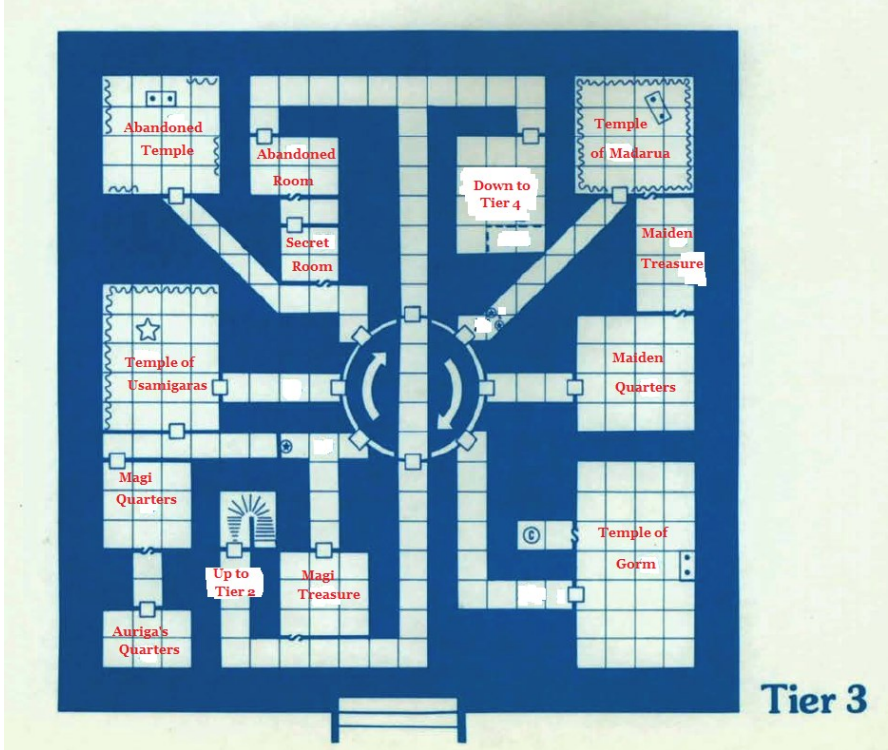
Chapter One (Tier 4)



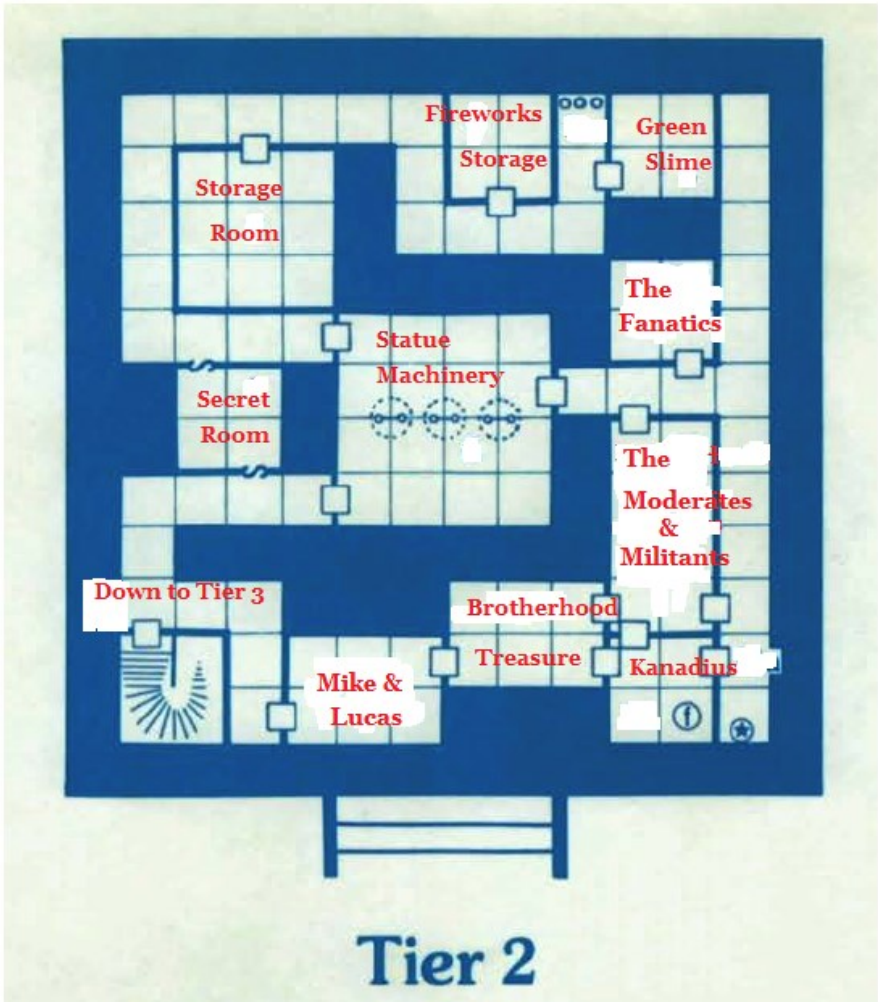
Chapters Three and Four (Tier 5)



Chapter Five (Tier 3)



Chapter Six (Tier 2)

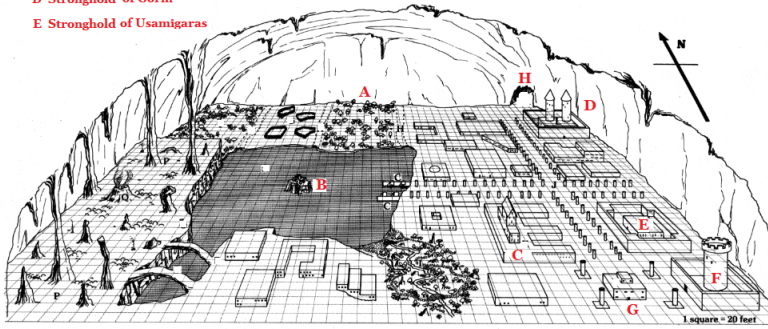


Chapter Six (The Underground City)

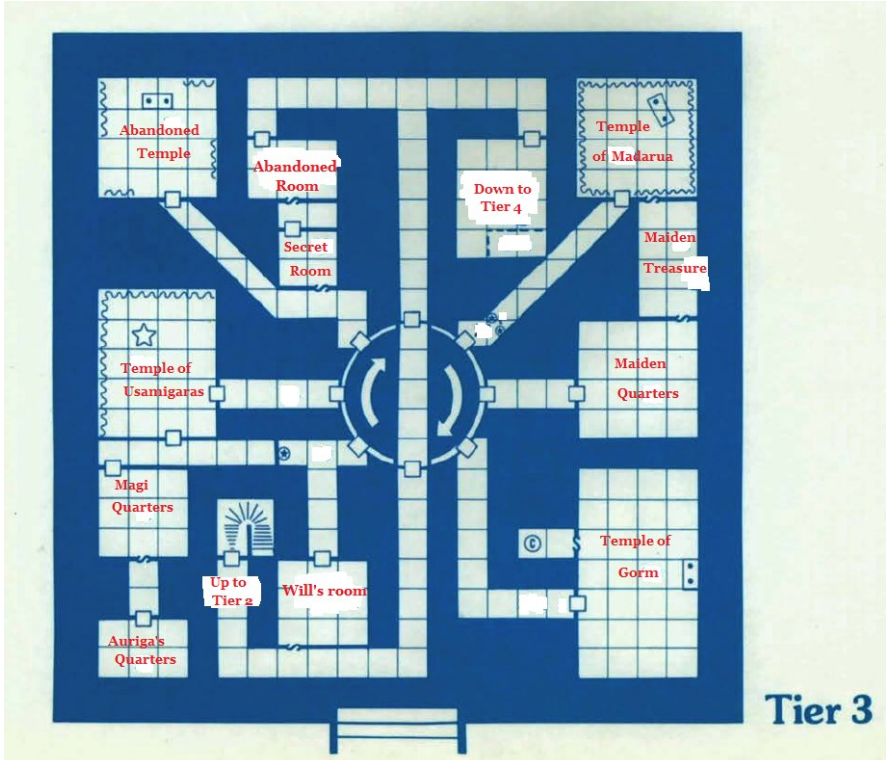
- A Mushroom Gardens
- B Isle of Death
- C Temple of Zargon
- D Stronghold of Gorm
- E Stronghold of Usamigaras

Underground City Map

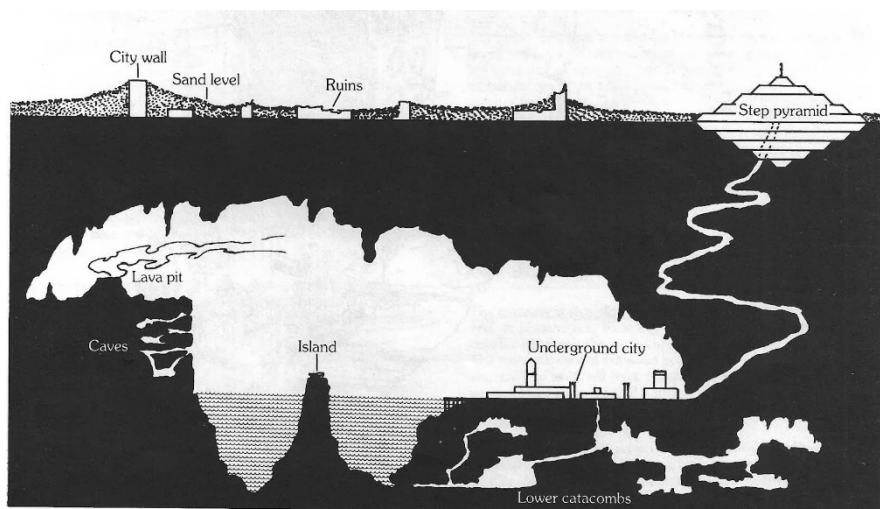
- F Stronghold of Madarus
- G The Catacombs
- H Passage up to the Pyramid (Tier 5)



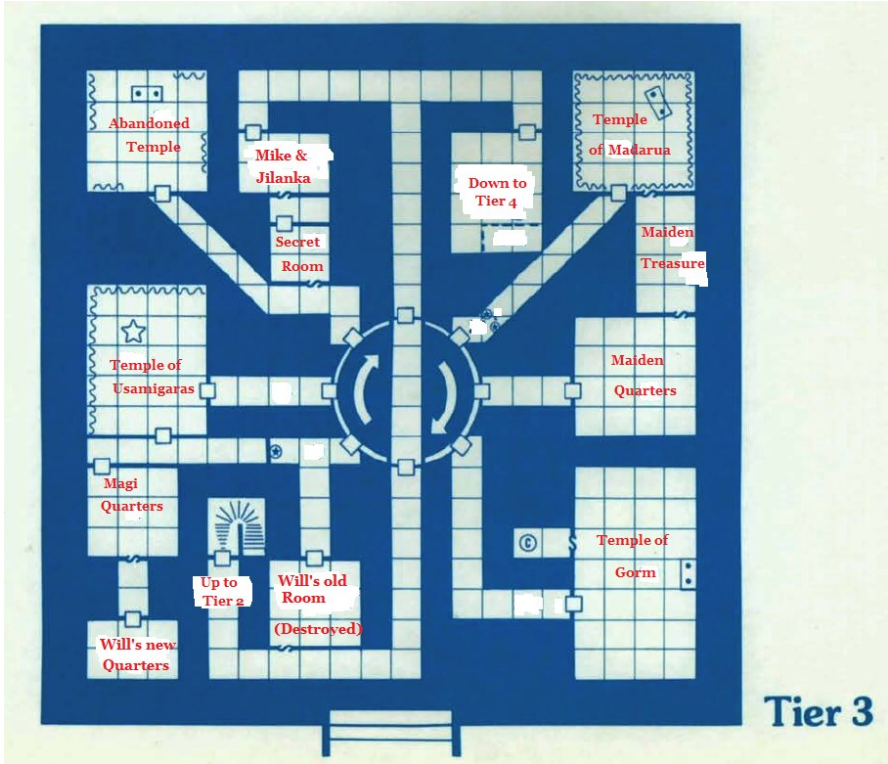
Chapter Seven (Tier 3)



Chapter Seven (Cross-Section of Pyramid & City)



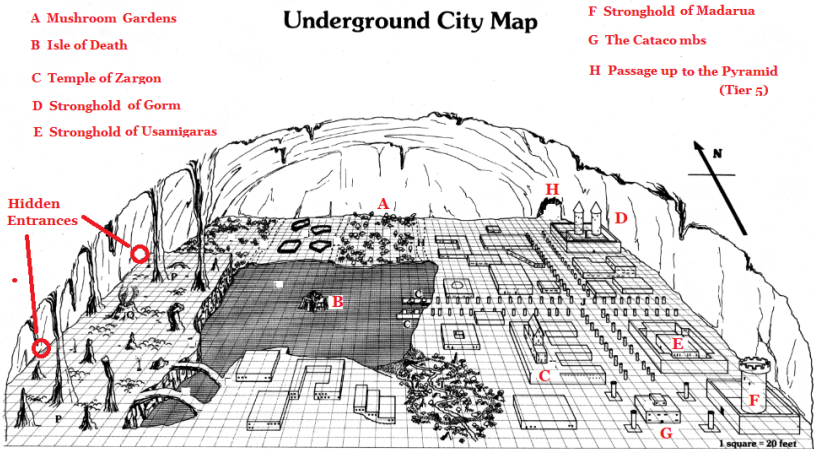
Chapter Eleven (Tier 3)



Chapter Twelve (The Emirates of Yshia)



Chapter Sixteen (The Underground City)



Praise for *Stranger Things: The College Years and Beyond*

"Fan fiction can be awful, especially when the only fan it satisfies is its author. With this work Loren has reached way beyond his own tastes, and tells a story with broad appeal. *Stranger Things*, indeed." (Greg Wright)

"I read parts of it during my work hours. That's how much I couldn't put it down." (Stephanie Gatley)

"How many times have you reached the end of an emotionally intense book or movie and felt bereft? You're not ready to let go. You need to know what happens to your friends. You miss them. Loren brings them all back with a vengeance. And the story goes on." (Tina Lozeau)

"Loren's affinity with the Duffer Brothers' invention is like a talent incubated in Hawkins' lab, and he seems to know what they're up to better than they do themselves." (Bob Kruger)

"Loren transports us into the world of *Stranger Things* so vividly, that you may as well be reading the Duffer Brothers' next screenplay. He is a master at including the best cultural references from the eras, and weaving in an interesting plot that keeps you staring at the last page after you've finished." (Kylie Hargrove)

"Eleven suffers so much throughout Loren's trilogy, and worst of all in the third volume. Her final moment of triumph made me cry." (Darren Hughes)

"Fans of *Stranger Things* will be pleased to reconnect with their favorite characters, as they grapple with the traumas they experienced in the TV series while facing a series of increasingly terrifying foes from the Upside Down. The books are satisfying in both building upon the previous stories and introducing new challenges for our heroes to battle. Do not expect to be always uplifted by the outcomes, but do expect a compelling narrative along the way." (Bill Noble)