Prologue: Jou Ouvè

Columns of aromatic black smoke rose from swaying braziers. Below, crawling upwards to the upper level of Mirrored City, an immense multitude of the city’s underbelly revelled to the steady rhythm of voice and drum. Still, a pensive tension clung to the walls of the massive underground cavern; long shadows thrown over the tenements acted as a dark caricature of the early morn of celebration. Soft hallucinations from the inhalation of the brazier smoke quieted the echoed discomfort within Valenti. Focusing on the dancing fires from the braziers above him was a needed distraction from the incessant push of sweaty bodies that marched alongside. Allowing his mind to drift away amid the crowd, meandering back to the commencement.

The entirety of the lower and upper cities gathered for the procession of faith within the torchlit early morn. For their god demanded its sacrament and thus the brotherhood exhumed the monolithic stone coffin in which it slumbered and declared to the citizens to prepare. Within a sennight, Mirrored City would awake four hours before dawn should peek her light into the mouth of their cavern. In silence, they exited their stone abodes and made their way to the main streets.

They marched downwards in darkness, save for the few torches lining the cobbled streets. Thousands of shadow-cast faces had gathered within the deepest recesses of the city along the edge of the subterranean lake. Leading from the shore into the centre of the lake, a grimly lit walkway led to the foot of where the Dweller’s temple stood.

*What a hideous construction, if I were god I would at least want to live within something that felt beautiful. Just look at it, it’s made from some of the ugliest porous black rock and it’s nearly overrun by lichen. At least the first high priest had the decency to design it as something representing a house of worship. I honestly expected something entirely different from the descriptions I’d been given*

Valenti angled his body to the left whilst shaking his head “You told me it was awe-inspiring, Jarene”

Jarene righted herself as she settled next to him at the top of a short wall “What?”

“I thought you told me that this damned ugly thing was supposed to be awe-inspiring” He repeated in a shouted whisper

“Shut your ass, before someone hears you and, please, have some respect for the temple and our god within”

Valenti sucked his teeth as he shook his head more vigorously, “We haven’t seen or heard of anything with regards to *our god* for the last hundred and thirty years”

“It’s only one hundred and ten” Jarene corrected “You should feel honoured to be alive for such an occasion, Valenti. Some would will themselves from their graves if they could, just to have a glimpse of the Dweller. Remember, we owe all this,” she said gesturing upwards at the towering cavern of the lower city with its inverted towers, “This city is the envy of the world, little brother”

Valenti shot her an annoyed glance “Need I remind you that I am the older one here?”

“No, but, do you act like it?”, twisting her hand in a lazy gesture.

“And also you’ve barely ever stepped foot beyond the rim of the cavern and into the upper city far less for anywhere else on the continent and trust me when I say no one envies someone who lives in a decorated cave…”

“You’re an ungrateful bastard you know that?” rolling her eyes in mutual annoyance

“I prefer honest bastard, but I’m a bastard nonetheless”

The conversation fell silent alongside the gathered crowd’s murmurings as the temple door slowly swung open with a moaning creak. Two poled braziers ducked out from under the doorway bathing the bleary-eyed crowd in an orange glow. Slowly in a strict careful march, the priests carrying the braziers made their way out into the middle of the long walkway over the lake. Valenti leaned forward with anticipation resting his forearms on his lap; Jarene bouncing in sheer excitement.

A third priest exited the darkness from within the gaping temple door. In an instant, he entered a dash before leaping an astonishing twenty feet into the air between the two burning flames. Whilst at the apex of his leap he unrolled his finger releasing what appeared to be dried leaves, allowing them to be consumed in the fire. The flames roared and then settled quickly into an ominous red glow.

The priest, however, remained fixated in the air between the two flames. A collective gasp was heard from amongst the gathered on the shore. His long dark sackcloth-like robes draped along the walkway and his hooded face slowly bowed as he entered into what seemed like a prayerful position. The silence persisted for a moment. The air of reverence was broken when the floating priest lifted his head and yelped a cry to which the priests below echoed a reply.

The steady beat of drums and accompanying instruments belched out from the mouth of the temple. From the darkness within came another pair of red flames dancing atop the poles. Trailing them a massive stone object slowly came into view on the walkway. Carried on the backs of forty or more priests was their god, the dweller, laying within a monstrosity of a sarcophagus surrounded in formation by a legion of drummers, percussionists and two dozen more flame bearers with their poles. The entire procession passed beneath the suspended priest singing his sweetening melody to the beat, as the crowd fanned out onto the shore. The crowd slowly surrounded the sarcophagus and thus began the march to the pinnacle of Mirrored City. What started in solemnity churned and writhed into a raucous festival in honour of the reawakening of The Dweller.

Jarene hooked her arm in within Valenti’s elbow rudely plucking him from the wall and landing both of them with the muted sensation of crushed lichen and mushrooms beneath their feet. Valenti didn’t bother to give any protest as he was more fixated on what transpired before him. His scepticism yielded in turn to his curiosity to take charge and will him into the churning mass of revelry. Jarene parted her way with her right-hand shoving her way past jostling elbows and shoulders.

“Hey, take your time where are you trying to go?”

“I need to see that sarcophagus up close!” she ducked another elbow before shooting Valenti a backward glance. Valenti craned his neck towards the swarm of priests that surrounded the sarcophagus. From between the bobbing heads, he could see what appeared to be raised etchings decorating it on all sides; the glow of the braziers acted against his sight by casting a penumbra over much of the side that was visible to him. Above the sarcophagus, two more priests had risen to join the other suspended in the air. Their combined voices amplified to sing above the roar of the drums ushering the atmosphere of the churning mass into a higher crescendo. The familiar dankness of the lower city had retreated away from the pulsating heat that emanated and pervaded its snaking streets and peculiar tenements. Valenti had never seen the lower city erupt into such a carefree celebration. It was something wrought from wild drunkenness that originated deep within a repressed spirit and sought out only the purest expression of bacchanalia.

The music had taken a spirit of its own relinquishing its ties to the vocal cords of their singers. It found its purpose in the walls of the cavern reverberating through the hollow chambers of the inverted towers that hung low from above and the bells housed in their belfry echoed a shrill hum in response. In the stamping of feet and movement of hips did it find the essence of humanity; from within the laughter of our hearts, it found escape from its fears.

The procession had reached the foot of the main thoroughfare that lead up to the higher levels. The suspended priests above dropped simultaneously dropped what appeared to be a dark canvas pouch into the flaming braziers causing the columns of smoke to darken and the aroma they produced to intensify. *How many times have they dropped those into the fire?* Valenti’s eyes remain fixated on the dancing flames above as his memories drifted across his eyes.

Jarene still clung to Valenti’s arm her mind taken up by the thrill as her feet marched in a mindless rhythm, her eyes fixated on the sarcophagus in a wild glare, steps bold and unsure. Jarene felt something awakening in her that wanted to be free. Something primal and hungry.

Sabazio stood atop the gate tower overlooking the divide between the upper and lower cities; forerunners that broke free from the main procession ran and hollered of the Dweller’s return from below. The air up here still housed a quickly fading sense of calm characteristic of the cusp of sunrise. Scents of the burning fungi from the braziers brushed Sabazio’s nostrils as the wind gently blew against his face and as a Trau Reiverean priest he was accustomed to the hallucinogenic effects. The wind picked up again bringing with it a full blast of mind-altering intent that he eagerly welcomed with a sharp inhale and lowered eyelids; head tilted backwards gazing into the sky. The morning stars twinkled their amusement towards Trau Reiverean Priest, and in a series of slowed blinks, his eyes shot afire with a prismatic kaleidoscope of colours. The world to Sabazio became closer to its truer self.

His gaze lowered in time to catch the head of the procession rounding the final bend before they stepped into the open air. Sabazio took another deep inhale before releasing his sonorous voice from his throat. The world came alive in a conflagration of colour as the waves of sound buffeted and ricocheted off the buildings and into the mouth of the cavern. The sarcophagus in all its decorative splendour was set down in the open air from off the backs of the priests. One by one, beginning with Sabazio, each of the singers decrescendoed into a high ethereal note. The beating of the drums stopped abruptly. The entire city fell into silence save for the hanging chord from the singers.

Sabazio held his note as he threw his gaze to the corner of his vision. He watched as the High Reivereans marched with pomp and ceremony towards the face of the crowd. The High Reivereans lifted their arms simultaneously, pausing the festivity, they moved closer to the sarcophagus parting the surrounding priests as they went. The three surrounded it, one on each side and the last at the feet. Together they laid their hands on the cold stone sending waves of colour rippling through the air from Sabazio’s psychoactive perspective. Sabazio leaned in slightly as his attention was fixated on the ceremony below; he hadn’t been a part of the priesthood the last time this had occurred and he only remembered distorted fragments of the experience from when he was an infant.

Sabazio adjusted his hallucination, allowing him to magnify the intensity of the experience — giving him a magnified view of the High Reivereans. They moved as one as they bent over the coffin and began licking the surface of the stone repeatedly. Sabazio's hallucination began to waver and ripple the more they continued licking the sarcophagus until without warning they all simultaneously reeled and lurched backwards, their bodies arching towards the heavens. Their faces expressed twisted caricatures of exaggerated euphoria but most striking of all were their eyes. Flames of blue and pink emanated from where their pupils should be.

With one shared voice a new song arose from the sarcophagus at the parting of their lips and emanated not from their mouths but from what seemed to be from god itself within. The crowd behind began to stir restlessly as the energy of this new song permeated the air between them. A new spirit had taken form amongst them, one more powerful and ravenous than the last. What echoed in the bowels of the cavern paled in comparison to what lingered with them in the open air. The drumming ignited with a new partner in the sound of brass instruments adding a layer of majesty to the psychedelic tapestry. The march from the border to the pinnacle had begun. The wildest of the crowd ripped off their garments to reveal their naked selves to the peeping light of the dawn. The heat of the first rays tingled on their sweat-covered skin.

Sabazio stepped onto the short balcony looking directly below as the reinvigorated revelry continued along. He casually willed his hallucination as he stepped into the open air and entered in position behind his colleague and joined in on the new song. Swaying braziers marked time, and with his Trau Reiverean vision, he heard the sound of the invisible percussion.

*“What do you make of that one over there huh?* An aura slowly formed to outline the silhouette of a reveller “*Is she to your liking Sabazio?”*

Sabazio gave the priest next to him an inquisitive glance.*“Wanton behaviour is encouraged but, by the Dweller, Paarvo, she looks like your sister... ”*

*“Well that’s because she is, my friend”*

Sabazio could sense the disgusting smile plastered across Paarvo’s face.

*“Paarvo, what sort of man, Trau Reiverean or not, looks upon the closest of his kin and finds their flesh appealing to his eyes? As much as I may find her curves and bare chest appealing you startle me with your willingness in acknowledging that. Now, stop interrupting our flow on the Trau Reiverean plane and allow the rest of us to enjoy singing the song of awakening”*

*“I agree…” grumbled Basilio from behind*

Paarvo grunted in their heads but otherwise kept his thoughts silent as the singing continued—the aura surrounding his sister faded. Sabazio glanced again over towards him noting the energy that left him. Peering through the psychedelic landscape granted him the means to see the emotional aura that radiated from people. Despite the joyous outward expression on his bearded face the colours that escaped spoke a different message.

Sabazio turned to look out and onwards fixing his attention on their destination seated on the pinnacle of the mountain. Up there sat the white upper temple of The Dweller; the orange disk of the sun had risen just enough to sit just beyond it in the sky giving the temple a haloed appearance. The naturally ethereal effect was greatly compounded when gazed at by eyes through the Trau Reiverean plane. Subtle rainbows washed over the stone like waves on a shoreline.

The sprawling facade dominated the horizon with its series of towers of varying heights resembling the natural formation of stalagmites. Sabazio didn’t know whether it was constructed or rather carved from the very mountain itself but whichever method was used did nothing to diminish the overall majesty of the upper temple. Any keen observer would be quick to notice that the arrangement of its towers formed the outline of a massive throne with its back to the rising sun. Anticipation rippled out into the hallucination stirring the god that lay within the sarcophagus causing it to rumble ever so slightly in the hands of the priests. Sabazio raised the volume of his singing causing the other priests to match his gusto.

The Dweller within his stone coffin began to sense that it neared the apex of the ascent. Hunger gnawed incessantly from within. Something ravenous and insatiable that hadn’t appeased its appetite grew impatient within its confinement. The Dweller barked its demands into the minds of the High Reivereans shaking their mind-altered reality into a darkening nightmare before their flaming eyes. *“What do you my strictures say!?”*

*“My Lord, ‘ We are thus consumed for the sake of atonement, ’” came the bitter reply.*

Umlae sat over the edge of the cliff that overlooked the upper city. It had been millennia since he’d first set foot on this soil. Not much had changed since he last saw it. The earthen houses piled atop one another in a haphazard construction made it seem as though it appeared carved out of the mountain itself. The entire city had the appearance of a gigantic seashell with its innermost part, where the lower temple sat, hundreds of feet below the surface. Umlae grunted to himself. He snorted and then spat out some phlegm over the city—a gesture encapsulating his sentiments towards the festivities.

Umlae gave the city a disdainful glare before turning on his heels to walk alongside the edge of the cliff. *Something about this place makes my tattoos itch. History lays its weight on my shoulders without any consideration for what I am capable of bearing. My very hands are responsible for the pillars constructed that are stacked high on my decisions. This place is a physical reminder of the hideous monuments I adore. Tingling fleshy sensations. Guilt or satisfaction?*  Umlae chuckled mirthlessly to himself at the self-proposed question. *I’ve lived long enough to become a philosopher in my own right.*

The sound of crunching stone tickled Umlae’s ear. In the second of his realisation, Umlae quickly vanished before reappearing, weapon drawn and ready for the kill. He paused. Umlae released an exasperated huff.

“Well hello, my friend!” the greeting came in a thickly accented tongue.

“What is your kind doing here?” Umlae stepped back sheathing his weapon under his cloak. He looked at the traveller with a mixture of wariness and curiosity. He was tall and lanky with oily wispy hair. His face adorned a permanently plastered smile which made a comical pairing with his naturally sleepy eyes. Strapped onto his back was a steel drum-like instrument reflecting in the early morning sun and on his side, he wore a large sack that made clinking noises as he moved.

“Well, you see wherever there is music whether it be intended for me or not falls in the category of praise to my ears, friend. I must say, that is quite the weapon to keep, why not pick up an instrument instead my friend?” He pulled a stringed instrument from his bag quickly tuning it before gesturing to Umlae to take it. Umlae stared back at the traveller ignoring his generosity.

“I can teach you to play, my treat!” The traveller further insisted by stretching his arm closer “And trust me when I say there’s none better than I when it comes to this.” he winked, plucking the strings to the song echoing from below.

“What is your name?”

“Quite rude, quite, quite rude and I believe I am called Vowlski. Not my choice of name but names mean little to me. Music, ah ha, that is what gives meaning to me. Need I remind you, Umlae, that we are all born from it?” The traveller began unpacking his metal drum from his back and gently placed it upon another metal contraption before the edge of the cliff.

“Now will you just excuse me my less-than-musical friend I must begin enjoying the festivities before they’re over and if you intend on enjoying it yourself you might wish to join in soon, my dear little brother seems to grow in appetite”

“I hate gods…” Umlae snorted.

“Funny you should say that, you’re a man of irony and for that, I shall immortalise you in my poetry!” The traveller then pulled out two short sticks and proceeded to strike the metal drum producing a series of sweet resonant notes that mimicked the distant melody. The god had all but forgotten of Umlae as he was swept up in his merriment. Umlae raised his eyebrow at the god’s odd behaviour. The fabric separating the layers of reality frayed for a split second, just enough for Umlae to enter his destination and within the short rest between the notes of a run, he was gone.

“The music grows ever sweeter, my friend, and your addition to the composition is all that this score needed!” Vowlski’s face contorted into a horrifying grimace as he bellowed a laugh. “Oh yes, my dear Umlae”

The scent of burning fungi dominated the atmosphere of the mirrored city. The strength of the smell made Umlae’s nose itch. *My tattoos and now my nose, this place…hate it.* He went unnoticed through the upper temple, just as he intended. All the Trau Reiverean priests would be preoccupied with serving their god’s needs this morning. Any other time both temples would be crawling with Trau Reiverean priests with their heightened sensory perception making confrontation guaranteed.

*Just keep singing, you zealots.*

*The thrill. The boundless thrill that governs us. What more can we want when having this feeling that has been given to us?*

“What more Valenti? What more do we need than this?” Jarene clung heavily to Valenti’s neck, her warm breath moving across his cheek. “Why must we fuss about anything anymore, hmm?”

Jarene flung herself into a wild dance tearing her clothes off in the process. Valenti was momentarily yanked from his trance at the sight of his half-naked sister. Only then it became apparent to him that she wasn’t alone in her display of stark nudity. The revellers around him were beginning to shed their clothes as if they were shackles on their very souls as they paraded with an increasingly bestial nature. Surrounding Valenti, people danced and threw themselves willingly into the arms of strangers and family alike. Their celebration quickly transitioned into a laissez-faire display of wanton debauchery and Valenti's mind in its current state felt drawn to what his eyes feasted on. His senses were heightened and the compelling nature of revealed flesh tempted him.

Jarene had found herself in the embrace of another woman, their tongues defaulting as their primary means of communication. Beside them, a triune formed for the enjoyment of flesh and the taste of bare skin. Valenti’s vision blurred. He turned in a half circle, basking in the raw spontaneous lust and he found himself beginning to drown in an overwhelming sense of euphoria inviting him upwards into bliss. Faceless arms of love began clawing away at his garments—demanding his involvement.

The sun had risen further in the sky and now sat overhead observing the thousands of revellers spilling out of the temple’s courtyard. A sea of groaning, grinding sweat drenched bodies completely covered the holy grounds of the dweller. The priests had silently laid the sarcophagus on the raised dais near the temple's entrance. The massive lid hung off to one side haphazardly leaning on the floor. The Trau Reiverean song had given precedence to the sound of mass hedonism; the braziers were firmly planted around the perimeter, lowly burning and lazily exhaling pungent grey smoke.

Tendrils snaked unto the floor from down the poles controlled by the priests that stood at the outskirts. They worked in silence layering the smoke on the floor covering the courtyard in a preternatural mist. Valenti lay on his back inhaling deeply while another aggressively straddled him by the waist and showed no signs of showing any relief—not that he would wish it. Valenti felt heat rise from his core washing his body in waves of numbing pleasure built up to an explosion of painful joy. In his momentary lucidity, he locked eyes with his lover.

Jarene smiled down at Valenti, hair draping over her face, “You don’t ever listen, what more do we need than this?” continuing to grind her hips. The horror of realisation overtook Valenti, sending his moral compass spinning without any hope of finding the guidance of true-north. Any semblance of taboo had been shattered for the sake of unbridled pleasure. He made no move to stop her efforts; the raw sense of revulsion felt foggy and distant in his conscious mind and quickly felt intangible before finally slipping away into the glazed-over sheen of his eyes. Jarene broke the exchange and leaned her head back redoubling her efforts—gripping his thighs for support.

Before long she had finished off brother. She crawled off his body stumbling drunkenly between members of the orgy. The Trau Reivereans standing there as silent observers paid her little attention if any. She felt drawn to the centre of the courtyard towards where the sarcophagus lay. She tripped up the short steps, grabbing onto the lip of the sarcophagus—lifting herself. Peering over the edge she glimpsed a swirling maw of fluctuating colour, she paused, a moment of questioning hesitation poked through the fog of her high. Ignoring the whispers from her instinct Jarene swung one leg up and rolled her body over the edge falling into the sarcophagus. The priests glanced at the sarcophagus momentarily before leaving their positions and retreating into the temple’s interior.

Jarene twisted and writhed in confusion and pain as she was pushed and pulled violently away from her reality. Her eyes shot open to reveal dancing flames with a distinctive pink core and blue outer edge—the mark of dread. Jarene spat and sputtered as she tumbled through a landscape drenched in colour and looming over her she saw the gaping maw of her own mouth. She recoiled as the image of being swallowed by herself tugged at her sanity and forced her to shut her eyes as a last infantile resort for protection.

Jarene screamed in the sarcophagus punching and kicking at the stone walls bloodying her knuckles and toes. She awoke from her frenzied panic, eyes still ablaze. Jarene lifted herself from the sarcophagus shakily with the pain wrapped across her chest and the throbbing heat from her hands and feet. She paused, now partially sobered, and gaped at what she saw before her eyes. Sitting above the courtyard looking down at them was the owner of the sarcophagus. A massive beast five times the height of a man with matted tangled fur covering the body of a cross between a man and a lupine creature. Its feet appeared as though three hooves were fused at the end of each leg and lanky arms that had the hands of a man. Most hideous of all was its head which didn’t resemble much of one at all. Situated atop its shoulders was a writhing mass of horns long as tendrils reaching out in all directions and between them oozing flesh containing mouths, eyes, and various orifices.

The Dweller descended from its throne carefully before settling down in a crouch on the courtyard floor. The god slowly rose, stepping over the sarcophagus— giving little attention to Jarene cowering within its confines. A sonorous shrill howl emanated from The Dweller before settling into a soft mournful wailing of the familiar melody of revelry. A strangely mocking tone underlaid the song that came from the god’s ubiquitary voice.

The wailing rose higher and higher shifting into the familiar up-tempo beat of the song but the song twisted and darkened into something hideous and dissonant. The Trau-Reivereans accompanied their god from the vantage of the temple’s towers. One by one the crowd paused in their blind lechery to pay heed to their god. The Dweller slowly lifted its arms in a grim welcome to the attention. An aura dominated the god's silhouette before emanating outwards and setting alight the eyes of all those who watched in awe as they saw the first glimpse of their deity.

“Come!” came the rattling demand from The Dweller. In swift obeisance droves of young men lept from where they fucked, stumbling, cussing and fighting their way to their god. The first to arrive fell at its feet. The song stopped. Horned tendrils shout out from its head impaling the dozens of men in a bloody massacre. The sound of flesh being penetrated relentlessly soon filled the air with the overwhelming scent of copper; streams of blood ran up the extended horns in a spiralling pattern before waterfalling into the innumerable orifices waiting at their base. Yet, the more they died the more they rushed to the feet of their deity. Many fell into the quickly forming crimson pools that rained from the suspended corpses of the most fervent worshipers.

The sun's light began hiding behind the slowly approaching moon as if Izmus himself felt ashamed at witnessing what transpired below. The Lord that is Light refused to shine on what he deemed an offence and thus plunged the world into preternatural darkness compounded ten-fold by The Dweller’s hallucinogenic presence. With each successive morsel of human flesh, the scene before Jarene’s horror-stricken face dragged her and the rest of the world into a perverse nightmare. The Dweller grew increasingly ravenous for after each pound of flesh it gutted, sucked dry and cast aside with indifference.

The agonising drag of each gory moment climaxed with one final bestial howl. The Dweller shuddered and wavered in its stance. Its mangy fur began falling off in clumps revealing patches of radiant white flesh; its greed led it to take pieces of shedding flesh and consume it as fell off. The god took its head of horns in its new muscled radiant-skinned arms and began tearing away at itself. Jarene watched as the god sculpted itself in the most grisly of ways, pulling off horns, eyes, pieces of jaws half filled with teeth and other pieces of unrecognisable flesh.

What stood before them now within the darkness of the eclipse was an eight-eyed being gleaming arrogantly in its radiance as it rose to its full height. Unfurling from its back were wide ribbons of skin that flowed from its back and rose in the air like wings; replacing its horns were tendrils reaching out into all directions. Its face was long and narrow with its only familiar feature being the eight, four across the forehead, two on what would be the cheeks and the last two nestled beneath the jaw on the god’s neck.

Which was once the beastly god known as, The Dweller, now stood in new flesh and bone as, The Dread on High. At its feet lay hundreds of maimed corpses and grovelling between them were those who had witnessed and experienced the meaning of reverence. When forced to marvel at the majesty of divinity they were found pitiful in its presence. In their need to worship the light, they were blinded and thus forced to stare into depths of darkness.

*Mirrored City under the rule of The Dweller Below and The Dread on High would, so long as it lived, be under the yoke of its bloody appetite. In their hope for mercy and enlightenment from their deity, the Trau Reivereans consolidated power over the citizens. Carnal depravity of their addiction to both power and substance they have fallen to the corruption that extends from the presence of what can only be thought of as Evil within the Divine.*

Umlae sat with one arm draped over his raised knee on a distant tower overlooking one of the wealthier quarters of the upper city; from there he had a clear sightline of the courtyard of The Upper Temple. The Dread on High had climbed back to the throne that was the temple itself. Its twinkling pale skin still radiated as the sun began to escape from behind the moon—its light proudly rivalling that of the sun. The soft breeze had brought the sickeningly metallic scent of the freshly shed blood. *Familiar.* Umlae grunted, shaking his head, “Gishira…”

The god’s head tilted sharply towards Umlae’s direction. A smile found itself spreading across his face in response to the god’s acknowledgement. Umlae chuckled, his tattoos glowing as his laughter grew. Umlae was gone. Gishira stared at the spot for a moment before turning his attention to a girl wailing over the corpse of a dead boy. “Why are you able to cry?”

Jarene cradled his head within her lap, tears falling onto his faintly warm cheek, wiping the blood from his forehead. His name was repeated on her lips repeatedly in reluctance to accept his passing. “May Sovuremeq take you with mercy, my dear boy. May you be seen as favourable in his eyes. I hope I see you in the lands of paradise.” Her words felt lost on his ears as she bent over in a silent sob. She kissed his forehead as a last sincere farewell.

The sonorous notes of a steel drum lingered on the dry mid-morning air. Izmus shone with disdain on the city. Volwski’s danced to the melody of Gishira’s song hanging on every note he struck from his steel drum. “Ahh, there is a beauty in this dark melody. Something hidden within these notes speaks to me, it guides my hands and forces a reprise, a second chance at a little surprise. What does the harmony say eh, Vowlski? Tell me what does the echo of the utterance promise? Oh, yes, yes yes yes yes; sweetest of finales are sung in these little motifs!” Volwski reeled in a guffaw as he crescendoed Gishira’s song, dancing merrily to the nearing finale, cackling all the way. In one final flourish, he launched his hands to one side—his heavy breaths still following the lingering rhythm.

“The music, my friends!”

Chapter 1: Fools and Their Laughter

“I told you not to pass this way!” Inder ran through the mud with an exasperated scowl on his face.

“I ain’t ever said a word on that” Lumex yelled as he came rushing past pushing him aside into a stall. Inder crashed into the startled vendor’s lap with a series of curses and annoyed squawks from the overturned crates of exotic fowls. Inder rolled over in the muddied street before resuming his awkward dash. Lumex skirted around a corner ducking between some stalls clutching tightly to the wrapped bundle under his right arm.

“You Judgement kissed scum! I got a free bird!” laughed Inder as he raised a fowl above his head and ducked under an awning. Lumex turned giving him a yellowed-toothed grin. Vendors flung obscenities in their wake as they pushed passed them through the market. Lucky for them the Vercinoan Guard were in the middle of a shift change. A stroke of good timing, genius or maybe some god smiled favourably, but alas, they were none the wiser to such things. They skidded around a few corners barreling their way out of the market district and into the dirtier parts of the city. Lumex grabbed his brother and yanked him down an alleyway that sloped around a bend. They vaulted over a low wall, skirting between the wall of two tenements.

“Oi, you better start cursing in my name then, you’re Lumex kissed, son. Start calling me your pa, I keep shoving you into your fortunes” Lumex ducked into another alleyway and then a next before jumping into an open hole leading under the stoned street. Inder came shortly after with a loud splash of sewage water. “You’re not papa and I ain’t ever need one either, and Judgement be damned if I’d ever be your son—son to an unwashed shit”

“You’re a petty little shit, you know, can’t take a harmless joke and ain’t we got the same father? Oi! You smell just as unwashed as me!” Lumex said, sniffing under his leather shirt.

“How do ya know we got the same father, Lumex?”

“ Cuz we look the damn same, Inder” grunting in reply. Inder paused for a moment to look at his muddied reflection in the half-light. “Oi, I don’t see it, I’m uglier” he protested while scratching at his chin. “Guess ma was desperate, aye?” They both burst out into a roar of obnoxious laughter slapping various parts of their bodies in amusement. “By Judgement’s way may her soul rest”

“Aye, indeed Lumex, but ain’t it Sovuremeq the god of dead kin?” he inquired with a bemused expression

“As if I know, I ain’t a focking Meqan” came Lumex’s reply with the roll of his accent

Traversing the underbelly of a Vercinoan required an adept knowledge of the stinking sewers and all their welcoming scents and occasional crelova—six-legged rodents with their characteristic antler-like horns protruding from their shoulders and known for their nasty attitude. To make the labyrinthian underground your highway was an art, an art that both Lumex and Inder had spent the last twenty-two of their thirty-seven summers mastering. The sludge and slime were the paint, their grubby boots the brushes, and the pockets of the unsuspecting were their unwilling buyers. Vercinoan citizens had little to fear from these brothers other than lighter pockets, roomier homes and fowl-less stalls—if they were ever successful. The most they’d ever stolen amounted to the wrapped bundle of cloth under Lumex’s arm and the stolen fowl softly clucking from Inder’s shoulder pack.

The sun had moved a half position in the sky before Inder and Lumex plucked themselves from a stone gap, exiting into a large canal. Above them lingered a cloudless sky, no bird flew over this part of the upper northeast district, not where penury reigned abundantly— no crumbs are left over. The canal had been blocked off by the city engineers and it now provided residence to a jumbled gathering of rotting shanties. Some might say the denizens of the upper northeast were somewhat engineers or architects themselves—no short feat in making homes from refuse, cosy ones at that.

To Inder and Lumex this crocked corner of these sorry lot of beggars, thieves, whores and the like was home. There was a warmth to the stink, a familiarity to the long shadow-cast faces that sat outside their bundle of makeshift boards tied with cloth and, there was Mensus crouched like a gargoyle on his favourite stack of wooden crates. Ol’ Mensus was good company if you ignored the fact that he spoke to those who weren’t there and snarled at the occasional passerby—aye, good company. Just beside Mensus stood the entrance to a long makeshift corridor that led to their destination.

Mensus eyed them as they strode past and around the corner, Inder gave him a passing nod of acknowledgement, but Mensus just stared at them both, slowly widening his stare. He leaned back on his haunches, curling into himself, cupping his ear as if listening to some unseen person to his left. Lumex shot him a backward glance as he proceeded to respond with a whisper.

“That one never gets any older does he?” Lumex chortled, nudging his brother.

“Who, Mensus?” he asked before eyeing the old bastard himself, “How long has he been sitting in that same exact spot eh? He’s probably been there since Judgement himself declared rule!”

“He’s a strange one for sure, I wonder if he even pisses…” replied Lumex. He halted briefly, turned on his heels and returned to where Mensus crouched.

“Oi! Do you even take a piss, do you?” a mischievous grin stretched his cheeks. Mensus turned his head towards Lumex eyeing him from toe to crown. He stood up promptly and in a rigid gait, he marched up to Lumex—his breath foul, causing Lumex to recoil. Mensus undid his trousers with swift aggression, then proceeded to relieve himself in the presence of Lumex who in reaction darted backwards—loosing a few curses at Mensus.

“You focking, madman…” Lumex growled, “You pissed right on me shoe!”

Inder howled in laughter behind his brother tugging back him into the corridor. Mensus redid his trousers and calmly retook his position on his wooden crates—an imperceptible grin sneaking its way onto his lips.

The door to Mao’lah’s den creaked open into a dimly lit musty long hallway. The walk along this hall was always a disorienting experience, something about the way the shadows found their way into the nooks and crannies gave the atmosphere an off-kiltered sense. Inder reckoned it was the Mao’lah himself that caused his den to feel as heavy as it did. Something about the man gave them a disturbance in their spirit. Lumex’s already soured expression soured even further as he furtively made his way behind Inder, clutching tightly onto the wrapped bundle under his arm. Inder strode confidently to the soft clucking of his exotic fowl. They walked passed a few barred doors and narrow corners before coming to a large door. At the entrance sat three grim-faced men that paid them no attention, their focus on a game of tiles and cards.

“King is expecting you two shits…” said the one on the far right nearest the door reshuffling his hand.

“And you’re his foking fool…” Lumex spat out under his breath

“What’s that you say?” He stood up carefully pocketing his cards, eyeing his opponents who exchanged looks of contempt in turn. “What are you too anyways, you look like two fat children but your heads are balding and you got beards longer than my cock.”

“That explains why you’re so jumpy” Inder pushed him aside without another word and made his way through the door.

“Oi, My Lord, these two shits are ‘ere to see ya!” He eyed Lumex scrunching his nose “And this other one here smells right full of piss!” pointing at Lumex. The other two seated there giggled as they watched them pass into Mao’lah’s chambers.

“Close the door, Seretos!” came a flat command “Yes, Sir!” Seretos closed the door giving the brothers an impolite gesture.

Mao’lah sat cross-legged on a large textile mat facing away from the brothers as they entered. The room was uncharacteristically frigid for the temperate climate outside, especially a humid summer. Hanging from the ceiling were different fetishes that held a significance to Mao’lah that was lost on them. The walls were all covered in various textiles made of elaborate patterns. Mao’lah didn’t have the characteristic darker cast to his complexion common amongst most Einaroan people. It was suspected he may have been from some remote culture from some northern land known for their lighter skin tones but the purple tinge made him quite unusual. Some whispered rumours stated that he claimed he was Callidoran—no one had ever heard of such a place before.

“We’re here your Eminence, and with the item of your request” Lumex gently laid the wrapped bundle on the carpeted floor before gingerly stepping back. Mao’lah peeked over his shoulder. “We didn’t look at it either,” added Inder. Mao’lah rose from his spot, towering over the two grubbily dressed twins. He took a step towards the bundle picking it up before unwrapping it to reveal a stony root in the shape of a man with dried crumpled leaves sprouting from its head. Mao’lah held onto the root slowly tracing his fingers over its form. A solemn expression fell from his brow and descended over his glassy-eyed stare, hints of a quiver could be seen as he pursed his lips.

The room’s temperature fell dramatically and waves of frost emanated from Mao’lah as his stare intensified. Inder stepped back, uneasily eyeing his brother for a reaction; both brothers inched towards the doorway as Mao’lah’s arms began to shake.

“Stay!” came the strained command. With a sharp inhale, Mao’lah recalled whatever cold sorcery was held within him. He looked up from the root, his eyes betrayed an intense mixture of emotions. His frigid demeanour and unforgiving exterior portrayed a false pretence.

“Come and sit.” Inder and Lumex shivering in near the door quickly moved to oblige.

“I apologize for the coldness” He drew in another sharp inhale warming the room to a still coolness. Mao’lah threw them each a crescent-shaped pillow, “Sit with these, consider this my gratitude”

“We are humbled, your Eminence” their voices rang out in unison. Mao’lah nodded his acknowledgement turning away from them carefully holding the root within his hand; he picked up a tiled clay jar with a beautiful blue mosaic pattern depicting a scene. Across its face stood nine individuals their hands held together and their backs turned. From what the brothers could make of it they could see them looking on at something they couldn’t understand.

“Oi, do you gots a clue what they’re staring at?” questioned Inder.

“Mind what matters to you, eh?”

Mao’lah took another less ornate ceramic bowl, placing the root within it, he then proceed to gently pour water out of the mosaic jar onto the root, gently washing off the dirt and grime. Inder and Lumex watched on for some time as Mao’lah carefully cleaned the root. After a few more scrubs with his thumb, he lifted the root from the water, taking a silky white cloth and wiping it dry.

“Tell me when you took it from him how did he look?”

Lumex motioned to stand but a quick hand from Mao’lah motioned him to remain seated.

“Well, My Lord” piped up Inder “He sort of looked like you, just scrawnier and his eyes wilder. His nose ain’t as big as yours nor his lips, I suppose he ain't as ug—” Lumex’s quick hand clamped around Lumex’s mouth silencing his foolish tongue. “Excuse, My Lord, he was there in his cell but he wasn’t there if you know what I mean. The walls where we found him were covered in circular scribbles and he kept whispering at them like they were ears, My Lord” In the split second that Mao’lah turned his head, Inder shot his brother a menacing glance mouthing off a few cruses in the process.

“Hmm, I see, did you catch any of the words that he spoke?”

Still holding fast to his brother’s mouth “ No, My Lord, I ain’t ever heard the tongue in my life”

Inder pulled off his brother’s hand “Aye, I bet it’s a madman’s tongue is what. I bet Ol’Mensus is fluent” interjecting with a snarky grin.

“No, what he speaks is not a madman’s tongue, he speaks the language of my people. It seems that he has lost has finally lost his senses. Did he resist when you took—” Mao’lah paused glancing towards the root. “Did he resist?”

“No, My Lord, he was busy whispering to the wall. Once we picked the lock and slipped into the cell he paid us no mind, none My Lord.” Lumex responded

“Aye, I even poked his head a bit, the poor sod is gone,” Inder said shaking his in mock pity

“You did what?”

“I said I poked his head are ya deaf?”

“Enough…” said Mao’lah. He took another cloth, beautifully embroidered with patterns of deep blues and purple with streaks of gold to embellish the design. He began delicately wrapping the root leaving only the head portion exposed. He placed his lips near the head and began whispering in his native tongue as if speaking to the root; he smiled and laughed as if the root were old friends sharing jokes. Inder and Lumex exchanged inquisitive looks. Mao’lah’s expression slowly darkened and his words ceased abruptly, he wrapped the root’s head, placing his lips on the root in a kiss.

“Call on the rest of them, let us discuss our next undertaking, this will be our most ambitious…”

“Through the annals of history, there has trickled down the notion of three great forces of creation. Self-proclaimed great minds have argued the truth of this idea and have given it the name, ‘The Utterances’, but I assure you that there has only ever been a single Utterance heard and it came forth from the unmoving lips of Judgement. It is Lord Judgement itself that holds the power over all, Judgement and Judgement alone. This notion of three has poisoned the minds of people beyond the edges of the Sasoroan Empire. Lord Judgement has yet to sanction their duly penance.”

The Sasoroan Sadist paused, scanning the lecture hall, before him, sat a mixture of faces that ranged from interested to drowsy. His eyes drew to slits before striking the closest disinterested pupil with a wooden whip across the shoulders. The Sadist delivered a series of hateful blows without restraint. The pupil cried out in pain and began reciting a single line of a prayer, “Great is Judgement for the punishment I receive is just!”

The Sasoroan Sadist relented his next blow regarding the boy in a downcast gaze of contempt.

“Consider it Lord Judgement’s mercy that you were born further from its will. You Vercinoans are slowly becoming an insult to our God. You know not the virtue that merciful pain can wrought from the twisted souls of a man. Consider why we are made to die, death is our deserved gift. We are too corrupted in Judgement’s eyes to exist beyond our use. The men and women of Sasora understand this and we thus beat ourselves for our Lord’s sake and trust when I say it pleases it.” The Sadist peeled back his robes exposing his bare chest and back, revealing a frightening number of knotted scars.

His eyes searched their faces for any lack of fear. Seated at the far end, a single pupil stared past him with an expressionless face. Jet-black short-cropped hair framed her pale face adding to her juvenile appearance. The Sadist’s expression hardened and his lips drew tight. He steadily walked over to the bench she shared with three other quivering pupils, yet she continued looking on into nothingness with a blank stare evoking the sense that her mind was far from where the rest of her sat.

“Are you dim of wit child?” snarled the sadist as he stood directly before her. “Do you not understand the significance of what I bare on my body? Does it not speak of truth to you?” His grip tightened around his instrument of punishment.

Without breaking her stare “I must apologise Holy Sadist, for Lord Judgement has already seen it fit to punish me righteously from my birth. I may have eyes but with them, I cannot see”

The Sadist’s expression turned into a sinister grin “What is your name, blessed child?”

“Myrna Cael, Holy Sadist”

“You are of a foreign caste, the tone of your skin is not that of a Vercinoan. Where do you claim your heritage, child?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t the foggiest clue, Holy Sadist. The Lord of Judgement laid his will heavy on my life as I have not met my parents. I was found as abandoned as an infant and raised here in the Sasoroan Chamber, Holy Sadist”

“You are truly favoured, for you bare the virtue of pain from birth”

The Sadist redid his robes and returned to the front of the modest lecture hall. He cleared his throat loudly and with a loud contemptuous sniff, he continued.

“We of Lord Judgement’s Empire are favoured and blessed. Our Ancestors sought to remain loyal to the truth of pain. Our Ancestors averted their eyes in obedience and inflicted upon themselves the deserved penance that our race was born to endure.” He paused, his eyes closed as he retreated into a place of bliss, a faint smile lightened his perpetual frown “O, children of judgement. Heed me when I speak of pain, heed me…” he drew a laboured breath. “Take my words and brand them against the flesh of your hearts. Pain offers a profound sense of clarity to all things. In the suffering of the body, the shackles placed upon our souls will loosen and we are given a glimpse of the freedom that is promised.” He paused again, staring into the arched ceiling, his eyes watering over with a single defined emotion, bliss. As if in dramatic effect he stamped his right foot and bit his lip as the tears spilt over onto his cheeks.

“I remember the first glimpse of that eternal place. My fellow Sadists led me blindfolded into a sanctum hall but it was almost as if I was given a new way to see that day. I was instructed to kneel as they removed my robes and left me with only a cloth around my waist. I heard their footsteps echo out of the large sanctum hall and for a moment I was left kneeling in silence. Some time had passed and their footsteps approached where I kneeled—by then my knees had begun to feel sore. I heard the clanking of chain links being fed through the metal loops bolted on the stone floor. They clasped my wrists and ankles in cold metal and left me again to the silence.

By the time they had returned the heat of the day had begun to leave the stone floor upon which I knelt. The setting sun shone its last rays against my twitching eyelids but there was no warmth on my face. There came the scent of burning coals and the heavy breathing of men under a heavy burden. Then came the scrapping of metal and stone. It was cacophonous and almost nauseating; my spirit recoiled at the dissonance that assaulted my ears but I emboldened my mind to brace against this affront. I was deserving of this discomfort and I reminded myself that I must welcome the pain to come.”

Blood now dripped from his lips as he paused, licking them before continuing

“The cacophony subsided after some time. I loosened my bonds enough for me to stand upright. My knees protested after hours of being in that kneeling position but all things afflicted upon are for us a reminder of the sovereignty of Lord Judgement. My dear, pupils, be ever ready to embrace persecution for it is deserved, destined and just. My recollection becomes a bit challenged here I must admit. I do remember my fellow Sadists bringing the pots of coal to burning infernos, the heat within the hall mimicked the fires of man’s final comeuppance, and I couldn’t resist a smile as the air itself scorched my skin. Then—”

Myrna cocked her head to one side and then the other as she listened to Holy Sadist’s dramatic pause. *This man is all the way gone, his mind is addled by the hands of Judgement itself*

With a deep breath, the Holy Sadist bellowed “I felt them drive the heated metal hooks through my arms and between my ribs. I remember howling Judgement’s name, as the burning scent of my seared flesh filled the room.”

There was a collective look of discomfort as the Holy Sadist’s face contorted into a mess of emotions ranging from horror, pain, euphoria and eventually settling on bliss. His voice dropped low into a hum as he held the last syllable. And in a whisper, he said

“Before I was a Holy Sadist I had been taught to be a masochist in the way of Judgement, I was stripped of more than my clothes. Oh yes, with the partial melting of my flesh, my soul was able to seep through and taste a moment of purity, a moment only the truth of Judgement can offer; the blinding pain wavered my vision and in between those transient moments, my blindfold was removed.

A holy effigy of our Lord Judgement stood before me ready with an intent to consume. The Lord of Judgement himself was not present, at least not in his truest form but I felt his attention on me through the effigy” He cleared his throat, wiping away a few tears “When he looked upon this wretched creature in his pitiful attempt of servitude, I felt it. I felt what I needed to be and the pain that I must endure.

Before me, the effigy rattled and the sound of screeching metal on stone screamed as the face of our Lord rotated within its head. The chest separated from the solar plexus to the neck. I cannot describe what I saw but trust me when I say I felt the greatest pain. The burning forcing of the burning hooks within my flesh felt like a caress to what my eyes witnessed within that gaping maw, it was beautiful. The greatest loss I’d ever experienced, the most wretched sickness, the most heinous transgression against me and yet I felt compelled”

A coldness was left at the end of his recalled encounter with Lord Judgement. The hall had fallen into a stiller sense of silence. Perhaps a well-due response to the perplexing perversions related to them. Myrna sat there with her head still cocked but now with the hint of a questioning expression. Her lips parted for just a moment before slamming shut. Past experiences do well to encourage restraint despite the temptations curiosity brings—no matter how morbid.

“We conclude this lesson for the day, return to your various abodes, and we resume within two sunrises on the 5th hour of the day.” The Sadist gathered up his metal chisel and proceeded towards the far stone wall whilst the pupils sheepishly shuffled out in a hurry. Myrna could hear as he had begun banging the tool against the wall as she was led out of the hall by her fellow hallmate.

“You should consider yourself lucky, I can’t say blessed for Lord Judgement would will that you be punished, thus is his way, whatever god your ancestors called upon smiles on you Myrna” whispered Cino

“I don’t even know the colour of my skin, let alone who my ancestors are and whose feet they kissed” she spat back.

“Believe me, Myrna, you don’t look like us Vercinoans and believe me again,” Cino paused, halting Myrna within the stone hallway. He waited till they were just out of earshot “they worshipped others and it seems they may have some power and they protect you, even within these walls, I just know it.”

“I find that hard to believe because if I could see the expression on your face I am sure it would be nauseating to look at”

Cino gave her a flat stare and began marching her back along the corridor. Myrna stretched her hand till her fingers clumsily trailed the rough walls. She felt the subtle decorative etching and began painting a mental image with her fingertips. Cino lead her through the stone dim-lit corridors, shuffling quickly past other Holy Sadists—all they offered were passing contemptuous glances, fitting.

Myrna smiled every time Cino’s hands trembled a bit more than they usually did whenever one of those Sadists brushed by, she had always found it amusing but never fully understood why. Cino had a naturally nervous disposition, his presence felt like consistent hesitation.