

A Forest Dark Trilogy

BOOK 1
"To Choose The Forest Path"

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Story Summery

If Tomb Raider found herself brought through Dante's Inferno, while following a new lead on the long lost expedition of Percy Fawcett. With ties to the mysterious place she never could have imagined.

What if Emotions Have Mass...?

If emotions have mass then the denizens who find themselves trapped here are weighed down to this place, anchored in whatever plight they found themselves in when becoming enveloped by their emotions. Those who bear the emotional weight of their life can trap themselves here, punishing themselves in their own unique ways depending where on the forest path they became stuck.

A Forest Dark Tell the story of one such place, those unfortunate enough to encounter it, and those infinitely intertwined with it. A dense and mysterious jungle, teeming with life, and very well alive itself. It represents our fictional world's version of Dante's journey through the inferno to our final gate, where book 2 will begin. Our Heroine Dawn Teason, is unwittingly called upon to replace an ancient pair of souls known as the mother and the fathers, these eternal souls were an infinity of souls combined, always lovers, always called as a pair, and always integrated into the eternal souls in a ritual then helped maintain the connection of this place to our reality, and help grow its presences throughout the universe as we know it. Chris and Virginia Beatty were called, but their souls were destroyed in a terrible accident caused by Chris's parents' mysterious past and connection to this place. The Eternal Souls were wiped out and a new First Soul was chosen, and Dawn just happened to be close by the responsibility falling to her shoulders to start this infinitely old cycle anew, but first she must be judged by this place and find her way to the final gate, all the while encountering the strangeness of this place, its dangers, and challenging her sanity as she faces this nightmare on her ascent to the gate. Losing her friends and allies, and following a dead woman, Dawn must grapple with his physical and mental challenge and safely reach the gate to the next part of her story.

Character Timelines

Chris Board Plane @ 11:15 Pm April 6th
Chris Crashes Plane @ 10:15 PM on April 7th
Dawn at Deadhorse Camp Event @ 10:15pm April 7th
(Future) Virginia Watches Plane Crash over ACRN Facility @ 10:15pm April 7th
Juda Watches Crash from ACRN Observatory @ 10:15pm April 7th
(Future) Virginia Wanders into the forest towards ACRN @ 10:15pm on April 7th
Dawn Waits an hour and Drives back to town @ 11:15PM on April 7th
(Future) Virginia takes 2 hours to arrive at ACRN @ 1:30 am on April 8th
(Future) Virginia Enters the Jungle Alone @ 5:00 am on April 8th
Dawn Arrives Back at Analândia do Norte and reports to Sajo @ 5:15am on April 8th

Sajo Leaves to Dead Horse Camp @ 5:30 am on April 8th
Dawn Leaves for ACRN @ 7:30 am on April 8th
Dawn Encounters Debris Trail and Luggage @ 8:30 am April 8th
Judah Final awakens to the point he can call Dawn @ 8:30 am on April 8th
Dawn Gets Call From Juda @ 8:32 am on April 8th
Dawn Arrives at the ACRN Facility @ 9:00 am on April 8th
(Past/Current) Virginia Gets Call about Chris's Death @ 10am on April 8th
Sajo Arrives at Dead Horse Camp and Spends 1 hour looking around @11:30 am on April 8th
Sajo Arrives Back in town @ 6:30pm On April 8th
Sajo Heads Out to ACRN Facility @ 7:00 pm April 8th
Sajo Arrives at Debris Trail and Luggage @ 8pm on April 8th
Sajo Arrives at ACRN Parking Lot @ 8:20 PM

3 Months After Chris's Death
Virginia meets with Tess and talks Jungle Nightmares @ 00:00 am/pm July 7th.
Virginia Goes Back in time to Chris's Crash @ 00:00 am/pm July 25th.

ACT 1 - Beginning of the end.

Chapter 1 - A Forest Dark

TITLE

"The Thing about Legend and Lore is it's all a matter of perspective. Most recount their tales with no lack of personal ego and bias usually from the fear of the moment.

Each tale spun is a mutation of the myth, a slightly different perspective, a different angle of the same lore,. The details always differ. The truth, as is with all things, is always far more unbelievably cosmic in its nature. Our limited perceptions, our words and stories, couldn't possibly do them justice.

So we make do with the terrestrial. The labeling of what we don't understand with the words and imagery we do. It's an important step in understanding, but merely wild theory and absurd speculation to make the impossible, tangible.

Most never take that any further, it becomes like a movie in their mind, something they replay but never invest. And thus a myth is born. But the truth behind the myth, more often than than not, is far more terrifying and wondrous as they are inexplicable."

- Dr. William Beatty.

His father had explored the world over, "The Great Forest Explorer" was not only his nickname, but the title of his encyclopedia series. His preface read almost as a theosophical statement in juxtaposition to the books, more an objective analysis of the forest's powerful connection to science and medicine.

But like Chirs's continued research in his fathers' footsteps, he knew a lot of these powerful connections lay in the local myths and legends that filtered down from a more primal time. He always took a book with him on flights, he hadn't re-read his fathers' work in years, but it was a veritable bible for the Amazon's flora and fauna.

"Boarding Priority passengers for flight 369 from Vancouver YVR to Sao Paulo Brazil. Our flight time is an estimated 26 hrs 33 minutes, with layovers in Mexico City, Bogota, and lastly Cuiabá before reaching our destination. We will arrive at approximately 12:15 am AST on April 7th. Please have your boarding passes and Identification ready."

It was pretty quiet at his terminal, not many tourists hitting the Brazillian state of Cuiaba during the wet season. The open air smelled sterilized, some chemical concoction meant to mask the mixed odors of the weary travellers that fill the massive structure with commerce on the daily.

"Ow!.. fuck, Damnit!"

His finger was caught pinched between his wheel and the aluminum railings coraling the line for priority boarding. It echoed pretty loud off the glass corner of the open ceiling waiting area. Some disapproving scowls from youngsters parent's made him give an apologetic smirk from the low vantage point of his wheelchair.

"Sorry, yeah, just let me move back a bit. Thanks. yeah."

The friendly elderly woman behind reached over her walker and gave a little tug on his chair, rolling it back enough for him to proceed.

"Thanks again."

She smiled against a backdrop of angsty passengers awaiting their turn in que. He was a bottleneck now, everywhere he went.

A striking ginger attendant took notice of Chris Beatty's kind, green speckled hazel eyes, she helped him up and over the ramp into the walkway to the plane. She reminded him of Virginia, his partner and most recently wife.

He had been pretty depressed, so his cardio was not so great. Even the noticeable drop in temperature of the on-ramp didn't stop him from breaking a sweat.

He was usually more well manicured, but a weeks worth of silver speckled scruff had overtaken his defined jawline, it made it itchy when the beads of sweat filtered through the mange. His raven black hair; usually tidy, was a mess and just a little greasy from a day or two of neglect. He had a few grays scattered throughout, he had been through a lot for his age.

He wasn't expected to live past twenty-five, and if it wasn't for his overly obsessive dedication to his research, he and many others probably wouldn't have. Thirty six now he was actually quite fit considering. But he had only been wheelchair bound for a few short months, and he still wasn't accustomed to the cumbersome change.

He rolled up the ramp behind the flight attendants, who helped him up and over the walkway into the plane. His face flushed from the push up the ramp, but he was thankful as it hid his embarrassment. He never was one to rely on others. Not even Ginny.

Virginia Maro, had taken the family name of Beatty. She was a delicately featured ginger goddess, at least to him she was, and nothing could sway that. They were solid. Which made this trip even harder, should he have told her? Would she have believed him?

Without realizing it he had spent a good 30 minutes distracted in his own head, only to jolt back to reality with a nauseating drop in his stomach as the plane disconnected from the comfort of solid ground.

He jostled to attention, a stewardess rushing past with her cart that had snagged his seat. The inflight movie had ended, but he couldn't tell you what it was. A cold meal sat in front of him.

"Something not to your liking sir?"

Her ginger curls dropped down into eyeshot as the stewardess leaned down to check on him. Still foggy he took her arm lifting it to peer at her watch. 10:02 am. It had been twenty three hours, how did he lose twenty three hours and two layovers?

"Sir?"

"Uhh, yeah umm sorry, no nothing thanks. It's fine"

"You sure I don't mind exchanging it for you?"

"Uhhm, ya know what, it's ok I'm just picking at it."

"Okay, well let me know if you need anything else." She started to lead her cart away, back towards the coach.

"Um Actually! Could you tell me.. uhh, did I get off at our last layover?"

"You don't remember?"

"Sorry, I..." he needed a plausible excuse... Click! it came to him.

"I took some pills for the flight, nerves and all"

"Ahh yes, you did seem a little loopy as we lifted you out, you returned right on time to board again!"

"Yeah? Thanks." He twisted back in his seat and stared at the time on the screen embedded in the seat in front of him. Twenty three hours.

He had made this trip before, but something was different and not entirely sitting well with him. He chalked it up to nerves. His doctors did warn him that in his stage a flight could cause all manner of side effects, hallucinations, even be lethal.

But as the flight went on, his concern for his health slipped entirely away. The void it left filled with existential dread, not for himself, but for everyone around him.

With that..

BAM!

The entirety of the plane jolted to a stop, tossing those unfortunate enough not to be seated, all around the cabin.

A breath of silence hung.

Chris thought to himself "We're not moving?"

He couldn't feel the plane, the inertia, the subtle drops and ebbs, nothing.

He turned and looked to the helpful elderly woman seated beside him, seeing her face for only a moment before darkness. The power cut, then popping one by one the lights above their seats crack and fizzle towards the back of the plane.

Peoples' worry turned into panicked chatter when a long screech across metal reverberated inside the cabin. Their chatter dissipated like hot breath in the cool air. Then...

THUD..

THUD...

THUD....

One after another like footsteps digging into the outer fuselage. Step upon step the clawing resonated in Chris's chest until stopping right above him.

Again silence.

His breathing rapid, his pulse pounding, he stared at the cabin ceiling. The crowded plane let out little more than whimpers in their fear. With a ghostly sounding inhale, a strange wisp of black smoke poked through the panels above. Chris narrowed his focus and dug his fingers into his chair.

Another inhale as if gasping a first breath of fresh air from it's ascent up from the underworld. Chris's adrenaline spiked when a loosely defined skeletal hand made of black particulate smoke emerged through the paneling. The plastic burned and bubbled, yellowing around it's grasp. A disfigured ethereal skull with eyes of fractal patterned light emerged, it ghostly inhales he could feel in his own chest.

Chris is no stranger, it knew him, and he it. He didn't understand how, but he knew.

It's breathing matched, his inhales followed its own. From his years of night terrors he felt the same waking paralysis set in, trapped in his mind as he observed the horror's supernal visage

The spectre struggled to pull itself in, contorting in impossible ways to heave itself through the planes' dense fuselage. The tethered smoke that wrapped round its form, pulsed with shocks of internal light, exposing the ghostly ash that gave it hollow bones their density.

A legless smoke like skeletal visage wretched and cried out, filling it's captive audience with its own tortured agony. Their tear soaked eyes could only stare on, frozen. Amid their terror, they felt despair for the entity. A sadness for its suffering.

Gasping and clawing it pulled its form through the panels above. Its smokey spine, like a prehensile tail, grasped around the upper compartments brackets. The cabin smelled cold and metallic, paired with a bouquet of frightened sweat.

Large circular eyes burning like phosphorus shone out like the signal of a lighthouse, a shifting stream of color wrapping round the edge of an intolerably bright epicenter. It floated the wrong side up meeting nose to nose with Chris in his paralysis. Silently, slowly it spun around to meet his gaze.

Chris felt his heart stop, and somehow he knew... he wasn't going to need it anymore. The bright eyes popped the vessels in his, yet his vision stayed sharp. Their audience could only bear witness, quivering in their motionless state.

The whole forest below had grown quiet, the technical marvel of human ingenuity hung helpless against the inexplicable will of the universe. Stuck still in the sky, swallowing the breath of life from all around. It held those within, in a moment broken into an eternity.

The entity twirled its exposed spine down to align itself with Chris's own body. It's back to him now, his head following its movements. He could not feel his breath, his pulse, not even his skin, yet still so aware, more so than any other moment in his life.

Only the occasional creak of the plane under duress permeated the silence. The spectre surveyed its on-lookers, meeting each spectator eye to eye, almost apologetically. Unable to blink, it's intense light dried their eyes, chapping their lids.

It began to slide back first pressing against the resistance of Chris's chest. Pushing through, it strained to merge its form into him. His body compressed back in his seat from the pressure exerted as it entered through him into his flesh.

A black shadow overtook the cabin with the end of its struggle. It disappeared into him, and then... nothing.

The Cabin of frightened souls stuck in their stasis, their bodies pulsing with energy and adrenalin with nowhere to go. The anticipation shrouded them, every second forever in their mind's eye. Closure from this horror is all they yearned for now, and in a flash of light they would have it.

The sudden rush of gravity, an upheaval throwing their bodies to the ceiling. An up draft caught a wing, twisting the plane into a spinning freefall of crashing hellfire down over the forest as the two wings tore from the core.

Pressed to the fuselage at the mercy of momentum, the passengers of flight 369's last images would be of Chris's body, eyes glowing, maw open spewing indescribable light. He floated suspended like an unearthly anchor amidst the plane as it fell around him.

Tearing and shredding the immediate seats next to him, the wreckage spun like deadly leaves in a torrent of wind around him. A spherical shell of moving metal and plastic grew.

One by one the passengers became a bloody accompaniment of debris and flesh. Sheared off layer after layer from the inside of the cabin as the ball of shrapnel cut through them in their supernatural stasis, Chris held still at the expanding spheres center.

The plane tumbled, and tore apart drawn into the event as it plummeted towards the jungle below. a Sphere of blood and metal heated and pulled inward as if anticipating the upcoming and quite immediate stop. The forward cabin and tail fell away crushing down the forest below with force.

Inches from the ground a silent implosion with a gust of wind that rustled the grass and trees. The matter and blood, flesh and metal, crushed together into a red hot orb, a perfect sphere which steamed off the blood from its unusually smooth surface.

Errily, it remained inches above the forest floor. It's hot glow dimming in the night forest. The orange hue hitting the brush nearby faded.

The scalding sphere sarcofogas hung silent.

Chapter 2 - A Letter Lost

The first drops hit the dry cracked surface of the main road into Analândia do Norte, a small farming community south east of, Marcelândia in the Mato Grosso Valley, Brazil.

This summer was hotter than usual, as much as it could be in the Amazon. But that all changed with the tide of the skies above. The world seemed to be throwing everything it had as a blowout before the coming of the dry season.

For those who live here the rain means life, the river swells, it's veins widen into flowing lakes. Life in the jungle flourishes, each drop reaching the forest floor quenches thirsty roots and the cycle begins anew.

Analândia do Norte, was not by any standard developed. The hundred or so residents relied heavily on one another and against all odds had survived as a community surrounded by a fortress of forest.

Heavier and heavier the mid morning drops fell, now practically a series of cascading waterfalls stood between Dawn Teason's vehicle and the small covered balcony across the street from her.

She never wore make-up, the rain would just wash it away from her fair skin. Too bad mother natures' shower didn't give her slightly tangled hair the deep cleansing it needed. But, she wasn't one for the atypical standards of beauty.

She had a strong viking bloodline, and the dark blue eyes to prove it. Her ancestral descent might have accounted for her natural wanderlust. She was not born in the scandinavian north like her forebears', but she was raised in the great white north.

"Ugh.. I used to love rain Florence." She reminisced of the light British Columbian rains she grew up in. Of course in Vancouver the word torrential failed to compare to the deluge of the Amazon Basin.

Gathering up her pack and notebook from the passenger seat, she scavenged through the garbage and mess that lined the floor. Her truck she affectionately called Florence; a somehow still sturdy, offwhite, Defender 110 Landrover, that had definitely seen better days.

The air in Florence was a peculiarly scented mix of lemons and garbage, with a hint of neglect. She pulled from the wreckage at her feet an old chipped plastic clipboard. Hilarious cartoons and sketches scratched atop the logo for ACRN Labs (Amazon Collective Research Network), a research group she came down to the Motto Gasso with over two years prior.

"Ha! Yes!"

She gleefully snatched it up, taking a moment to admire her defaming artwork strewn across it. A glance outward and her glee turned to pout, the rain had hastened, torrential seemed to tame a word to do it justice. That's what she got for staying into another wet season.

With a deep breath she readied herself, cranked open her door with one loud creaking push, and stood up against the power of the pummeling rain. The splatter on the clipboard made it slick, and the bombarding weight of the downpour pushed it from her lightly held grasp, it dropped to the ground.

"Fuck!"

She stood defeated, her platinum hair drenched in one brief moment, cascading down to quickly cover her whole. She stared down frustrated at the ARCN Logo and stomped the plastic paper holder into the mud. Underestimating its flexibility, its arched form snapped back, flicking a fist full of mud up Dawns' chest and across her face.

"Jesus Christ." she muttered to herself, utterly defeated.

A shout from across the street pulled her eyes up to a formless figure who waved through sheets of rain. Their footsteps could be heard through the now river-like surface of the street. Whomever they were, they seemed very comfortable in the rain.

An umbrella opened and raised over Dawns' head. He was a friend, a stern looking brazilian man, face aged with experience and his skin darkened from years under the Amazonian

sun. His uniform donned a name tag, officer Sajo Avila. With just a look, the suggestion to follow drew Dawn along with him across the now flowing street.

"Thanks.. thank you, no no its ok i have it..." She fumbled her pack as he tried to help.

Dawn was always polite, but she could be pushy, especially when it came to her gear.

Declining his assistance she clutched her bag preciously. Her knee raised to perch her pack on her upper leg, she teetered holding her balance on the balcony as the rain pelted the makeshift tin roof above. She dug through the front pouch for some papers and a pen.

In very broken Portuguese

"Hey Sajo, umm where is this place, the umm, the Backpackers Inn?"

She scribbles on a sticky note and shows it to him, a symbol like an hourglass turned sideways, the Local hostels logo.

In native Portuguese "It's farther down, about 3 blocks, take a right, and then drive straight until the road ends and you will see it."

They spoke loudly to combat the rain, Sajos' words were not inspiring as she looked back towards the shape of Florence through the deluge. It was in that moment when her mind struggled to commit to the slog across, that in an instant the rain stopped. Almost as if it was her will alone who tamed it.

She stood shocked for a moment, the quiet was strange. She leaned out from under the covered balcony leading with her hand. She moved her face out ever so slightly and could see the sun, it had poked through as if to greet her personally. The warm press of light was nice, but she knew she had little time in this moment of stillness, and she rushed across the puddles to her forever truck Florence.

She was waived off by her guide and she pulled down the street to her destination.

Not much was to be said about this hostel, it didn't even have a name. It was a typical stay for these remote locations, but that being said.. At least they had internet.

She had been to this town many times before, she knew a few of the locals and would normally stay with them, but most had left for opportunities of the larger hubs. She planned to be here for a few weeks, she had some questions to ask, and one really big favor.

The building itself; like most here, was a concrete box. Front decking was added made from local wood, and an old vinyl and aluminum overhang barely protected those below from the regular heavy rains.

Some of the building's decay had been patched with mud and grass, and much of the deck jutted with grass and vines with a layer of soft moss lining the edges for a vibrant green outline.

Her room was tiny, just a bunk on a dirt floor and a fold down table that was so close it would overhang the bed. But, she had made it home base. She used her bed as a seat, her eyes reflected her notes and research on her laptop.

Sticky notes, articles, sightings and reports, all stuck together with an intricate weaving of thumbtacks, cheap clear tape and some colorful paper clips for good measure.

Strange symbols, rituals into voodoo, judeo christin rights, theosophy. Things she'd rather most people didn't see her obsessively pouring over at the local caffeine dispensary.

She had a fascination with a man, who had a fascination through his family line, that all had a fascination with the occult. A man who had Disappeared with his son into the amazon jungle decades ago in search of a lost city he called "Z".

She was determined to crack his mystery, like many before her whom all failed. But like everyone cursed with the yearn of exploration, of being a pioneer, she too believed she was "the one" who would do it.

A knock on the edge of what would be a door, she pulled back the privacy curtain.

"Si?"

A young girl, the daughter of the hostels owner, hands her a tray with some food and a package that was delivered for her earlier.

"Ah, yes thank you"

She gave the girl a tip for her mom and a smile, and the little one adorably covered her face and scurried away.

Sucking down a few pieces of a mango, she sat back in her bunk, and began to peel back the brown paper that sealed in whatever treasures her old friend Juda had sent her.

Inside were two letters, one unopened and old, with a wax seal. She pulled back the fresh loose sheet of paper that accompanied it and began to read.

"Hey Dawn, I hope we can still grab that drink, let me know when you will be closer to the Mato Grosso again! We have been seeing some pretty crazy things with these tribals, some I can't even begin to explain. Asked around for you and amazingly you were right. Well I guess not amazingly since you always were. At least you thought so haha.

Anyways, the older women of the tribe gave me this, one said it was found on a corpse deep inside the jungle, farther than most ever gone, even for them. I didn't believe you at first, but the seal? It has to be him right?!

I also included the rough location of the bottom of this letter. But don't go wandering into the woods without me, this has got me super intrigued!

Talk soon."

- Juda

She pulled the old letter close to inspect it, the dim lighting in her room made it difficult. She scrounged for her headlamp, and flicked it on. The letter lit up revealing the wax seal of Col. Percy Fawcett. Without a doubt, this was it.

Carefully she peeled it back attempting to preserve as much as she could. Sliding out the leaflet inside, her heart pushed down into her belly and she folded it back.

It began with a quote.

"Midway upon the Journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark
For the straightforward path had been lost."

From her research Col. Percy Fawcett's lost expedition into the amazon, was rife with religious allegory and elements of theosophy that some believed Fawcett held as fact. It was interesting to see a man whose ties to theosophy's doctrine that, "there is no religion higher than truth." would be quoting Dante's descent.

It went on...

"Words spoken of the first steps on the Journey of life that through to death found absolution and salvation, and not something normally associated with the heart of the Amazon rainforest.

But interpretation is a funny thing, and I now realize it is unlikely that the mysteries of our world, our existence, can even be understood. For their complexity is far from our understanding and to think otherwise was foolish.

My interpretation of Dante's words has changed since I first read them. Their meaning, more tangible than ever. I feel that, like Dante, even my words cannot convey the realities of what I have witnessed, and the cost it has demanded.

This jungle is hell, I am convinced of that now. This Forrest brings life, this Forest is death. It has been 3 weeks following the winding path of the River Rio Sao Francisco at least I think it is, I can't trust anything anymore.

As I walk like Dante through the forest path, followed by the widows lost, I begin to truly understand his descent into this madness. The truth I find becomes far more wondrous and terrifying with every step I take.

I miss you my darling, I lament my leaving you, I should never have brought Jack. Now without him I do not think I can cope. I can only hope that this will not be my last letter...

May we see each other again" -PHF.

Col. Percy Fawcett.

"Holy shit".

Chapter 3 - Life, Love & Loss

The lab was quiet, The commute through Vancouver to their ACRN headquarters was a slog if she didn't leave real early.

Virginia sat distraught at her desk, her throat was tight, she swallowed to alleviate the tension before her next words.

"Yes.. I understand."...

It didn't matter what was being said, Virginia's mind was racing. Waves of anxiousness washed over her, each followed with cold clammy skin. She was in shock.

Her caller had hung up minutes before her phone slipped from her hands. She had been staring off into the depths of the tile floor. Her tears, although reserved, still trickle one by one down to the floor. With a deep sharp breath, her body gasping for oxygen, she peered out through the labs translucent door.

Her eyes drew in their focus to the writing on the glass

Dr. Chris Beatty & Dr. Virginia Mora.

They still hadn't changed her name to his on the door, but she didn't care. Infact seeing his name, that's when it hit her. Chris was dead.

Their lab was founded by Chris's parents. They set up in Vancouver for tax incentive purposes, and the proximity to the airport as their research had taken them all over the world in search of its forest secrets. The foundation for the "Great Forest Explorer" series.

She had helped maintain this center with Chris after the disappearance of his parents. It was years later before the two finally admitted their desires. The lab had never felt as empty as it did at this moment. She had held out hope after the plane disappeared, but the confirmation of its crash meant it was truly over.

It had taken weeks to finally hear back about his plane, she spent most of it in a daze. Each morning a new nightmare to wake up to, each night new nightmares to lay with in her empty bed. She was losing sleep, exhausted all the time, it was killing her.

"Hello Ginny"

Virginia looked up from her phone as Tessa greeted her. She barely remembered the drive over from the lab, more to say she didn't remember at all.

"Tess?"

"Come on in"

"What?"

She shook it off, her exhaustion quickly draining what energy her adrenaline shot into her system.

She had a hard time with therapists before, but she liked Tesses' office couch better than her own bed, she even fell asleep on it once. She sat down and slumped over face first into the pillow.

"Rough night again?"

"Mmmfmm hrmm ferrr mmm"

"Try that again..."

Virginia lifted her head from the pillow she was so comfortably suffocating herself in. Her eyes were always heavy, Tess's office was bright and open, it usually kept her awake.

"Another goddamn dream, nightmare... I dunno just weird."

She stuffed her face back into the pillow.

"Mmrrrmhrm frrr mememm"

"Right. Well I can't give you any higher dose, and I wouldn't want to change your meds without first tapering you off."

Ginny sat herself up slumped back down pulling her legs up. She clutched a pillow to her chest, she was finally comfortable being vulnerable with Tess.

"I just want one night. Just one!"

"We still haven't talked about him, I really do think it will help-"

"No."

She was sharp and concise. Her call this morning made the wound fresh again. This was a setback for Tess's treatment, but she was her friend, and so was Chris.

"Okay, well let's start with the dreams again, where were you this time?"

"The Jungle... and I heard whistling. It sounded distant, but I felt like whatever it was making was right behind me, beside me, or... it was me. Like I said.. weird."

"So you hear the whistle, what are you seeing?"

"It's just forest. It's like it's day because I can see the sun barely piercing the canopy, but the forest itself is dark. But not like normal dark. It's like it's night time, I can only see a few meters into it."

"Are you scared?"

"No, not of the jungle, not even scared really. I'm sad. deeply, agonizingly so."

"Sounds about right, wouldn't you say?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Did something happen Ginny?"

She debated telling her about the phone call, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it yet. She started retreating into her head obsessing over it, it drew her into her panicked state again. Something Tess had to continuously react to in her treatment.

"Alright alright, you're in the jungle, Anything else unusual?" she diffused her obsessive thoughts pulling her back to their conversation.

"Huh? uh, yeah. Everywhere I look it's like a flash light illuminates the area, even so it doesn't seem to lighten anything, the light is just sucked in between the branches"

"You said since your last increase you have noticed some missing memory or time?"

"Three times now actually. a few minutes here or there at first but the last one was hours."

"Could you have just fallen asleep?"

"At first I thought so, but then I noticed I had made my lunch for work, and apparently marked 3 papers. when I finally came to."

"And you don't remember doing any of it?"

"Mmm Mmm" she nodded no.

"Are you aware of the pattern?" Tess flips through her notes.

"What pattern?"

"That makes... 1,2 ,3...6!"

"6?"

"Of the 12 sessions we have talked about your nightmares and dreams, 6 of them have been focused in the jungle. In fact, the last sequential 3 have all been."

"Is that significant?"

"Probably not, just noticed the pattern. Is it significant to you?"

"Significant to me?" she replayed her words over in her head. It stuck with Ginny all day, why is the jungle a recurring theme? She and Chris had traveled there many times, and its flora and fauna was the focus of their research, was it that simple?

But it was becoming different, a lucidity to her dreams that felt... tangible.

A sudden sinking feeling overwhelmed her at that thought which finally snapped her from her daydream. How did she get home? When had she poured that glass of wine? She didn't even remember leaving Tess's office...

"This sleep deprivation is getting to me" she justified her lost time in her head.

She was determined to sleep, her aide tonight would be two bottles of a cheap red.

It always started in a similar fashion, always with rain. Nothing visual, just rain, then the smell of rain, or more over the scent of fresh rain on the forest floor.

The sound is soft, trickling. It grows. A sensation of a warm dense moisture washes across the entirety of her body, like stepping through a wall of heated mist.

Flashes of red, her eyes flickered behind the lids, light just beyond. But she knows if she opens them, she will be inviting all manner of dreams and nightmares.

Which will it be tonight?

Sitting up in a hurried state she leaned over the edge of her bed expelling a mouthful of bile. Her nightmare slipped away to her subconscious, but what lingered was a sense of terror like many of the nights before.

She was breathing heavily, her diaphragm sore. Flashes of the jungle floor made her shake her head uncontrollably to push them away. Her mouth tasted like dirt triggering another flash, her hand felt the touch of stone and metal. Her mouth went dry from a warm breath of smoke and cinder that brought about a strong sense of the past relived, de-javu, and then a shrill shriek that woke her.

She reached for her lamp, flashing as the filament ignited within the bulb, again she was overtaken, her vision of a great bright light full of color its center an orb of shadow like an eclipse, she couldn't make out its full form before the light flashed and threw her back. She caught herself on the side table nearly falling out of her bed.

Nauseated she stumbled to her ensuite. A cold splash, refreshing, woke her fully. She tipped a bottle of antacids into her palm, and threw the chewable to the back of her mouth, crunching down and swallowing the shards.

She had never had acid reflux before, maybe it was the stress, maybe it wasn't reflux at all. Either way she was wide awake now.

4:12am.

It was like her alarm clock was mocking her with it's stupid red numbers. This was her life since he died, frustrating didn't begin to cover it. At least she could have a coffee,

"Comfort AND caffeine" she thought to herself. Just what she needed, especially if she was going to get some work done. Didn't take her long to be dressed and out the door. The twenty minute drive to the lab would let the caffeine sink in.

Chapter 4 - Dead Horse Camp

"April 7th, April 7th....April goddamn 7th."

Dawn scratched the date one last time, scribing it onto the last of the forms she had accumulated in her expedition planning efforts. Bribes, tolls, certificates, approval, there was always a palm to grease and a lease on her life to sign away should anything happen.

"You look like hell." Juda Laughed, he knew what buttons to press. He was tall, and a little lanky, his long dreaded hair matched his lengthy beard. He had a personal musk to him, even through the deodorant, but in the humidity here it wasn't all that useful.

He had his hair back today, his black rimmed glasses slid between the matted hair as he placed them back on his face from a good old t-shirt wipe. It actually made them worse.

"I thought convincing you guys to come along would be the hard part, but this red tape... I'll say this, a life of crime free of bureaucracy... kinda has a certain romance to it now." her smile leaked through her exhaustion, the last two weeks organizing had been non stop.

"Hey it came together though" Juda slumped down cross legged on her bed next to her in the cramped little space. He had a tendency to push into her personal space, She couldn't ever tell if he was aware of his intrusion.

"Yeah you can be optimistic for the both of us, while I have a short nap..."

"Well nap in Florence, we gotta head out, I still gotta' head up to ACRN for my gear. Plus you gotta' drop those papers off and grab our permits."

"Fuck, can I have a coffee first?"

Juda handed her his.

"Get yer ass in gear. Calo's meeting us in town, everyone else is already setting up camp."

"Fine."

The shadows moved over her closed lids, a slight ache behind her eyes each time the sun returned. She may not be asleep, but she will take what she can get before their departure into the jungle.

Florence skidded to a stop, Juda was never a careful driver. Dawn had a moment to react, catching her travel mug before it laced her in her favorite caffeinated brown drink.

"Sorry.. sorry." Juda spoke as he stepped out onto the shaded street. He had parked Florence under the cool relief of the tree tops. He had already suffered Dawns blinding fiery wrath once for giving Florence a tan.

"Don't apologize to me, tell Florence."

"Sorry Bud. Ow!" He slapped the hot hood, it singed his palm like a sarcastic quip to his apology.

"Ha ha! You tell him Florence!"

"Sometimes I think you love that car more than me!"

"More than anyone actually, you're not special."

Juda laughed on the surface. Dawn as usual took no notice of his internal yearning, he never had the confidence to tell her. His eyes drawn to her perky youthful booty, swinging on loose hips. Her baggy cargos' couldn't hide her fit form.

"Be right back!" She yelled back to him as she stepped out into the street. A small cargo van nearly slammed into her at slow speed, she laughed it off and apologized, the driver waved her off.

She smiled back to Juda

"I'ma grab a coffee, Calo should be here soon. Meet you back here?" He gestured to the small coffee cart up the street.

"Yep!"

He lingered for a moment, catching himself in a torrid of less than professional thoughts.

She grappled with the door handle for a few moments, it seemed locked, which was confusing considering the open sign in the window. She peered through the glare, startled by the weathered man in an officers uniform who guided her to her accommodations. He opened the door.

"Sajo!, ola!"

He rarely smiled, but he'd at least try when Dawn was around. He knew Dawn for a while now, and she was genuine, he liked that.

"Ola Mrs. Teason."

She followed him in, and he pulled her bags from behind the counter.

"All in order, you have your papers si?"

She handed over an envelope haphazardly stuffed with crumpled papers and forms. He shuffled through them taking little time to be scrupulous. Dawn dug through the baggage and gear taking stock of her checklist.

"Everything is here except a flare gun."

"Si, si... in the med kit."

"Ahha! nice. ok! I ... I think that's it!"

Sajo Hands her a dry bag containing all her identification & permits. Handing it to her she grips it, he holds tight.

"You know you're all alone out there si?. We cannot help you in any way once you leave that campsite..."

"I do, isn't that why you had us sign our lives away?"

His seriousness cut her sarcasm right down. A moment was shared as he stared into her soul as if judging her. He let go of her papers.

"I get it. I do." She reassured him with much more sincerity.

"Thanks!"

He could barely hear her as she disappeared behind the closed door to his office.

Juda was leaning on Florence, browsing his phone, Calo pulled up across from him exiting the ACRN company Jeep. Dawns drum roll on Florence's hood grabbed both their attention.

"We good?" Juda tossed her the keys to Florence

"We are god damn good!" She said with conviction.

"Calo your riding with Dawn"

"Actually your driving Dawn... This Dawn is tired."

"Dawn of a new day" Juda smirked with intent.

"Uhhh, so bad." She had heard nearly every dawn pun imaginable.

She tossed Calo the keys, they hit his chest and dropped to the ground. He didn't even make an attempt to catch them, he stood just staring down at them.

"Hustle up Calo, I'm getting a nap in."

Calo being a fresh face to their company looked to Juda, Dawn was not a part of their team at ACRN, not since before his time at least. He wasn't sure what to make of her orders.

"You heard the woman, She's in charge!" He chuckled "Heh, Good luck Kid."

"What's That Supposed to mean?" Calo inquired, not sure he even wanted an answer.

"Yeah What's that supposed to mean?" Dawn quipped with a mischievous grin, mockingly insulted.

Juda's grin grew wide "Nothing." He winked at her, the door to the ACRN Jeep closed behind him.

Florence sagged and bounced under their weight as Dawn and Calo settled in for a long drive.

"There, I believed, lay the greatest secrets of the past yet preserved in our world of today. I had come to the turn of the road; and for better or worse I chose the forest path." She quoted Percy Fawcett as a send off.

"Think Fawcett regretted his decision?" Juda leaned out the driver side window of his jeep.

"That depends on what he found out there.."

"What he found decades ago..."

"We found his letter didn't we?"

"And again, you're always right. Okay, see you at camp in the morning. Be packed and ready!"

"Don't make me wait!"

Juda Slapped the side of his jeep and pulled away.

"Ready?" Calo put Florence into gear.

"I doubt it." she replied with her sarcastic half cocked grin.

Florence had some torque, the acceleration pushed them back into their seats and they tore off along the dirt road. Dawn burned a hole through her journal staring at Percy's last letter taped to the inside of it's cover, the words became blurred as her exhaustion caught up with her and she fell asleep to the familiar, nurturing rock of Florence's suspension.

The long and beautiful drive went unnoticed behind her lids.

"Just Let her sleep.. Here help me unpack."

Dawn was on the cusp of sleep, lucid enough to hear Calo, but her head swayed back into her dreams. Curled up on the passenger seat, She had wrapped herself up in Judas' jacket and laid back to rest. Even their clumsy removal of the gear from Florence didn't rouse her enough to pull her out of her semi dream state.

It was dusk when they arrived, her tent had been set up for her, but she was now sprawled adorably across to the driver's seat encapsulated in Judas' large jacket like a cocoon. She needed rest, she always over exerted herself, and the jungle takes a heavier toll day to day than the comforts and luxuries of home. She rolled over and drifted.

The dark of night overtook the valley. The camps perimeter was outlined by the heated light of the fire. Even in the cool of the night it was wet. The air was like steam closest to the central fire.

The team had surrounded the sleeping area with their jeeps, to protect the tent inside the ring. Florence was parked facing directly towards the fire to fill the hole closest to what few would consider a road.

It was the reflection on Florences' head lamps that first drew suspicion, Calo turned to inspect the flash that had blinded him for a moment. Another flash and he turned when their botanist Marco in his half cut mumbling manner, stammered a few steps forward pointing into the illuminating bush.

"Que?.."

A flash of light here, occasional noise there, but nothing to really wake her. Dawn always slept pretty deeply when she was in Florence, nothing her mild mannered nerds from the ACRN crew could do would rouse her..

But the gunshot did.

Instant flash of cold sweat as anxiety set in, a sudden state of fight or flight overwhelmed.

She sat awkwardly up only to make out the silhouettes of Calo and the team against an indescribably colorful light. The team's details were barely visible, like stick figures against the anomalies intensity. She dropped down and held her phone up, her eyes couldn't see but her camera could.

It wasn't the light that brought on the dread, but the strange silence, no birds, nor crickets, no water flow, nor fire crackling. She worked down the list of what she could make out on the screen, and the subsequent audible sounds she should be hearing, and nothing was aligning.

She could hear one thing, a very distant ringing, almost a whistle but more melodic. It sounded far away, but felt as if it was being whispered directly into her ear. All she could utter to herself was.

"Strange..."

She heard that, but her voice, like a trigger, caused the light to flash, blinding her completely. She was forced back in the cab, rolling back over the e-brake. The force decoupled it and she felt the inertia of Florence as he began to roll.

A deep growl, unnatural and haunting accompanied the forceful flash, echoing as Florence rolled backwards over the embankment, slamming to a stop into the ditches basin. She was strewn across, her feet in the driver seat, and as the shift in gravity took hold she was tossed up her head hitting the steering wheel ahead, and a sharp pull back dropped her back into the seats.

Florence was tipped back in the ditch. Breathless, she felt her consciousness slip away... April 7th flashed in her mind again, not the start to her expedition she was expecting.

Chapter 5 - Limbo

A light crunch of small pebbles beneath the tires of Virginia's eerily silent tesla echoed throughout the concrete conclave of cars. The drive had made her drowsy, caffeine be

damned. Sluggishly she pulled herself from the vehicle, her foot touching what she expected to be solid ground.

"Shit!"

Something squashed beneath her feet. She paused to look down to discover what heinous sludge had smeared beneath her footfall.

"What the hell?" Her head shook in disbelief, a soft patch of grass cradled her foot. Not the compact concrete floor her foot was expecting. Fixated on it, her eyes followed the path of green out past the first concrete pillar, where a vast forest stood silent before her.

Something in the distance, a light? No two lights... they were drifting closer. A crash through the canopy above, a winding shadow looms overhead, and an object hits the forest floor. A few steps forward and she made out a book, bound in leather. It was in her next step she remembered the glowing lights, which had now gone.

She could see her breath as she looked into the dark of the forest ahead. Things grew very still. She felt herself lift from the ground and pull away from her own body, looking back to herself detached and horrified.

"Don't turn around" She thought to herself, her body began to spin as if hearing her and spiteing her command.

Pulled inward, she regressed back to her now frozen body, She shuddered, her eyes watered from two intense lights ringed with swirling color that locked with her glare .

Her breath shallowed as a skeletal maw began to take shape beneath the two lights, its form coalesced before her. Its smokey bone-like fingers rose to grip her throat, burning the flesh, the smell stung her eyes. Its spine wrapped around her, crushing the air from her. Her feet left the ground as it drew her closer, and then... she dropped.

A sharp gasp, crisp morning air filled her chest as she gripped her car's open door for balance. Her eyes darted surveying the empty car park as a semblance of composure took hold.

"7:43 what the?" She must have fallen asleep, right? All the problems with the statement began to pile up, her logical mind couldn't coalesce a straight and obvious answer, and it filled her with dread.

Anxious at the thought of losing her mind. she tried to shake it off. She took no notice of the muddy prints she left behind as she entered the stairwell.

The elevator doors always opened right in front of Chris's office, her daily reminder. She had pictured herself smashing it all, torching it all, destroying it all in painfully creative ways. His legacy left behind a constant ache, never fading, always present.

She attempted to hurry past in avoidance as she usually did, but each step away from the door brought out a stronger nauseating sensation, as if driving a car over a quick dip. She steadied herself against his door, it's latch unhinged and she fell through.

"OOF!" she felt her back crack as she hit the floor, a sound usually reserved for her chiropractor. She lifted herself using the desk as a prop, she raised to her knees.

The sun had hit the side of the building illuminating the room through the slitted blinds. The cabinets which lined the back wall layered in books and papers, included a small leather bound journal that tensed her throat, tension not even her attempted swallow could relax.

She pulled up and around the desk and reached for the book, stopping as her tips approached its tanned exterior. This cannot be, she had never seen this before. How could she have possibly seen it in her waking dreams? And yet as impossible as it is, here she sits a touch away.

Its soft casing slid it into her hands gently, she pressed it between her palms and took a breath in deeply. The cover pulled back a few pages strapped under an elastic sewn into the book, they fluttered a puff of air into her face as they elegantly flipped down. It smelled like him, it was nice. It was terrible. She hated it.

The last page to settle, the title page, Chris's name and contact info scribed in his barely legible printing.

A date, 2017, almost ten years before they met.

She leafed through. It had photos of tribals, drawings and markings, strange dried plants and herbs pinned to pages with notations and theories.

Deeper and deeper it became a collection of strange iconography and images depicting all manner of occult-like creatures. Much of them conformed to some legend or myth from stories the world over.

She stopped on an entry

"This is my 6th time wandering into the jungle, the Sa-Hau-Hei have again found me. They've gone so far as to set up a hut for whenever I return. I cannot explain the loss of time. 'Things are not in order' is what Sam'Ouia said, at least I think he said, their language isn't like the other tribes.

They guided me through another journey, I thought they were giving me ayahuasca, but the symptoms are not at all the same.

This time a deer headed entity and its counterpart took me through to the vallys' edge. I peered from the edge of the massive cliff face into a deeper valley below. At its distant heart

a fiery mass of desert, bombarded by the night sky, like stars falling to earth in explosions of color and light.

I meant to ask them, but realized I was once again alone, my surroundings faded and I awoke the next morning with a wicked hangover.

I'll hitch hike back into town again. I was apparently cognizant enough in my daze to bring a sat phone with me into the jungle this time, I've decided to leave it here in case. Something tells me I'll be back.

I dunno, I feel like, if anything ever happened, I feel as though this is where I would return. Like an anchor in my journey, a spiritual north star."

She didn't even notice she had erupted into tears, not until the ink in the corner of his notes became blotched. He had returned to that forest, it took him from her. His words could fill her with false hope. She couldn't even begin to entertain the idea.

Months of therapy, Tess had worked so hard with her too. But she was right, she never talked about Chris with her, maybe she should have, or maybe she didn't need to. Maybe Chris left her everything she needed.

Chapter 6 - Dead Horse Camp

Everything was black.

It had only been 5 minutes but Dawn was panicking, no one was responding to her cries , not one. A few small explosions and the sound of fire elevated her fears, more so when the first wave of heat hit.

Her senses were going haywire trying to re-adjust. The "where am I?" came into her mind first. Feeling around she got hold of the familiar stick shift of Florence. It was comforting but not her focus.

Getting her bearings she unlatched the door and fell backwards out onto the thin layer of mud. She felt the gash in her shoulder now, not too painful, that was until she reached to rub the soreness and her finger slipped inside the wound.

"GAHHH!" It was not good.

"Shit... okay..okay think..."

She was on her hands and knees now feeling her way across the dirt and grass towards where she assumed the campsite lay. It wasn't the same as night time, the darkness was complete. Her body was in reality, her mind was in a void.

Hand over hand she felt through the mud and debris around her.

“OW, FUCK!” Her hand seared in an instant as it grasped a scalding rock from the ember filled fire pit.

She sat in tears, holding her hand outstretched in the cool night air. She was trying to process what might have happened. She occasionally called out, her head pressed into her arms, which crossed her knees.

A leak of light streaked across her vision, and another, with each tear that fell more and more. Her vision was returning, but the aftermath she would behold was not something anyone would want to see.

The camp was entirely rubble, poor Florence dented and scarred on the one side tipped back into the ditch. The smoldering bodies of her team stand amidst the scorched earth. The ground depicted a hot and heavy blast radius in one direction, outward from the fire pit, towards her people.

Disfigured and contorted, they stood where they perished, Calo bore the brunt. Everything natural had been burnt up, but their gear, their casings, their luggage, although strewn about from the blast, not a scorch mark marred their surface.

Her whole body was heavy with grief, weighted were her steps, with each toward a decayed Calo bringing her closer to her knees. The gravity overtook her.

She sat next to his remains, his features gone but the shape of him preserved in the dark red ash. She was afraid to touch them. They looked delicate, like a sculpture made of crimson dust. His hand clutched a camera, her camera. She just stared at it considering. Would the answers there be worth it?

She couldn't bring herself to take it, just stare. The rain began again, each drop hit the ash figures, melting them down drop by drop, slowly they would begin to crumble like wet sand. Calo's ashen hand fell under the camera's weight with the first drops that hit him.

It startled her, hitting the ground just before her feet. She took it up teary eyed, even in her suffering she was still curious, it was her nature. It was still recording. She stopped it, hesitated and then hit play. She Jerked back, the video began with the gunshot.

“It's probably just some animal” Calo's voice clear over his fumbling of the camera.

Amidst their banter, his camera came to focus on the bush opposite the camp, a light was streaming through, moving across the shot slowly. A hellish gasping shook the tree's when Calo's flicked on the flash lighting up the verge. The light from the tree's started towards the camp.

“THE HELL THAT'S AN ANIMAL” Jona their guide knew this jungle, his rifle had scoped nearly every danger in the wilds, and this was not one of them, this was very different.

At first two lights, like beams from a car on a misty road, protruded through the thick brush. The light was directional, surveying the camp as they moved. The forest lights looked

one by one to each of their faces. Calo was silent but she could hear his swallowed, erratic breath, they all seemed paralyzed in the presence.

The Lights intensity grew emerging from the thicket entering the camp perimeter as they watched like statues in their fear. The entity spilled over with color and light as it rose up above their campfire and just floated, below the fire died down snuffing itself out. On the fires last flicker the ethereal beings' smoke-like skeletal visage had come together, its form and shape now recognizable.

One at a time a pulse of electric light from its' eyes slowly threaded through the moist air to meet those of her team, entering their retinas as they stood motionless against it's invasion. One by one their jaws dropped, expelling an intoxicating collage of light and color.

When it came to Calo, it seemed as he peered through the camera's flip out screen, the light traveled through the lens, extending from the screen into his bloodsoaked retinas. The creature exploded with light, the fire below erupted and fizzled out in an instant, the spectre gone.

Embers crackled as the moon sat high in the now still shot. The stars were clear, even bright on the screen. She spared no expense for this low light model after all. She sat still in contemplation watching in disbelief. The sounds of the natural forest returned, the ashen remains stood still in frame as if paused. She could hear herself on camera a few minutes later. She shut it off, she knew the rest.

She retreated to the comforting embrace of Florence's tipped cab and locked herself in. The rain had once again begun pelting hard against Florences' roof. Her camera pointed towards her on the passenger seat across from her, she felt almost as if it was replaying the video directly to her mind, shooting an uncomfortable twitch through her body.

The rain, as it always does, had washed the proverbial slate clean, whatever remained of her friend's corpses, washed away like ashes spread on the river. The ground was too wet to burn, the fires choked and died out before the mornings' first light.

She waited alone in the safety of Florence's metal shell for a few hours expecting Juda to show up, but nothing. Every sound suspicious, every shadow a threat, her paranoia had taken the lead now. She couldn't stay here.

"Quarter after ten" She thought. The white digital numbers on Florences' radio obliged in telling her the time. It was a four hour drive back to Analândia do Norte,. Hopefully Juda was there.

"One thing at a time" she told herself. First things first, she had to pull Florence out of the ditch before the rain collected and drowned him. She was determined not to lose another friend today.

Her mechanical counterpart lurched and squealed against the dirt and mud. Finally the tires found grip and locked into their accent. Florence clambered up and out of the shallow ditch onto the dirt road.

His lights spewed over the distraught camp, the large puddle of blood ash water reflected back at her as a reminder. She jerked Florence's wheel and turned to leave skidding to a stop as a panic attack overcame her.

She stared into her rear view mirror a long while catching herself from a cascade of freefalling emotions before finally calming herself. She pulled away feeling as if she were abandoning her friends, which was quickly overcome with the feeling as though something was watching her, and based on last night, anything was possible.

Florence lurched to the left as she rounded the corner back into Analândia do Norte, a four hour return drive and she still wasn't thinking straight, what could she even tell Sajo? She felt light headed, she didn't realize how abundant her panic was, she had begun to hyperventilate.

She came to a hard stop, Florence rocked back and forth for a moment, it was comforting. Head down on the wheel, another downpour, the sky her eyes, the land below her muddy cargo pants.

A swell of emotion; panic, fear, sadness, terror, she hadn't really slept which made it that much worse. Usually she had some defense against the tides of emotion that fill us in our daily lives, but her nerves were frayed, her conscious and subconscious in overdrive, she couldn't hold it back any longer.

She just quietly sobbed, the occasional stuttered breath shook the tears loose from her face. The outburst quelled her bubbling emotions somewhat, enough to let her inquisitive mind take control.

The ghostly visage snuffing out the fire, whose eyes burned through her team turning them to dust. Was this Magic? The wrath of god? She was a pretty skeptical person, and she needed answers, not just to satiate her curiosity, this was something more... primal.

Her breathing had calmed, the throbbing throughout her body slowed. A few deep breaths and she felt in control again.

"BLECH!!!"

Florence's Door whipped open just in time to avoid her stomach's contents, which splashed into the grass below. Maybe control was too strong a word. She heaved and spat, wiped her mouth, and put Florence into drive.

Florence's headlights barely cut through the rain, redirected by the heavy sheets like a prism. They pulled up to Sajo's office just as he was heading inside, she still hadn't figured

out what she was going to say, but it was important she seemed panicked. She thought it strange she even said that to herself, she WAS panicked.

It was an awkward feeling witnessing something unbelievable, she overwhelmed wanting to tell her story, but the mixed feeling of paranoia at what others will think loomed. She wanted to find out what happened for herself, which left her one choice.

“SAJO!... SAJO!” She called out with urgency, His key had jammed in the old lock of his office as it did regularly, he looked up from his fiddling.

In native Portuguese

“Mrs. Teason... Wait, Teason?!”

“Sajo, Sajo, Please you have to help. I.. I fell asleep last night in Florence, things started flashing, fires and something exploded, I don’t know...”

“Whoa Whoa, Dawn, please, Dawn, slow down.”

“THEIR GONE SAJO!, They’re just gone! They just... they’re gone...” the weighted reality set in.

He grabbed her trembling shoulders, she was to the core, terrified.

She welcomed the smell, a dark roast, freshly brewed, bit of cream and some honey. Her hands were trembling but not enough to spill.

In native Portuguese “Jesus Dawn, I’ve never seen you like this...”

She sipped her drink, burning her lips but she found the sensation nice, distracting from her racing replays of the night prior. He had guided her in and sat her down.

In native Portuguese

“Come on Dawn, Talk.”

“I don’t really know. I just woke up, I was alone, everyone had just-”

She trailed off, processing her next carefully spoken words. She debated back and forth, before settling on her answer.

“Everyone was gone.”

In native Portuguese “As in they had left without you?”

“No they were just gone. their packs, their equipment , tents and vehicles, still at camp, but I was utterly alone.”

“Did you call the facility and check in? or Dr. Beatty? Maybe they are playing a joke on you?”

"NO THEY-"

She cut herself off. She wanted to justify it as some elaborate prank, that would be much easier than the reality of it. But Sajo was right, she needs to call Juda.

"Yeah.. maybe" She said knowingly.

"You'd better find out first before I put together a search and rescue. We don't have much in the way of resources here."

"Yeah, sure... Can I use your phone?"

He pulled his chair out for her, grabbed the phone and plunked it down in the middle of his desk. The radio in the other room drew him out, closing the door behind him to give her some privacy.

An old dial phone, plastic yellowed, it's cloth cord covering frayed, stared her down as it sternly held its ground on the hardwood surface of Sajo's desk. Cranking the dial round and round one number at a time was arduous. It rang... and continued to ring. No Answer.

An audible "ding" when she dropped the receiver back to its holster.

"Shit." She hesitated, her and Dr.Beatty hadn't talked since she left ACRN. It wasn't exactly amicable.

Sajo had the latest model smartphone, this monstrosity on his desk... she could tell he was mad at her, now she wondered how mad Chris was going to be. Her fingers hovered over the dial hesitantly.

The door to Sajos office whipped a blast of air past her as he headed to the door.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Dawn Called after him.

"Wait back in your room when you're done, I'm going up to the campsite now. I'll let you know ok? I have to go!" The door took an extra tug to close behind him, and again she sat alone, the daunting rotary phone sharing in the silence.

She began to dial, it made some grinding noises that couldn't have been healthy. Neither were the thoughts she was having about possible outcomes of this call, but nothing prepared her for the reality of it.

An Automated message system becond her to select from a list of very boring options. She ripped the rotary dial around from zero angstily. The phone began to ring.

"Yes Um Hi. Uhh..." she forgot why she called for a moment..

"Yeah sorry, I um I'm looking to talk to Dr. Chris Beatty Please, this is Dawn."

The woman on the other line sat silently.

“Sorry, Dawn Teason.”

They shared another moment of silence.

“Hello?”

As the woman spoke Dawn’s entire reality began to fade away, the moment felt cold, she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Chris Beatty died early this morning.

Chapter 7 - Leave Your Baggage.

Virginia had been at it all day long, each page had more questions, Chris had spent years in the jungle far more than he ever talked with her about.

Guided meditation he called it, where he recalled seeing other worldly beings, creatures and spirits, this wasn’t the scientist she knew, these were the writings of a highly spiritual person, she couldn’t hear his voice in the words as she did near the beginning.

Time and again he would visit with the Sa-Hau-Hei, they would take him into the jungle, engross him in strange rituals, watch over him through his meditations, and somehow he would always return to his hotel room, missing only time and a fractured memory as the proof of his visit.

“Each visit I felt as if I left something of myself behind, chipping at me a piece at a time, until I would become theirs.

Every time it gets harder to return, my health deteriorates, but, when I am with the tribe I am whole. I worry I won’t be able to return soon, bound for a wheelchair, the doctors say. I could stay, but I don’t want to, especially now that I know Virginia feels the same way. I think I am in love with her.”

She stopped reading, the words were a blur on the page now, she was just staring through them. She pulled herself closer to his desk frantically, and with a few swift clicks she had ordered her tickets.

Her flight was in an hour, a long transit where she was sure to pour over his manuscript once more. There was so much he never told her, and from what she could tell this was only one of several manuscripts. She was now convinced the others sat at their remote research centers, in the Mato Grosso.

She had to piece together where Chris kept being taken, she had to find this tribe, find out why he risked everything to go back just before he died. But first, a long wait in an uncomfortable seat in coach.

She thought “Is this going to be my last flight?”

She pushed the thought aside, thinking like that wasn't constructive, regardless it remained nagging. Yet still each bump, each dip sent it through her head.

She used to always be good with flying, not anymore understandably. Unable to sleep, she took advantage of layovers to escape the coffin-like cabin, getting snacks and an empty notepad.

She had already filled her first pad with notes, she was getting more questions than answers, his journal seemed to descend into madness, this was not her Chris, not an inkling of these experiences seeped through into his life with her, as if the jungle would profoundly change him when he was present.

But even through the unbelievable recounts of magic and mystique, she could hear his rational mind trying to make sense of it. Always the scientist. This was the only way she could tell it was him speaking through the insanity she was reading.

She kept returning to one entry in particular, it recounted something all too familiar.

"I saw Something today. Maybe felt? I guess it was more a memory. God I hope it wasn't.

A new entity large like the others, its face hard to discern, large eyes? Eyeless? No it was more like a shifting of it's form as I tried to peer at it to get a sense of its shape. It has smooth opal skin, but not skin, mist maybe? My curiosity didn't last long, I was more coherent than I had ever been, this time I could feel my bindings.

I was restrained to a stone slab tilted back ever so slightly. The entity stood with its back to me, gesturing and speaking outward. I could see the vast jungle extending for miles all around us, stone steps lead down into the darkness of the forest floor. When my eyes tried to readjust, taking into focus the entity once more, it shifted out of my vision. Not moving just... fading.

Then two lights below, floating at the base of the monolithic ruin which overlooked the immense green vista. Soft at first, like headlights in the fog they appeared to close in on me. They locked with my eyes and again my sleep paralysis set in... it approached and all I felt was it's own agony over take me, as if it was my own.

I knew this creature. It knew me. It wanted me, but I didn't want to go. Then nothing, the memory ends."

No answers, more questions. She was getting frustrated. Nothing really makes sense, the tribesmen must have been drugging him, it was the only explanation. But the lights, the paralysis. How could he have seen the very thing that haunted her in that car park, almost a decade ago in the jungle? The Questions mounting would have to wait. The seatbelt sign popped on as they began the descent into Cuiaba, they would be landing shortly.

Relieved to be on land again she was famished. She couldn't eat on the flight, her anxiousness was killing her appetite, but back on solid ground her stomach yearned for

some sort of sustenance. It would be a twelve hour journey to Analândia do Norte, a drive she always hated.

She started to hear the rain, she forgot how loud it could get here... unusually loud in fact. She looked up from her notes out from the cafe, she held her coffee close to her lips hovering. Sunshine? The sound of rain louder now, almost painfully so, she flinched her eyes closed in reaction.

When they reopened she stood drenched and barefoot. Ahead the dense jungle wall lit by the blue light of the night sky. She clutched the handle of her luggage, knuckles white. She could still taste the vanilla from her latte. What the hell just happened?

A surge filled her chest, a lightning bolt of butterflies which quickly sank to her stomach. Panic had set in, she surveyed the road she stood on, dirt, muddy, with very little tracks. This was not Cuiaba.

A large pop from the sky above. Hues of golden orange light filled the valley, followed by a deep roar above the ridge line. Two lights, this time one red, one white, with a trail of smoke reflecting downward the warm orange flow of the flames.

The rain subsided, she found it hard to focus against the backdrop of the milky way, tracking the movement more than the light. It was coming fast, the rumble became familiar. An airliner flew past, low like it was being pulled towards the ground, it flew straight over her and outward over the distant forest.

Wreckage rained down like hellfire, tearing and gouging through the limbs and brush of the tree's. She turned watching the plane fall further down entering the forest below. No explosion, no crash, nothing but a deep echoing reverberation.

Back she rose to her feet, a trench of trauma and wreckage marred the landscape like a scar, a new exposed path through the tree's. The canopy parted and charred made visible the cliffside, a familiar landmark, the foundations of the ACRN research observatory.

She couldn't tame her mind, rife with burning questions, how can this possibly be happening, there was no way that was Chris's plane. That was weeks ago? But by what coincidence has she happened to be standing right beneath another crash?

The quote from Chris's journal floated in the forefront.

“things are not in order...”

She fixated on the dark path into the jungle ahead. Her hand loosened leaving her luggage behind and with it so much more. She clutched the journal against her chest, her last memento. Her logical mind was screaming for her to turn back, but somehow as if drawn, she took her first steps into the forest dark.

Chapter 8 -

The ACRN Jeep's shocks were stiffer than Florence's. They shook the vehicle hard when the wheels sunk into the divots of the road. Juda just wanted a sip of his coffee but it seemed like everytime he went for a sip, the road would steal it away with another dip.

He battled gravity back and forth until success! A mouth full.

"MMMMmmm! MMMMMM!"

Frantically he rolled down the window and spat it out. It was cold, leaving his mouth bitter. He looked down at the console separating him from the passenger seat. Three coffee cups, all identical, were stuffed in the cupholders with reckless abandon. He looked at his cup, stained and old. He had grabbed the wrong one.

"Gah! Aww Awful!" he spat and groaned, tossing the old stale coffee out the window.

It had been several hours drive since he had left, he was nearing the research facility. He was taking a risk exploiting ACRN resources to help Dawn in her treasure hunt, but it was Dawn, it was worth it.

The facility had been overgrown and in disrepair for some time now, ever since Chris stopped coming back to the jungle. Juda chalked it up to loss of interest. Regardless of its state, it was still a fortress of concrete embedded in the cliff face overlooking the ocean of jungle. At the summit, the observatory, the crown jewel of the station.

He pulled into the dusty parking area blasting a plume of dirt up at the nameplate reading "Reserved - Dr.Beatty " He had been using his parking spot since Chris hadn't been back.

Juda and Chris never had a great relationship, he had only got to work with him on a few expeditions before his condition got the better of him. But Chris saw how Juda took to Virginia like a lost puppy. Until Dawn arrived and peaked his interest.

The floodlights blasted out the dark of night on Judas approach. His pass was pretty worn out, it always took a few swipes to open the gate. The heavy door that protected the sensitive equipment and research within, broke its lock-down and creaked open a few inches before he pulled it the rest of the way.

The facility was dark and echoed empty. The rest of his team was excitedly setting up at dead horse camp nearly a four hour drive away. The light followed him as he moved through, during the night they would conserve power using integrated motion sensors.

To most the quiet and darkness provided by the thick concrete would leave them unsettled. Juda felt at home here, it offered protection from the heat and insects, and gave him the solitude away from civilization which he coveted.

His gear was already packed awaiting his arrival. He slumped on to his bunk and leafed through his bags, taking inventory. Satisfied, he headed to the observatory to reset the alarm.

"472491-" He said it outloud as he typed it in, stopping before the last number. His attention was caught by a spot in the sky. He peered through the thick glass, trying to focus on the distant event. It was too far away. A Flash of light blinded him for a moment.

He looked to the telescope and rushed over to its mechanism, maneuvering it into position. He pressed his socket to the eye-piece and peered through.

"What the.."

An Airliner hung silently, along its fuselage two lights enveloped by a thick black smoke clawing and scraping up the outer hull. It stopped, the two lights turned toward him locking their gaze directly through the telescope through into him. He felt it, it knew he was watching and he was paralyzed. It continued, pressing itself against the plane pushing ever so slowly into the cabin below.

He watched as the interior flashed with light, flooding out the exterior windows like flashlights surveying the inner cabin. A few moments and it went dark, left silently suspended against the glory of the milky way that streaked the sky behind.

His heart sunk, a short gasp was all he could manage as the plane began its plummet releasing him from his stasis. Its wing caught an up draft and the craft started it's swirling descent towards the jungle below. It grew louder, closer, and brighter.

He ran to the veranda encircling the outer edge of the observatory and peered out over the darkened forest. The Plane was much closer, headed directly towards him. He stood in awe, the smoke reflecting the orange glow of flames to the canopy below. Balls of fire and debris split off, plowing through the foliage at ground level.

The Airliner passed over the facility, he swore he could feel the heat and smell the burning electronics. He could hear a strange twisting of metal as it skimmed a few hundred feet overhead.

It disappeared into the forest, he expected the flash of an explosion but nothing but a deep rumbling echo throughout the valley... and then an explosion behind him. Scores of jagged metal and debris blanketed down over the facility, turning concrete to dust.

He felt the blast that tossed him over the edge of the veranda, the loss of gravity made him queasy, but the fast approach of the ground below didn't give him much time to take notice.

He landed feet first from the nearly thirty foot drop to the ground. His usually sturdy legs buckled from the force, his tumbling barley lessened by the sturdy shocks of the ACRN jeep that cradled his falling body. The trauma of the shift in momentum smacked his brain within his skull.

He laid on the hood looking up, watching the bombardment of rubble and flame overtake the ACRN fortress. He barely felt his phone vibrating in his pocket, but his choice in classical pieces for a ring tone only served as a musical score to his consciousness slipping away, giving way to only darkness.

Chapter 9 -

Frustrated Sajo closed the door behind him leaving Dawn to make her call. The radio Full of overlapping chatter that made it sound like some old dead language. He pulled out one voice in particular, Leon, an unmistakably french canadian accent hailing from Cuiaba police station, and an old friend of Sajo.

In Portuguese broken portuguese

"Alet all stations, we are on the lookout for possible crash sites of airliner flight 369 somewhere over the Mato Grosso. Last reports on a heading over Analândia do Norte. Station 27 Report in when available. Repeat..."

In Portuguese

"Leon! it's Sajo."

In Portuguese

"Sajo, We had an emergency madae from an airliner over the Mato Grasso, The last pinged it near Analândia do Norte"

"Si, Si, Okay. I've got something to do up past the ridge anyway. I'll have a look to see if I can track any smoke."

"Let us know and we will coordinate search and rescue, over"

"Will do. 24 out"

He grabbed up his jacket and barged through Dawn's call.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Dawn Called after him.

"Wait back in your room when you're done, I'm going up to the campsite now. I'll let you know ok? I have to go!"

She nodded, still holding the phone to her ear. No one was on the other end, it was just ringing. Judah still wasn't answering.

Sajo's old cruiser was beaten to shit, rusted out in most places, but its core was still strong. The long and tiresome drive dwindled what little life it had left. It crept up into the campsite, coughing to a stop. The site was a mess but it was just that. No signs of struggle, no blood or bodies, just some missing people and some overturned camping gear.

Dawns' recount was verified, they had left all their supplies, fully stocked packs, dry bags, medical supplies, all the things they would have brought with them into the jungle, and that was odd.

He took a deep breath, hands on his hips.

"Fuck."

He knew he had to form a search party. But a long slog into the jungle seemed pointless when he knew anyone wandering into these woods not prepared, they were gone, and for good god damn reason, the Amazon is not forgiving.

He surveyed the valley with his binoculars, they were new and shiney, only because he had bought them himself. No smoke, no signs of wreckage. If the plane did go down he couldn't see it from here.

He jotted a few notes down, slumped down into his cruiser and made the call. It would take a better part of the day for them to get organized and regroup at the site, in the meantime he needed to question Dawn.

He was groggy when he got back to town, long drives always did that to him. He had been planning the effort in his head as he made his way back to home base. He went directly to the hostel, but the widow and her daughter had watched Dawn gather up her plethora of notes and journals, and headed out in her truck.

"Florence" He corrected the widow. She was confused.

In Portuguese

"Did she say where she was headed?"

In Portuguese

"No, just gave us a big tip and left"

He didn't know where she went but he could guess, and since it was already on his todo list he popped in the office to report in, grabbed some trail mix, and sank back into his well formed grove in the seat of his cruiser, another long drive ahead.

The ACRN facility was 4 hours each way, enough time for him to devour the trail mix, he hadn't really had a chance to eat through all this. He hadn't tied the events together, but it was nagging him how peculiar this all happened to be.

"Maybe the team saw the crash and headed out to investigate, but why would they leave Dawn behind?" He poured over the limited facts at his disposal, each time finding pretty damning evidence to negate his most current hypothesis.

This is how Sajo worked, the process of elimination, and he was methodical about it. Problem was if things didn't fit into his tapestry of fact and reason, he could quickly get frustrated. Patience was not a virtue of his.

He blew past the strewn luggage at first, involved in his own thoughts. A casual glance to ensure what his perfrail caught was true and he spotted the colorful assembly of clothes and luggage strewn about the dirt road.

He pulled over onto the brush that one might loosely consider a shoulder. It didn't strike him at first, he wandered to the pile of clothes kneeling to inspect them, when it enveloped his senses. Smoke. He could smell smoke.

A dark red blouse hung from his grip, he stood awestruck. Smoke and debris, left a ditch of destruction through the brush and foliage. Hotspots still smoldered from where intense fires once burned. Rising up the cliff side he saw the catastrophe that struck the ACRN facility on its perch. The damage is visible even from here.

"Jesus..."

He took his time back to the cruiser, not out of safety or concern but simply because he was utterly distracted. This whole day has become one of the biggest events of his life, and it's just the beginning.

His radio screeched at him in protest, it did not want to broadcast, or receive for that matter. It made sense, part of the reason the government even approved the ACRN Facility was if they included a communications tower to serve the communities. A fair compromise, except when it doesn't work.

"GODDAMNIT!"

He was not equipped for this. Hell half the valley wasn't.

Fire spat out from a large gash in the cliffside until it sputtered out in a tantrum of flashes. His next stop, he had no choice, in addition for potential wounded, he had to try and get communications back up for the entire valley or risk even more chaos.

Chapter 10-

Title

She was just staring off into space, the ringing went on and on, there were any number of reasons Juda wasn't answering but with everything that happened she really needed to know she wasn't alone.

Sajo's brutish assault of the door spiked her blood pressure, he hurried out.

She called after him, but got nothing but a bark full of orders. He seemed anxious, something had happened but he was out into the street before she could ask. She finally

hung up and sat slumping her head backwards over the chair. It pulled her chest out separating the ribs, it felt good. She rolled into a full stretch and sighed.

When she thought about calling home, hearing Chrises disapproving voice, worried of the conflict this call might cause, she hesitated. It had been a longtime but she still felt some guilt over her actions.

In short she used Chris and his research program as an excuse to leave her life behind in search of glory and status often romanticized in treasure hunter lore. Over the years the reality of her efforts had beaten much of the romance out of her, and at times she often wondered how different her life would have been had she stayed with ACRN.

She and Chris had spent much time together as she worked with him first in Vancouver and then here in the Amazon. Much of that time he was apart from Virginia, and expectedly it caused a rift between her and Virginia.

What if Ginny Answers” Rushed through her head.

Virginia wasn’t necessarily the jealous type, she trusted Chris, but it didn't stop her from dismissing Dawn as anything more than a pie eyed lustful youth, less interested in the science of their work and more in the relationship with her mentor.

Her suspicion of Dawn, although mistaken, had a root, Dawn was using her husband, and their research, not in lust for Chris, but her wanderlust and desire for her false idea of adventure. Either way Dawn would end up hurting Chris, which was the true root of Virginia's concern.

Dawn Always felt this, although her and Virginia had a complicated relationship, Dawn always had a deep respect for her as a mentor in her own right. But the two never got close because of this unspoken and misguided perception.

Either way, whoever answers this will be awkward for her, followed by a surge of guilt. How can she hesitate when she led directly to the death of their research team, how small minded she is, and it was her guilt that stretched out her hand to dial.

The rotary phone surface became a universe all its own, the words she had heard, the death of Chris beatty, was not at all how she saw this call going. It was as if she could see the paint peel, and corner rusting, and the desk around its base rotting ever so slowly. She just stared encapsulated in the extended moment her mind had stretched to take it all in.

When she had finally hung up, her thoughts had gone from a moment stretching an eternity, to a stressful and hectic flurry of checklists, all competing to dominate as an answer to her next steps.

Her racing thoughts pressed her body into action, nearly pulling her back to Florence in her haste. Florence was noticeably cooler than outside his near ivory shell having been shaded by the building she parked next to. She pulled him under the foliage next to the

hostel making them a parking spot in the bush. She subconsciously wanted Florence to be comfortable.

There was a lot still going on in her head, pulling out random facts and memories from her research over the years. Lots of myth and legend surround the jungle, the Mato Grasso in particular. There was a lot to sift through, she needed some focus, some direction.

She was tumbling through her thoughts while she was browsing the news of the plane crash on her phone. Chris's name hadn't been mentioned, not that there was any reason to call him out specifically.

Her top of the line camera she used to love, put a bad taste in her mouth now. She knew what it had captured, what it had been through. Touched by a horrific spector, and held by a lost soul. She wasn't particularly superstitious, but she had been given good reason for a modicum of doubt.

She flicked through her apps, hovering her finger over her camera. She wasn't really ready to watch it, but she wanted answers more than she feared what she would see. It was mostly blown out, the camera couldn't compensate for the intense energy blasting its iris.

One frame, one half decent frame depicting the glowing eyes obscuring a skeletal form of ethereal smoke. an obvious and disjointed streak of white electricity reaching out into her camera and out its flip screen into Calos head. She expected fear, but was instead overcome with guilt. That poor kid was the new her from a few years back, when she joined ACRN, and here she had gotten him killed.

She saved the shot to her gallery and opened her contacts. Again it rang, going unanswered.

"Damnit Juda."

She was hungry, she could smell the breakfast cooking. She took up her journal and joined the old woman and her daughter in the communal kitchen. She had started sketching the figure from her phone, she found drawing helped her sort her brain out, usually.

The dutiful daughter was curious, ignoring her chores more and more as the image was taking shape on Dawns pad. She placed a small plate with eggs and some fresh fruit and clammard up on the long bench of the dining table. She leaned heavily on Dawns shoulder, she was a curious little thing no doubt. She pointed at the spectral image and said something Dawn had heard before.

"El Tunchi"

Like files on a computer her mind sorted through the mess of data she had collected and pulled the thought from the ether. Folklore of the Jungle, an evil spirit of the forest known for its strange whistle, and eyes of pure light.

When the creature is far off its whistle is loud, almost deafeningly close, but when it is near it becomes soft and distant until it is right on top of you with no escape. It was said to lure widows into the jungle to help end their suffering.

“El-Toon-Chee” She spelled it out loud and she jotted it down, the little girl took her pencil and corrected her spelling.

“Thanks!” She pushed out what smile she could, considering.

The girl smiled back before her mother scolded her for shirking her responsibilities.

Dawn peered into the eyes of her drawing. Something else was familiar, not the creature itself, something about its description. No time for that though she was fed and ready to head out. Juda was her first priority.

Like a dog hearing the world “walk”, Florence roared to life as if he was happy to see her, She however was too preoccupied to share in his imagined excitement. Juda should have called back by now, in fact he should have arrived last night before this all started. The whole ride to the facility she felt very alone, and with it the worry crept in.

“WHOA!” Her shoulders flinched upwards and tightened. The impact was imminent. A flurry of color and cloth exploded and draped itself across Florence’s windshield. She had to force herself away from the steering wheel as Florence trembled against the anti-lock brakes coming to a stop.

The sharp stuttered stop settled her back in her seat pretty hard. She opened her eyes and her first thought puzzled her

“That’s cute” she internalized.

Attached to the wiper and strewn across the glass was a deep red blouse which slipped off Florence and onto the ground.. Her thought was Justified, it was in fact adorable.

A flash of memory of the moments just before. A piece of luggage in the middle of the road sitting statuesque, a moment of what felt like slowed time as it struck Florence’s grill and leapt up over the hood, splattering its guts of clothing and toiletries into Florence’s poor face.

She stepped out onto the road and could smell the burning. Her hand reached out to keep her balance, relying on Florence for support. Fires burned, the forest reeled, and the distant cliff was covered in flame.

At her feet scattered about was more clothes and items, amidst them an ACRN Badge.

“Juda!” she snapped it up. It wasn’t his. Virginia Maro. She barely recognized the smeared face under the melted plastic, but the name was wrong. But, with so much going on she couldn’t pick it out through the mental clutter.

Memories of better times played in the back of her head. Back when she joined her first expedition with Chris into the woods, collecting samples, filming the team's research, even meeting Juda.

She burned that bridge, and she started to think if any of this would have happened at all had she not talked Juda into risking his job, or even found that damned letter!

"The Widows...Virginia." She said it outloud to herself. It flooded her with the pieces, layering into one another as it became something solid. She ran back to Florence sort of scared and sort of excited, this might be something.

"I figured it out, Florence!.. Well I figured something out... or I'm crazy. Maybe both."

The crease of her journal had been cracking with use, and she could hear the glue snapping in the spine when she pulled its cover open. The letters' browned parchment folded itself back and her eyes were instantly drawn to the passage that sparked her epiphany.

"As I walk like Dante through the forest path, followed by the widows lost, I begin to truly understand his descent into madness."

"Widows of the lost. Holy shit it's Beatty! Virginia Beatty Florence! Chris and Virginia Tied the Knot!" excitedly she shook the ID.

She recapped the connections internally. A spirit said to lure the widows of the lost to the jungle, Percy Fawcets account of being followed by the widows of the Lost... and now this Virginia Beatty, Widow to; as of this morning, the late Chris Beatty.

It was like the air had thickened around her, even through the heat of the amazon she felt the chills. She felt it first, but the vibrations were not enough to warn her as her phone erupted. A well known bassline from a popular show about nothing, shocked her system with a bolt of adrenalin.

She knew the tone!

"Juda! What the Hell!"

"Dawn.." His voice was faint

"Juda are you alright?"

"Not... Great. Oh ho ho... I'm up at ACRN. I-"

"Yeah I am almost there , there is lots of fire Juda! I can see it from here, are you somewhere safe?"

"Mostly. The stations pretty beat up but most of the debris OW! oh.. HRRRRMMM!" He was straining.

"Sorry I'm ok .. most the large debris missed, thats whats burning, but they are dying down a little, Can you get-"

The line went dead. An explosion at the cliff top compound. Her and Florence were underway in a heartbeat. Only the momentum closed his driver side door, nearly catching her foot. Another twenty minutes and they would be there, but her inner pessimist reminded her... a lot can happen in twenty minutes.

Chapter 11 -

The trek it took to reach the station should have been exhausting. She hadn't even broken a sweat. Her feet were covered in dirt and soot, her fingers sticky from a light layer of sap that had gathered as she waded through the trees. It was the only proof that she had made the journey to the stairs at the cliff's base. She had lost time once more.

Virginia had scaled these stairs before many times. She used to run them in the mornings for her daily exercise whenever she and Chris would spend weeks at the cliff side facility on their research missions.

The rusted blue paint of the metal staircase showcased the nurturing this station was in desperate need of. She couldn't tell if the daze she was feeling was nostalgia setting in, or her strange time lapse, everything she touched seemed to seep the sensation of its experiences into her. A connection to everything around her she was having a hard time adjusting to and even harder time focusing..

She felt light, like the mass of her body had become porous, lifting her gently away from the gravity of the world. The weight of each step felt softer as she ascended to the top.

The heat of the initial fire fall had wilted the canopy above, as she made her approach it seemed to renew, lifting itself slightly upward towards the night sky regaining some of its vitality. She was too distracted to notice.

She again had lost time, she didn't remember the ascent. But here she stood outside the entrance to the facility, lit up only by the emergency lighting.

"STOP IT GODDAMMIT!" She shouted into its depths, asserting her will. She wanted so badly to feel in control again.

The last time she stood at the entrance to this facility was a difficult one. Chris knew this was his last time returning here, his condition had been getting increasingly worse each time he returned home from the jungle, and so he chose to be with her and return home.

The reason for the rapid ramp up of his condition was uncertain, but now she wondered if she hadn't expressed her love, if he had just chosen to stay, he might just be alive now.

The floodlights kicked on, bringing her back out of her head. The intense halogens revealed the scorching and scoring across the thick concrete skin of the station. The crash had not been kind.

“Shit.” She patted herself down in search of her pass.

“Dammit.” The tips of her fingers pulsed with memory, a sliding of her luggages handle from the pads of her fingers. She had left her baggage behind, her pass along with it. She could only hope they hadn’t changed her passcode.

She reached up and caressed the steel box surrounding the keypad. It had been especially worn by the elements, she noticed the streaked rust marks left behind from the constant rain beneath the leafy debris stuck to it.

The fires had dried it out, but her fingers still slick with rain made it easy to wipe away. The keypads’ protective covering swung open by her thumb, and the panel lit up alert and wanting of a human touch. Her fingers reached the threshold of the first button.

A light emitted from the back of her hand pulling from within her as a volume of scattered dots each emitting its own blue and white light emerged. The dots tied together, forming lined constellations that ran up her arm, making up an afterglow. It seemed like a female forearm that flashed before her. It’s hand layered over hers on the keypad as she touched it. She jerked her hand back taking a step along with her reflex. It had disappeared. The keypad sparked with a pop. She took another step back. The doors latch made an audible clunk with mechanisms released.

She shook the experience off. Her subconscious stored it to haunt her later. Her lucidity in the current moment meant she was in this moment rational, as much as she could be in her situation, but it only really made the ordeal worse.

“Making sense of senseless things” A quote from her biology teacher who had a penchant for the dramatic when it came to the life sciences.

He did have a whimsy to him that she admired, a truly open mind, even if he was a little crazy. But maybe that makes sense, she was feeling a little crazy. Faced by something strange such as this, maybe a little crazy is a good way to cope. Her mind must be playing tricks on her to help her through something.

Stepping off the earth into the thick foundational concrete of the facility pulled her down. She sunk down on her feet feeling her full weight take hold once again. It was as if she had disconnected from the ground outside as she entered the man made structure that cut into the landscapes otherwise pristine skyline.

Even so, it still felt like an old home. The motion sensors lit up the hall through to the living area and observatory, welcoming her back with a wash of light. A lot of her best memories here among the instruments and research. Not just with Chris, but with friends who she

would become family with. Her thoughts turned against her, turning to the people she had left behind without so much as a word.

She felt guilty. A deep remorse. Tess especially will take it hard, she had become a beacon for her through her loss and she just abandoned their years of growth to come to this old abandoned mine of memories.

The entrance door closed behind her and a back draft nearly pushed her back off her feet. She steadied herself on the cold steel frame.

She was aware of the room before she saw it, the large daunting telescope took up the majority of the observatory, the rounded walls covered in a steel dome were lined with instruments, readouts, and numerous workstations. She knew the room well, but how she ended up here, that was another lapse in memory.

She was standing at her and Chris's old workstation, their notes and maps still pinned to the large cork board on the wall. A Map of the Mato Grosso sat square in the middle of the collage of research. Next to it a gaping hole in the facility, open to the veranda overlooking the jungle below. She only stepped up to the wall to lean out and peer through the hole. Her Hand pressed to the pinned maps she leant out for a better view.

On the horizon she could see a very thin pillar of light it's source at the forest floor below. She raised her hand to her brow to blockout the shine of the stars to get a better gauge at it's distance. A few kilometers out at least.

She had to know, so she began to get her things in order. This would pretty much mean suicide should she go unprepared, even fully stocked with a trained team it would be dangerous. But what other choice did she have. All signs pointed to Chris. And if that meant wandering off into the night jungle in pursuit of even a half hope of finding him, she was prepared to do it.

Even still, she was exhausted, hungry, wandering off unprepared would be a death sentence, she decided to rest first, the decision seemed to make itself. She wandered through the once familiar halls, more and more detached, it was almost alien to her now, she yearned for the forest floor beneath her once more.

With her thoughts came a sickening feeling, she wanted nothing more than to lay down. By now she had wandered into the communal lounge area. A gentle wind blew up from beneath her cradling her as she was softly placed down onto the couch. The haunting moment passed her by, her conscience was ringing too loud for her to realize what had happened.

She laid with her eyes closed feeling every ounce of her emotion. Untethered from her body within, she swam in them. The good and the bad, they became a bland melancholy as they swirled and mixed, letting her drift on the surface instead of drowning in the pool. Her chest felt open again, room to breath. She could rest, but only for a moment. The jungle would call her again soon.

Flashes behind her lids didn't wake her, a visage of the starry woman flashed once again, the form of light and constellations was posed over her, its thumb pressed to the middle of Virginias' slumbering forehead. It flickered like a sputtering florescent light, struggling to ignite until it was lost to the dark.

Chapter 12 -

Title

For a brief moment he was shunted awake by a female scream

"STOP IT GODDAMMIT!" He recognized Virginia's voice screaming into the night, but not the face he associated with it.

He faded again. Although trapped in an unconscious void he could still sense her, a body moving around him ignoring him or at least unaware of him. He was unable to reach out, nor speak out to ask for aid. Then nothing, he was alone again, stuck in his purgatory. An occasional twinge of pain would surge up from his leg to remind him of his situation, before fading out again. Over and over his cycle repeated, longing for a way out, or just a reassuring voice that he had been found.

Each time he lasted longer, and then longer still. He was starting to come back. But, that meant the pain would last longer, and the more he could assess. He could feel all his parts, but the pain shooting up his leg was rough. He managed to lift his head. no major bleeding that he could see, that was reassuring. He could wobble the leg without too much discomfort, also good. Away he drifted again.

Lucidity at last, for how long though? He had a plan this time. He tilted his torso to drop his shoulder downward, his hand slipped into his pocket. He felt the slick surface of his smartphone, it had that one chipped corner out of the cheap plastic case that pretty much all his phones ended up with at some point or another.

A twinge made him bare down on his teeth. He gripped so tight that they squeaked sliding apart. Like nails on a chalkboard it sent a shiver down his spine.

"Ahh Ow! Ooh Wee you son of a bitch. Ahh ha ha.." This cussing went on for some time as he worked through the menus, tapping hard and with malice as an outlet for his pain.

"Juda! What the Hell!" Her voice was cracking as it peaked in the phones' shitty little speakers. It didn't matter, her voice was a boost of confidence for his predicament.

"Dawn.." His voice was coarse and dry. He swallowed and tried again.

"Juda are you alright?"

"Not... Great. I'm up at ACRN. I- Oh ho ho..." He managed to pull himself to a sitting position on the jeep's windshield.

"Yeah I am almost there, there is lots of fire Juda! I can see it from here, are you somewhere safe?"

He was breathing pretty heavily through the words. He surveyed around the station for what he could see.

"Mostly. The stations pretty beat up but most of the debris OW! oh.. HRRRRMMM!" He shouldn't have poked at his knee. At least he knew now, it was just dislocated.

"Sorry I'm ok.. most the large debris missed, that's what's burning, but they are dying down a little, Can you get-"

An explosion on the far side of the compound, he still felt the heat pass over him, but he could only make out the smoke against the night. The line had dropped. He just stared at his screen baffled. His head shook very slightly as the voice in his head protested the absurdity of his misfortune. One word.

"Seriously."

He dropped his hand, the phone just slid along the hood and dropped to the ground.

"FUU HUU HUCK! YOU!" He cursed to god, gods, any deity or galactic consciousness that would listen really. A general FU to the universe. He felt justified, he was just trying to do something nice for a girl he liked, and now look at him.

"Fuck you" he muttered that one to himself.

He knew he had to get off the hood and sort his knee out. Maybe a quick nap. Not that he had a choice. His head slumped back on the windshield and he laid resting nearly asleep.

Florence's familiar growl rang clear, his squeaky driver side hinge told him. Then a voice.

"Calo- fuck - I mean JUDA! JUDA! Are you up there?" She had been visualizing Calo's ashen remains for the better part of the 20 minute ride here. She was so glad Juda called, but had gone to the worst place in her head when she saw the explosion.

"Jesus yes over here..."

"Oh Christ Juda!" She ran straight to the jeep, her keys jangling in her hand. She was gripping them pretty tight. It was the longest, short drive up that hill that she ever made.

"You alright?, I, can I help? "

"Here yeah lean here let me press my foot against you."

“Okay?..” She leaned against the jeep, Florence headlights made it seem like he was disapprovingly scowling in jealousy.

“How am I helping exactly-”

“OH GOD JESUS FUCK SHIT FUCK ASS!” his blood curdling cursing did not drown out the squidging sound. He had leveraged her body weight to knock his knee back into position with a cartilage crushing crunch.

He felt it.

She felt it.

It was not enjoyed by either party.

“FUCK!” One last cry as the throbbing subsided

Dawn had a moment to herself, casting back an esophagus full of fluid from whence it came. Her gulping sound nearly triggered his gag reflex. They both sat catching their breath. A long night, into a long day, into whatever the hell this was. They deserved a moment.

Dawn bubbled over, a studder of her breath caught his attention, her eyes had already swelled up.

“They’re all dead.”

Juda didn’t understand. But those words would be hard pressed to ever hold any good connotation. He hesitated in asking, the answers were not going to be good. She interjected before he could.

“Randall, Milo, Chrissy, and...” she trailed off. Her diaphragm struggled against her emotions for some air. Juda finished her sentence for her.

“Calo...” He was overcome too. He needed more information, but could see she was already having a hard time. He let her calm herself regardless of his angst.

She took control of her breathing.

“I don’t even know what happened, what I saw... what it did to them.”

Her use of ‘it’ was concerning.

“It?”

She fumbled with her phone and flipped it towards him. It nearly caused his heart to explode. There it was, the same spectral beast that froze him from a mile away.

“This. This fucking thing. I can’t even begin. Even my theory is insane!” She was getting frantic.

"El Tunchi" His words stopped Dawn in her tracks.

"Yea.. Yeah.." She had a cute, concerned face.

It was the first smile he cracked since she got here. He caught himself, his friends were dead, he shouldn't be smiling. He was glad she didn't notice.

"It can't be real. I mean I'd like to think I have a fairly open mind. I get that I know very little about the universe. I don't know. If I hadn't seen it myself, if they hadn't died. I'm having a really hard time with all this."

"Me too. don't worry." He tried to reassure her but his voice was a dead giveaway.

"Why? Because everything will work out? This isn't a god damn movie" She was sharp with her tone. more so than he probably deserved.

"I know. i know."

They just sat there. Wanting to say so much but, what was to be said? Any comforting words would be hollow.

"There is something else..." she paused still in disbelief at the coincidence.

"Chris died this morning. His plane went down over the Mato Grosso."

"WHAT!?"

"Yeah."

"no, no, no ,no ,no no!"

"What?"

"I saw it too."

"The plane?"

"Both."

"Both what?"

"The plane and that thing."

"What!? How?"

"Through the telescope..."

They both looked up to the observatory, its large metal shell ominously back lit by the now dying fires behind. A few drops of rain prompted them to take this inside. Dawn helped him over to Florence and they drove him over to the door. She took the opportunity to park

Florence under the safety of the concrete overhang near the entrance to the facility out of the rain and protected from the wind and fire.

The emergency power had overtaken the station with the last explosion.

“Ahh shit... Dawn.”

Dawn turned following Juda's pointed finger. The communications tower had been hit, its transformers below were blown out by some debris that had lodged itself into the now exposed circuit. That meant the whole valley was down. They were on their own.

They had cleared out some of the debris that littered the observatory. Juda wrapped his knee' for support and recounted what he had witnessed to Dawn. Dawn did the same in kind as she fiddled with the communications workstation. No luck, the system was shot, and the sat phones static made matters worse.

“It all started with the letter. Percy Fawcett thought something was out here too.”

“You think he found that?”

“Any crazier than the other theories about the expedition's disappearance?”

She slid over to the security station. She hoped there would be an angle that caught the action, but she found something else entirely.

“What in the shit.”

“What in the shit, what?” Juda had the tensor bandage awkwardly pinned by one elbow keeping it tight as he fumbled with the tiny metal clip.

She pulled on the white strap of the ID Badge that loosely hung from her pocket. It popped out and upward bouncing to a standstill on the end of its lanyard.

Juda couldn't see what she was holding from where he was mending himself. She sat holding it, staring in contemplation at the unlikely happenstances that had to occur for Virginia Beatty's ID to end up in her possession. That aside, Virginia had been here, she had been right next to Juda.

Juda had finally finished and his interest peaked, he wandered over.

“Virginia was here.”

“Okay?, We didn't get any notification she was coming to the facility.”

“I don't think she was here on business...” Her conclusion concerned Juda.

“What do you mean?”

“Watch...”

Juda watched, he analyzed. She was saying something as she stood outside the facility. He was trying to make out the lips of her black and white visage. But he didn't need to. He had heard her. Her voice came back to him, her face became its owner.

"Stop it goddamnit..." He said it along with her on screen. Even Dawn could make it out now.

"How the hell could you know that?"

"I heard her, I felt her around me. I remember now. I laid there wanting to ask for help but I was barely conscious."

"You were on the hood of the jeep, the camera can't even see you. From where you were you'd basically be invisible."

"Still what the hell was she doing here, and where the hell is she now?"

Dawn continued her methodical investigation, pouring over the last clues left from the night of the crash, and now apparently Virginas' disappearance. Juda wandered the station he had called home for 4 years. He assessed the stations' supplies, took stock of the damage, and inventoried their options.

"This is weird right?" She shouted down the hall, the concrete made it easy to bounce their conversation around the station.

"THISH ish schweird?! Thish whole freakin' day hash turned to shit."

Juda was gripping a small tin of lighter fluid between his teeth. His hands were full carrying two full backpacks, a box of ration packs, a mini generator, and his favorite mini solar panels to accompany it, and his drones Deez and Nutz, their names affectionately sharpied on their sides. The bulk of it all made him hobble back on forth with a shuffle more than a walk.

"Uh Juda..." Dawn sounded concerned

Her voice was distant to his mind, though his ears heard her just fine. He spat out the tin on the table. "Umm."

"Juda!" her voice was tinny over the intercom.

He stood wringing his hands trying to smooth the tender impressions made by the boxes and gear he was carrying. In front of him was what seemed like decades of overgrowth, sturdy roots grown that had pushed out of the floor of the common area. He had been there yesterday morning, this had not been here, "this can't be here."

He peered through the trees he could swear he saw moonlight, the forest had a depth to it that seemed impossible, he was fixated on it, his mind trying to grip the fractured physics.

He could feel it, a primal pull. It was as if his essence was two steps ahead of him, he was merely catching up.

“Juda! You can’t just NOT answer me, come on!”

“Ow Fuck!.. Shit.” His shin smacked into the side of the couch, it has been overgrown with vines and ferns, moss creeping off its edges, dead leaves in its cracks.

“Uhh... yeah sorry”

Her screech over the intercom startled him out of his daze. He backed out of the room, his curiosity was in overdrive.

He entered the back into the observatory to see Dawn who was pale on a good day, now damn near ghostlike at this point. Juda through his darker complexion still showed through with a pale inner dread. Things were getting a little too complicated.

Dawn sat still and Juda pulled the aluminum chair scraping across the floor to sit next to her. They just watched, sitting in witness to Virginias ‘strange journey.

“She.. she looks crazy.” She did, Juda was just stating a fact, Dawn however was trying a little harder to add some rationale to her behaviors.

She seems disturbed, almost lucid at moments following some very strange behavior. But how to explain the sparks at the main door like the facility was welcoming her. Her calm meandering through the facility, But what happened next... Was breathtaking.

Virginia swaye left, and toppled right throughout the broad hallway of the facility between the Observatory and the lounge. Over and over she was gusted about, like tall grass at the mercy of the winds . They pushed and pulled her towards the lounge, and against all reason she lifted from her feet and was sent gently down onto the couch.

They both needed a moment to process, she just laid there draped delicately over the couch, asleep. She looked peaceful.

It was the movement on the screen that brought them back into Virginia story. It was like watching an old black and white movie, it actually made it easier to make out the movement as they watched the forest grow.

The camera was pointed downward towards the entrance from within the lounge. The movement began at the base of the couch. The concrete cracked around it, vines sprouted grass grew around the square wooden feet of the cheap leather couch. Quickly she and the couch were enveloped in a veritable miniature forest of color and vibrancy, she was completely obscured from the camera.

It grew and grew, flowers blooming, grass growing, stalks of tree’s took form and jutted ever higher out of the floor. The grass had reached up to the ceiling pressing against the

concrete, the brush slowed its growth, and the trees stood sturdy sure as they would have had they been there for decades.

The tall grass moved, a large line cut through leading right up to where Virginia laid. It encircles her location and slips back into the forest.

Their bodies both became charged, like pressing a battery to your tongue. It coursed through them, they were gripped through the screen, a giant black shape of a man stood staring out through the lens, obscured by a darkness it seemed to exude itself. Its mask was horrifying depicting a great horned beast. It stared back through them like it knew they were watching.

"Jesus" Juda broke the silence. It startled himself and Dawn, the creature on screen was gone.

With a twitch Dawn had stopped the playback.

"Shit. Shit.. SHIT!" he escalated. "GODDAMNIT! FUCKING HELL!"

He kicked his chair across the room, it would have been impressive if he hadn't been losing his shit.

"Juda" she tried to calm him. Really she just wanted to join him.

"EVERYBODY IS DEAD DAWN... EVERYONE, And then whatever the fuck that was! They fucking took her Dawn!"

"I know. I Hate this too, but." She knew what was about to fall out of her mouth sounded crazy.

"But what Dawn.."

"We have to go after her."

"That is not the correct response."

"Juda she's out there alone, and if that was Chris's plane she's going after him whether it kills her or not. She needs help. Like professional help."

"SHE NEEDS HELP? a fucking forest just spruing up where i used to have my morning coffee-"

"I-"

"-Virginia Beatty happens to be right here the day her husband crashes to his death above it. Our team gone from a goddamn visage of death-"

"It's just-"

“-which might I add may have taken down the very plane Chris was on... How the hell is SHE crazy Dawn?.”

Juda just shook his head, he had nothing in particular in focus, but the nod back and forth acted both as his disagreeing statement, and secondly as a stress relieving rocking sensation as he struggled to overcome her argument. He knew he was defeated before he started, but he had to give it a try for the sake of his own pride. She was always right.

Dawn had nothing but respect for Virginia, she regretted not becoming what she and Chris hoped of her when she was at ACRN, and now she just feels for her loss. Dawn was no stranger to loss. She was also never one to let anyone suffer alone.

“I’m going Juda... I owe her. We both owe Chris. And with communications tower down, no one else is coming out this far.”

“GODDAMMIT I KNOW!... I know. “ Juda deflated. His pacing helped.

He had always had a temper under pressure, he had worked hard to get away from the habit, and he had made it a priority. But understandably this had pushed him a little too far.

His Anger was also partly selfish. Save the wife of a dead man, a woman he had been obsessed with for years, because the woman he is now infatuated with asked him too. Neither of which knew he coveted them. And now he was likely to lose them both, and himself.

“Get packed.”

Dawn had Deez, Judah was a gentleman and took Nutz. She flipped on her tracker bracelet and the small drone popped up over her shoulder. She wanted to document this.

“How do I...” She stared at the small screen on the wrist band, a little overwhelmed with the controls.

“Oh here look, first turn on the flash light...” Juda Took her arm up, it was an opportunity to get in close. She welcomed it considering, but not the way he wanted her to.

“So it’s mostly presets, tap a button it’ll follow you in a specific pattern or free mode at specific distances. Or you can full on pilot it.”

She pressed a button and the tiny wisp of a thing whipped past Juda’s face forcing him to take a few steps back. It roved around her at about head level, smooth and quiet as a dragonfly, casting its own light. finally resting back on her shoulder.

Nutz took a quick lap around the room, it showed the forest patch was small and finite, confined to the center of the lounge. Deez had lightly probed into the brush and tall grass ahead, just enough to see through the forest absorbing its impossible depth.

A person likes to think they know how they would react when faced with the fundamental breakdown of everything we have come to know. But we don't. It's not something you should be able to articulate, much like what your eyes are witnessing.

They felt it, they didn't need to describe it to one another, they knew. It was the most primal sensation they had ever felt.

"I'm not exactly confident in going in there." Juda still felt the haunting sensation, the slightest push forward at the base of his skull like the tip of a finger, warm, small. He wanted to step in, but every other particle in his flesh and blood fought it .

"She could be right there Juda."

"At this point, anything could be right there."

They sat with that for a hefty moment.

Juda took a deep inhale and forced it out his nose. It gave him the briefest moment of ease from his powerful anxiety. He took a moment, stepping into the tall grass, Dawn closely in toe. The Tall grass shifted around them, enveloping them. It began to rain, their footsteps became distant from the cold, echoing, emptiness of the facility.

Chapter 13 -

Title

"Static. More static. More goddamn static!" Sajo thought as he pulled up to the facility

Radio's still out. At least the fires seemed to have subsided. The facility was pretty roughed up and he could already see the extent of damage done to the tower. He wasn't fixing that.

"Shit."

Sajo left the static on, he liked the white noise, preferable to the rocks and gravel spitting up under his cruiser's wheel well. The last twenty minute drive really gave him a sense of how alone he was. His life long experience living here had probably given him more respect for the jungle than most.

The ACRN Jeep was the first thing he noticed. Mostly in part to the fact he pulled up next to it. It's hood dented and windshield cracked, but he found it odd there was no debris around, the only indication of what caused it. a small splattering of blood about. At least no body meant there was a chance they were alive.

"DAWN?, JUDAH?" He called out as he struck a flare, igniting it.

The flares cast a red hue around the dark lot. The forest soaked it in, retaining the daunting blackness between the army of trees. It gave him light to investigate, yielding results.

Tracks led him to the main entrance, the door wide open. He unholstered his pistol, he has never needed to use it on duty before, just practice shooting with his deputies before they too abandoned him for the cities. He crossed his other hand across his wrist and held tight the flashlight to follow his firearm.

"Hello? Policia, Dawn? Dawn Teason?" no voice replied to his call.

"Juda?..." The echo moved like molasses through the facility.

He could hear water, it got louder as he rounded the corner to the lounges entrance.

It didn't strike him as strange at first, a large garden in the lounge of the facility. He had never been here before, as far as he was concerned this was just decor. It was the half claimed table and chair that first caused some doubt. But it was the water, but not water, rain. It was raining inside, raining from a concrete ceiling with no sprinklers, no water source, it was just raining in the forest.

"Business as usual..." There was no one around, but his sarcasm made him feel better.

Light was crossing the threshold into the room, white, pale. The mist and particulates ushered the light in from the distant tree line.

He wandered round the forest opening three full times, none of which secured his breaking sanity. Impossible as it may be, here it was looming and out of place. The rain hitting his forearm is what made it all too real, he nearly fell out of the room, the back wall of the hallway catching him, he just looked into the grass and trees like prey frozen in the gaze of its fate.

Movement in the trees, His trained instincts kicked in made wild by the adrenalin. His gun met his eye line and the flashlight faded into the light from the impossible forest.

"Dawn?!" It came out meek. He cleared his throat.

"Dawn Teason, This is officer Sajo. Please respond." With no response he decided to go in.

With a short sharp breath he used the tip of his pistol to part the tall grass giving way to the true expanse in front of him.

"Juda? Can you hear me?" It echoed out into the open air. He fought in his head between how impossible this was, and how he had a job to do.

"Don't fucking train you for this do they?" It was really all he had to cope, and he did find himself to be good company.

"Dawn?... Juda?" his flashlight tried to penetrate the deep dark, luckily his eyes were accustomed to the jungle at night.

Still no reply. Just the sullen silence of a teeming jungle surviving till the morning light.

He was scouting through the richly wooded labyrinth using the old growth for landmarks to keep him situated. It was warmer than he would have expected, like the fraction of moonlight that managed to reach him, softly burned like the days' sun.

His paranoia was intent on overcoming his logic, and for good reason, with each step he was increasingly more lost than the last. Until he could situate himself this was likely already a one way ticket. Any disillusion around that would be underestimating the Amazon, which will always lead to ruin.

He felt unusually small, like the forest had grown larger here, its vines thicker, its tree taller, it was on the edge of surreal. It could have just been the extreme night exaggerating his imagination. The clicks, cracks, and chirps all around gave him the humbling understanding that he was not alone, nor was he ever the center of any universe.

Respecting his place in the food chain would only benefit, and it was what his mentor taught him. "Respect your power over things and the power of things that can and will have power over you." He always thought it was damn good advice. All the good it will do him if he gets jumped here in the woods.

"Annnnd that's why you stay outta your own head Sajo." The thought of being jumped by any manner of beastie was not all that unlikely and reminding himself of that did not aid in his attempts to remain calm.

He took a moment to rest his arms from the weight of his firearm. Leaning on the tree next to him he felt it grab onto him as he pressed his uniform to its fleshy bark.

"Well that's just great" A gorey streak of red sap stained a large line into his otherwise pristine uniform that he took a lot of pride in maintaining. Not that it mattered any more. It was ruined now.

He shuffled his shirt out from under his belt and unbuttoned it down one by one. Rolling it up and stuffing it half in his pocket, he was now at the mercy of the insects and plants on his exposed skin from his sleeveless undershirt.

His shirt was sticky, the red sap was warm even through his calloused hands. A small crack and sizzle drew him back to the tree, the sap had sparked and fizzled out with a fiery pop as it ran down the trunk.

He stood in confusion, his head cocking slightly to the side like an inquisitive pup. He looked at the shirt hanging from his pocket, and lifted it with his palm. It was hotter, so much so it scalded his hand. It erupted in flame and he threw it from his pocket to the ground, watching it smoke and burn.

"What in the hell?"

His name tag was enveloped in the heat, reduced to a bubbling plastic pool. The brush beneath began to catch around it and he stomped it out. He was distracted trying to make sense where none was to be had.

A mind stabbing snap in the distant thicket. a creaking bend of a tree crushing under an immense weight. The light penetrated in from the night sky, the treetops that played with it, their leaves bounced its reflection as the trunks were bent and toppled.

He was gripping his firearm tight, it was aimed down at the ground, he balanced himself back and forth on his legs with the hastening of his breath. then from behind, a similar commotion.

He pivoted on the balls of his feet and planted his heels, pulling up to align the sight of his pistol with his turn. Another to his left, he was trying to follow the noise, keep steady his aim, but it was random.

"Multiple targets?" he thought out loud.

He had naturally taken a lower stance, the noises were erupting all around him, dozens of targets, from every angle. Did they know he was here? Was this a trap for him?

Then one by one like a circle around him the movement swept by him. It became a large singular far-off trampling through the brush and trees.

"Okay... ok ok ok.. no no no no no no..." he was muttering to himself quietly for some sanity. He tapped his finger anxiously on the safety of his pistol.

He felt removed, secluded. The night sounds had become a deafening quiet. He was sure he was alone, his instincts were not. He felt like the center of attention for every living organism within a mile, and it took awhile for that to subside.

By the time enough light had leaked in over the horizon that he could make out a break in the canopy a few hundred feet away. Hopefully he could get his bearings, maybe a landmark.

A layer of cold surrounded his skin with the drop in his anxiety. He was shaking it off at the cost of some drowsiness and cold sweat. He had settled his beating chest with some timed breaths and proceeded towards the backlit clearing.

With careful footing he stooped and stepped through the foliage. His legs guided him though while his head turned and swayed listening to his surroundings for threats. He was careful to avoid the red sap trees, his eyes darting between them checking and rechecking the constant onslaught of blindspots.

He approached the treeline of the open meadow unable to see through into the light. The entire forest floor was erupting with mist, creating a dense wall of fog. The peculiar look on his face was stunted in its prime by a large looming shadow slinking past the mist just on the other side from him.

It felt like all he was doing now was looking down the barrel of his gun, once again he found himself aiming down his sights locked on the obscured shade behind the steam. It shook the ground with its movement, pulling away from the haze and disappearing.

It was large, as large as the pit he felt in his gut. He tested the mist, it was hot to the touch. He gave himself a disapproving nod as he knew this was just another bad idea. He pushed through the mist, pistol leading. It wrapped around him with warmth and he himself became a dissipating shadow cast upon the thick fog.

Chapter 14 -

Title

Dawns keys hung from her belt by a scratched and loose carabiner. Despite its wear and lackluster finish it was still sturdy. It snagged and peeled back a small portion of the trendy angular computer desk that was obscured by the tall grass. Its top board has swelled soaking in the heavy rain.

It tugged her sideways and she steadied herself, her weight squeezed the moisture from the corner of its softened surface. It was dirty, like a season's past of reclamation gripping it firmly into the forest decor.

Juda stepped around the couch, his shins still stung from their last encounter.

"This looks like it has been here for... years?"

"This was all fine yesterday." Juda remembered it clearly, he had spilled his coffee across the tiles of the kitchen, right where Dawn was standing.

"I don't understand?" He looked around at the cabinetry consumed by the forest.

"Which part?" Dawn tugged and opened the drawer of the desk, tearing through the plants that had enveloped it. It was spartan and clean on the inside, corroborating Judas perspective.

She had hit the mouse and the computer flicked on, the monitor glowing out from the tree it had been embedded into. The trunk had gripped around the screen as it grew lifting it slightly from its place on the desk, the bark grew up to the edge of the screen peeling back and away from it like an open wound.

"She was right here, there are no footprints or anything?"

Dawn looked into the forest ahead. Judah disengaged Nutz from his shoulder mount and shot it up through the foliage above.

"I'm going to see if I can get a Signal." The Drone shot up like a bullet of light. Its range was a pretty decent range of up to one kilometer. He brought Nuts to its peak and held it there.

"Shit. Still nothing, not even a sat signal?"

"Can you see the facility?"

He spun Nutz around scanning the environment the best he could.

"It's pretty dark I can't see too far. But there is a clearing up ahead about a klick and a half" He made out a milky layer of mist over an opening in the canopy. "We should be able to cut straight through".

"I'm starting to think we should go ba- Juda... Juda! JUDA!"

The entryway was gone, nothing but more forest.

"Where?.. Where'd it go Juda?"

"Awe what the fuck..."

They had taken no more than ten steps through the impossible forest, and already it had closed the way behind.

"This is real bad." Dawn had a damn good sense of their peril.

"We can. We can go back, we, we, we can find our way back-" Juda was getting panicked

"We don't even know where we are."

"Shit, right"

"What do we do?"

"Umm, let's think. We should get a camp set up first. Gather the driest stuff you can find as we go."

"Yea- Yeah. Okay."

"Oh here." He popped up the controls for Nutz and tapped the spotlight follow option. The Drone hovered about 3 feet above him it's lights pointed down over him on a slight angle forward.

"Top Right corner on the presets" He gestured to her wrist controller.

She felt the whiff of air as Deez launched from her shoulder and followed her the same. Both Dawn and Judah were adept in the forest, and they were well equipped, but they both respected the danger being lost out here can pose.

Dawn felt the wet slimey wood at her feet as she scoured the vicinity for some dry spots. a handful of leaves, some small sticks, some dried bark, nothing substantial. Judah was luckier but it came at the cost of some serious paranoia.

He smelled the burnt wood first. The area had been cleared centuries ago and with great care. The central pit was cold, the wood charred on one side. It meant there were people in these woods. No sign of any modern camping gear, just some flat stones placed around the fire for seating, they looked ancient, but recently cleared off.

“Uhh Dawn...”

She followed through to his voice stepping out into the campsite. Its main fire pit lined in tall stones up to her shoulder, each adorned with markings and ash.

“Shit. this is almost ritualistic” Dawn began investigating the area. Juda took up the best of the dried pieces in the burnt pit.

“These are so old. markings carved all over the sides of them.” she continued investigating

“Natives?”

“Probably, I don't recognize the symbolism, but I don't really know many.”

She was drawn to a central stone, it was taller than the rest and it had a tree growing on top of it as if it had been swallowed into the tree. The web of the tree across the top of the stone had been gashed over and over, healed and split again ritually to draw out the now thickened red sap.

The stone itself was sticky on the surface and had a warmth radiating from it. It had a stench, rotten yet sweet like blood and flowers. A small pile of red charcoal was placed delicately at the base of the tree on the stone. She didn't know what any of it meant, but she had an idea what this was, and it did not lighten her mood.

Her foot pressed down into the soft top soil, catching the edge of a stone carved knife with the tip of her shoe. She felt it beneath her, lifting her leg to inspect it. It was heavier than she expected.

Juda dug out the last of the dry wood and started setting up in the pit.

“This should be okay to get us started.”

“Yeah I don't think we should stay here.” She stared at the intricate details carved into its rocky handle crafted with care.

“We will get to the clearing ahead, I'll scout out some more once we establish ourselves somewhere safe.” Juda was trying to sound confident, but the nagging sensation pulled his head space through his worry in obsessive repetition.

Dawn was no better, they both had a knack for putting on a strong face, which made them both stubborn as hell. She was questioning everything she saw, every smell, or taste on the air, every audible whisper, she had to keep control or her panic would get the better of her. The knife just solidified the sensation that they were not alone.

"We should go. This place looks well used."

"Yeah..." Dawn was trying to memorize the stone slabs glyphs, a concentrating furrowed brow as she analyzed. She slipped the dagger into her pocket and they moved on.

They made their way through the forest in a sullen silence. Dawn was heavy with guilt over her conquest to follow the Fawcetts that had led them to this place. Juda concentrated more on the here and now. He pulled out his compass, he was scrambling for some sense of location, the compass needle was suspended, perfectly locked towards the distant light of the clearing.

"That clearing is straight ahead north."

"Yeah? So we set up camp, wait for some more light?" Dawn smeared the feeding mosquito down her forearm and rolled her sleeves down.

"Drones will be useless in the dark. Should be able to get high enough to spot some landmarks in the morning though."

"This place feels weird. almost bigger."

"I've never seen overgrowth like this."

"Isn't that bad? Doesn't that mean we are deep in old growth?"

"Shit, I don't know anything at this point Dawn, I've been right beside you this entire time, what you know, I know."

"Sorry, just trying to make sense... honestly, I'm probably just thinking out loud to feel less crazy."

"Is it working?"

"Not so much, no."

"Well you're only crazy if I am, cause everything about this is fucked up."

It was. Even the forest floor felt different beneath their steps, softer, untouched.

They had both spent a lot of time in the forest over the years, seen some old growth, but this was even older; Ancient towering Lupuna trees, some wrapped in centuries old Strangler Fig vines. Even Shaded by the massive palms, the forest floor was vibrant with orchids and poinsettia, this place was virgin jungle, and for a long time.

"It's a beautiful place to die at least." They both at some point thought it, although neither said it.

Deez and Nuts had risen a bit higher above the thick canvassing of lush tropical flora. It was casting surreal shadows from the entanglement of vines that stretched from tree to massive tree.

Juda stumbled, his foot felt the absence of ground and he toppled forward into the ditch ahead. It wound through the nearby tree's becoming a slippery muddy trench as the rain accumulated. His injured knee took the brunt but held strong, with just a significant amount of pain.

"Ahhhgh, AHH man , fuck."

He had managed to claw at the muddy wall of the small ravine, and grappled himself up and out of the natural mud trap.

"Ahh Shit."

"You Alright?" She turned back to look at him, Nutz positioned above dangling light into his frustrated face.

She shifted her focus behind him in the shadow at the edge of his light.

A tall figure looming, made of the darkest shadow, its form of an extraordinarily tall man, It was slender with a head like a stag. Its long antlers were entwined with flowers and vines that stemmed from the flesh at the antler's base. The pale white face of the creature had a dark blue nose that seemed luminescent in the dark. Its long white hairs were packed with mud, its hand's black with soot.

It's animalistic black eyes only revealed the edge of their whites as it looked from her to Juda, as if selecting between the two.

"AHHHH!" She shrieked and toppled back. Deez follows to keep her illuminated.

Juda turned to an empty forest. Dawn lifted herself to find them alone, the mystical entity gone.

"What the hell Dawn?"

"I.. I.." she looked frantically around them. Nothing.

"There was a thing..." she trailed off

"Dawn?"

"Sorry. Nothing just letting the paranoia get the best of me I guess."

"Nuh uh, not here, not after the fucked up stuff we just saw. What happened Dawn?"

"I thought. It was that thing or something like it."

"Not a Mind reader here, what thing?"

"Sorry umm, the uh. The Security footage. The bit at the end after the forest grew."

"Jesus Dawn, you're joking right?"

"I don't know. I mean, it was just a flash. Maybe I did?"

"Shit. well... Fuck."

"Can we just go?"

"Not gonna argue."

They pressed on. Cautiously was an understatement, every step they took, every sound they made or heard, they would stop and survey their surroundings. It slowed them down significantly as the forest had no shortage of reasons to create daunting noises in the deep.

Small comfort came from the rain's end, although below the canopy was still a wet mess. Eventually the last of the trickling droplets from the frondescence above would subside and give them some relief.

Even with the extraordinary circumstances of their arrival here Juda was becoming concerned about their more grounded needs. His feet were already soaked from the ditch, he needed to dry them out before they went too far.

The trail from the campsite had become nothing but bush, a bush that Nutz was starting to have trouble penetrating with its shafts of LED light. They were getting bogged down by the dense underbrush between the colossal giants of this impossible valley.

Each massive monument of nature was mostly clear around its base where the light could barely reach. It was the brush between their brethren that had taken the opportunity of the added light and sprung up a fortress wall of verdant green.

"Hold up Dawn." He dropped the wood and his pack on a fairly dry patch of raised ground beneath a massive Lupuna Tree. Its elephant-like skin was dry near its roots, the rain hadn't reached them even through its intense downpour, a testament to the dense scale of the tree's canopy above.

"This is getting a little thick, and light will come soon. I think we should stick here for now."

"You said it was only a few hundred meters?"

"Yeah, but it's not exactly a straight line here is it? Plus I need to dry out the best I can."

"Shit, ok yeah. I have some extra socks..." She slumped her bag down next to him and started to dig through its contents.

Juda had pulled out his zippo from his small plastic kit, and was placing the wood atop the leaves and bark Dawn had carried. He had made a lot of fires here amongst the wetlands, he made short work of it.

“Not much but throw you socks over it.” He gestured to Dawn for her sweaty socks and she looked at him brow furrowed.

“Yeah, I got it” She wrapped them over a rock which she placed near the boundary of heat emitted from their small fire. Juda was stoking it with some sticks and debris from around. He had placed a few larger sticks near the fire as a rack, as well as to dry it out for more wood.

Dawn pinned up a tarp above them across the massive roots of the tree. their natural sloped down into the ground, which made it easy. Surprisingly they had a pretty large area for some lounging while they rested.

They hadn’t even noticed the shift from the light from a night blue to a red hue. It wasn’t any brighter out in the forest, but the color had changed. Perhaps it was the firelight that blended the odd new tinge of the forest.

Dawn was having a hard time. Like an image from the tv burned into the back of her lids, that creature would appear everytime she tried to rest her eyes. The details were fuzzy now, but the daunting size, and the outline of its horns gave it a demonic overtone. The Glowing blue nose, and the tips of its fingers glowing through the soot, it was pretty in a “terrified of the unknown” kind of way.

Juda was lucky to have the capacity to completely zone out, something he shared with Dawn by passing over the joint he had pre-rolled.

“Oh Jesus yes.” Its potent skunk was refreshing, a comforting stink for the habitual user. She drew it in and felt the anxiety leave with her exhale. It may be brief, but it was welcomed.

“What do you think Percy was really doing out here?” He took a long draw, he had rolled it thick, he intended to get right baked.

“Honestly I have no idea now. I don’t even know what I am looking for now.”

“Besides, how to get back?”

“Yeah. I guess.”

It was supposed to be motivating, but the truth of the matter was it might not be very likely they will. They took a moment of silence as they dosed themselves.

“You never did tell me what was in the letter.”

“Enough to get everyone killed.”

"Come on Dawn.."

She withheld the joint, taking a few puffs for herself. The fire flicker was a good focus point as she replayed the night at Dead Horse.

Each moment flicked by with the wisps of the fires tips. It took her concentration away from her loss when she noticed the odd colors emitting from the fiery points, fractal shapes lined with dissipating color flickered around the most intense edges of the flames dancing forms.

"Hey!" Juda slapped her shoulder gently with the back of his dirty hand.

"It's not a sharing stick come on pass it off"

She snapped back to her reality and handed it to him with a smirk.

"What?"

"It kinda is tho..."

"What?"

"A Sharing stick" she let out the little nervous giggle that he had always loved

"Heh, yeah, right again eh?"

"Being right isn't great when you have to pay for it."

"None of this was your fault, or mine, or Percy Fawcett's. whatever this shit is. whatever the fuck we ended up tied up in here. It's something primal."

"Primal" She said it more to herself than anything. It was a perfect descriptor for this old growth around them. The thickness of the brush, the sturdy stalks of the ferns, the flowers intense blooms, everything screamed primal.

"Speaking of which, I have some primal needs to tend to." Juda gestured to the bushes.

"Gross"

"Just a number one, gotta stay hydrated right?"

"Still gross"

He chuckled through his anxiety and stood up to take a leak. The dark forest was not inviting in the least. He simply hopped up and over the massive root to do his business on the other side.

It's size completely obscured him from Dawn for some privacy. But it also obscured the light of the fire, and he could now see the odd red tinge to the forests' depth. He chalked it up to

his eye adjusting from the fire, it wasn't long until he was finished with his relief in the form of a puddle on the forest floor.

He looked up through the few spots in the canopy above, the tree was foreboding, standing in judgment, he felt a moment of sickness, vertigo from looking up its immense trunk. He felt a sweeping sensation of remorse, no reason, nor memory or thought to trigger it, like the tree had been angered over his thoughtless deposit.

His hesitation was brief and he threw himself back over the roots into the safety of the firelight.

Dawn had become engrossed with Percy's letter and her notes. She had brought all her journals and research from over the last 4 years.

She had been on her own pilgrimage searching for clues to the mysteries of the most ancient forest, the Fawcett mystery but only one of the many myths and legends she had been consumed by.

El Tunichi, Fawcett, the impossible jungle, ACRN, the crash, Chris's death, the widows call, Virginia... all disparate pieces of a larger puzzle, but nothing was coalescing into any tangible image in all this absurdity.

She liked lists, but this list was getting long with unanswered questions, each line item wrapped in an ironclad confusion.

"Maybe Fawcett came back on purpose. Maybe something happened to him the first time around at Dead Horse Camp?" She had some decent reasoning, He had claimed to have had to put down his lame horse there in his first attempt into the jungle, years prior to his disappearance.

"Think that's why he came back here?"

"Maybe he saw that thing and survived? Maybe that was what killed his horse?"

"I mean yeah, that could add up, but if so why go back?"

That was a good question. "Why risk his son" she thought to herself "especially if he knew what was there waiting in the forest for them."

"His Family eventually released his notes, he talked a lot about Helena Blavatsky and her role in the birth of Theosophy. It was said he even became convinced his son and him had some connection to his lost City."

"So what, he came back with his son to find El Tunichi?"

"Maybe. Don't know why, I saw what it did" She had to catch herself from tensing up with the memories.

"Who the hell is Blavatsky?"

"She was a russian occultist Philosopher who co-founded the Theosophy movement in the 1800's. "

"Say that again?"

"She had influenced people through theosophy like Fawcett and Jules Verne."

She read a passage from her own notes on the subject.

"An unsectarian body of seekers after Truth, who endeavor to promote Brotherhood and strive to serve humanity. The self described motivations and purpose of the Theosophical Society founded in 1875."

"They were believers more in science, not doctrine. They were unsectarian, and didn't require any sort of belief for membership. Just a steadfast group without distinction for race, creed, sex, caste, or color."

"Sounds nice"

"There is no religion higher than truth."

"Amen to that.. I guess." A bit of a chuckle ended his statement.

"It says they encouraged the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science, Investigating the unexplained laws of nature, and the powers latent in man."

"Like transhumanism"

"Not really, maybe? I mean Transhumanism wasn't really a thing back then."

"So what Percy was an occultist?"

"Not really, his brother introduced him to theosophy, and like his family before him had a fascination with the occult. Blavatsky spoke about Monk Masters who served in great cities hidden about the world. Masters of hidden cities that Fawcett clung to, serving into his story about the city of Z"

Juda tested his socks, they were stiff and dry on one side, he flipped both his and Dawns.

"Say anything about that freaking glowing eye'd thing?"

"Not in theosophy. But one connection is Virginia.

"Ginny, what?"

"Look. Among all various takes on the El Tunichi legend, many tie to widows like her, luring them into the forest to end their suffering."

"Okay now that's a bit unnerving."

"Everything is unnerving at this point. This is all I can do to not freak out."

"Keep the stories coming. I'm not in the mood to sit in my own head."

Juda broke down the thicker branches he had been drying and added them to the dwindling fire.

Dawn began to take her own accounts and put them in ink. She would constantly put things in note form, trying to order and re-order the events, scratching those out that she needed to reposition as new details came to mind.

From the letter to the crash she had gotten her head around the events, All except Virginia.

"Did Ginny usually call ahead before she came to the Observatory?"

"It was always an ordeal. Logistics up the ass when the Beatty's came. But that was always because they were planning an expedition. They never really came for the fun of it."

"I miss Chris"

"Yeah me too"

They both had gotten close to him in their own respective ways. Chris was an inspiration to his team, like his father before. It was always important to him that everyone had a part, a purpose, and he would keep them focused on it.

Dawn was their protege, until she left, abandoning the team in pursuit of her own ambitions. She had used the opportunity for the internship as a way to get her to South America.

Her ambitions were always to be a treasure hunter, not that it was an actual thing, but the allure for adventure from the movies was always something that motivated her. Being a pioneer, finding things lost, it was an infatuation.

Virginia had invested a lot into her, all at Chris's behest, and it took some time for the two of them to respect each other, even longer to become friends.

"What even happened with you two?"

"It was nothing," she wanted to avoid it.

"Seriously though you were there one day, gone the next. Chris was pissed for weeks if anyone even mentioned you. Ginny, she was sad, she just went back home."

"I didn't come here to work at ACRN."

"I mean, it is just a job."

"It's more than that to you guys though, the whole team, it was your life. I came here to do what we are doing now. Discover new things."

"We were discovering."

"Yeah but I mean like, really exploring, not cautiously probing like Chris, Even Ginny wanted more."

"You gotta be careful here. I don't blame him."

"I only took the internship to get here and get some cash and start my own thing. So I left. Once he had announced to the team that day that I had completed my hours for the internship... I left."

"Jeeze, no wonder he was pissed. They saw you taking over that place"

"Shit really?"

"Yeah that's why Virginia interviewed like 200 applicants."

"Fuck. What?. No.."

"Seriously, they were trying to find someone who could man their station after-" He stopped, she didn't know.

"After what?"

"Man. Dawn."

"What Juda?"

"Shit Dawn, he ended up in a wheelchair. Some degenerative disease he never talked about. The doctors told him he couldn't even fly anymore."

"What!?"

"Yeah like 3 months after you left. He needed you"

"Oh my god."

She had pulled herself inward, slouching her back into an arch and coddling her knees. She put pressure on her chest for a sensation of security. She left him, cocky and self assured. She even laughed him off when he tried to get her to stay, and now that was the last conversation she had with a dead man she once admired.

But even her admiration for the man couldn't compete against her lust to make a mark on this forest. She considered herself a self taught archeologist with a focus on lore and history, finding their parallels, and it all led her to the lost letter. Was it worth it?

She still held out hope that there would be answers coming, something to justify the losses she had faced. She felt bad about that too, a little guilt over her continued ambition amidst their desperation.

"Sorry to lay that on you like that"

"It's okay. I asked. Rather you'd be honest than a lying asshole."

He felt bad about that. His pining still persisted even though life was precarious at best at the moment. The cliché had occurred to him of professing his love in the face of their untethered future. But like a bad 'Dawn' pun, she hated clichés.

"Yeah, no problem."

It was a problem. Just one more of his problems that he was ignoring at the moment.

"I had no idea."

"Kinda figured that."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Really? How was that up to me? Not to mention you only reached out to me 2 months ago."

"Fair enough."

"I think Ginny was more pissed at you"

"I bet."

"She had to take over for him here. For months they were apart, months she should have been with him as he was acclimating to his health issues."

"Jesus Juda."

"What? Honesty you said."

"Fuck."

Now she felt even more beholden in her chase after Virginia.

"I have to find her Juda."

"I know. So do I."

"Why you?"

"For..." He hesitated, the truth was not something he was prepared to admit,

"For Chris. I owe him more than you know."

Chris had once confronted Juda about his lust for Ginny. Despite that he kept Juda on, mentored him, and helped him learn to survive deeper in the jungle than most had ever been.

Juda had come onboard as a photographer. His custom drones could get some of the best shots in the most remote places, and Chris immediately saw his potential. Chris was never one to put personal before professional. He actually taught Juda a little something in that respect, that's why he kept his distance from Virginia regardless of his yearnings for her.

Distant crashing in the forest caused a moment of lucid silence. They had gotten comfortable and it was as if the forest wanted to just remind them of the imminent peril in any given direction.

It worked.

They were both exhausted, but neither would sleep. They continued their discussions trying to connect the events to the limited information. It was like the first few months at ACRN again, working as a team pouring over mounds of research. A little nostalgia went a long way in relieving their tension.

The fire was nearly dead, but the forest had already lightened with a yellow glow, the sun must be rising, it was time to move. Their feet were dry, their gear was stowed, they pressed through back into the thicket.

Their clothes were wet again in an instant, but that was to be expected, their feet were nice and dry, which is a matter of survival. They had come through to a more spacious area of the woodlands, the spaces between things had grown and the clearing of mist had come in sight.

"What the hell?"

Another Mystery this one literally steaming, as the mist rose up from the floor where the cold air hit the hot. It was mesmerizing and mystical, the thick sheets rolled over one another, swirling the moist particles fluidly around.

Its immensity became more apparent as their approach brought them closer, it spanned from the ground up into the oversized overgrowth of the canopy above. A line of ancient wood acted as the outskirts of the vapor barrier that diffused the open light pouring into the space beyond.

"Is that Steam?.. Ahh! It's hot...ish" Dawn pressed her hand into the wall of mist that had completely obscured the open clearing from view.

"This is ridiculous." Juda was having a bit of a spat in his head. Every few steps made things less sensical than the previous few. And now a cascading wall of up flowing water stood in their way.

"Fuck it." Dawn Stepped through.

"Dawn wait.. Goddamnit." Juda was consumed by the warm mist. They both became fading shadows cast on the translucent wall.

Chapter 15 -

Title

She had no bearing, no concept of what time it was, or even how she ended up in the forest. Virginia remembered falling asleep, but not wandering into the woods. No pack, no supplies, she was ill equipped for a jungle trek. Panic overcame her confusion, she didn't even know which way was north, the canopy above, too thick to see the stars.

She shuddered with tears, afraid and alone, she pulled at her sleeves to cover her hands and wipe the moisture from her face. The rain fell harder and louder.

"What the hell is happening to me!" She softly whispered, knowing of the things attracted to the noise in the night.

If this was a dream it was vivid. All her senses were in overdrive, She was less and less convinced of a dream state as the sounds and sensations of the familiar forest washed over her.

But it wasn't familiar, it was unusually old, the growth thick, withholding the light. She felt small, unassuming amidst the gentle giants that supported the umbrella of leaves above. She cowered in a pocket of thick roots at the base of one.

Wet and cold from her angst, she could not keep the strength in her legs. All her energy was dedicated to her hopelessness, her sorrow for Chris, and now fear for herself. It had become too real, her dreams, and waking visions, the bright eyed specter, the journal.

"The journal!" She thought to herself. The reality of it was her rational mind needed to distract her from her boiling emotions that had assumed control. The book was a good place to start.

She remembered an entry early on. It was a pressed flower, an unusually large orchid petal. Its note in particular was what she was scanning for.

"I Awoke, gripping the orchid petal from my dream. The Vanilla Orchid Petal. Usually small and thin, Here they are thick and long, like everything in the ancient recurring forest of my dreams. But here it is sitting right in front of me...is this real? Am I still asleep?"

Chris had lots of questions scrolled across the pages, and none had answers. He was finding artifacts of his dreamstate in his waking world. He was beginning to question his dreams, probing for truth, a basis in reality. The pedal was a truth he wasn't ready to face. Not yet at least.

She read his entries in his voice, it gave her a sense that he was there with her. She never needed him for anything, they weren't like that, they were partners in all. But that almost made it worse, a true half of her was missing, she felt stupid for thinking she could reclaim it here in the jungle. It was more likely it would claim her first.

She had stopped crying mostly, the rain had let up as she was flipping through the pages, just gazing at them. The action of the turning pages was enough to keep her from erupting again, but she knew if she stopped it would all flood back.

She needed a clue. If Chris had been here, if he was here, she needed to find the tribe. But they would always find him. He never spoke about going to them, always waking up with them. Unsure how he got there. Another parallel. Was Chris missing time too?

He recounted in one entry about a guide, he'd have flashes of being guided by a keeper he called it, a tall being with the head of an animal, different each time he saw it. He believed it was these creatures who would take him to the tribe, but he only remembered it once.

Another later entry he learned the name of one of the beings from a tribesman.

"Anesidora" It read, She said it aloud along with the words. It felt familiar on her lips.

The snap of moisture escaping the dense wood of the fire played off the trunks and leaves across from her, a fire that hadn't been there before, a place she had not brought herself too. She was standing over the dancing light. She was unsure of what she was seeing at first, still foggy and exhausted from the months of grief that had caught up with her.

"Fire? CHRIS!" She twisted herself around to look for any sign of life that had started the hearth, her wet clothes stuck to her in a cold embrace. She could already feel the warmth reflecting off the large stones and welcomed it.

It was a campsite, a stoked fire, and a large stone altar embedded into a split in a large tree's base which stood looming across from her. Its roots wrapped around it, it was grown that way, purposefully. Its surface slick with what looked like thick and sticky blood.

The embrace of the fire was intoxicating enough to draw her curiosity out. She became all too aware of her misjudgment when it set in, suddenly a stoked fire and yet she was alone. Someone had to be close, or did she build it? Again she had lost herself to time.

The Altar had a knife carved out of a solid piece of intricate stone work, she rushed quickly to the stone slab and she took it up for protection. The tree had been cut with it, she could see that now, the red sap was dripping out of the fresh wound in the arch that had grown over the stone.

A small pile of shaved wood was delicately placed and the sap had reached its outer ring. A pop and sizzle accompanied the burst of flame that jumped her back. Another sparked the flame up into the strips of fiber that began to smolder and smoke.

Her back to the Campsite she was stepping away from the altar, it was the reflection of blue light cast from behind that formed a figures shadow around the rocky tablet infront of her. She felt the presence behind her, the ground was bright with blue light between her legs.

The knife led her spin, pointed readily at the luminescent creature, their thick white hair melded into their black skin all around their twitching nose. Their skin coursed with blue energy that sputtered up their nervous system in an array of dotted lights. The dark eyes of the Doe-like head peered into her, beyond a look, past a stare and penetrating her mind's eye. She was frozen. but not in fear. In awe.

They towered above her, their immense height made them proportional to the Ancient timber that surrounded them. The tips of their antlers must have breached four meters, wrapped in flowering vines and leafy foliage that sprouted from their own skin at the antler's base.

The Doe's white pelt continued to cover its slender, femanine, human form. They were wrapped in weathered cloth around their breast, with a short tattered loincloth of tanned leaves wrapping their waist as protection from the elements.

Their cloven hooves led up their reverse knee which bent as they leaned down to meet her stature. Their hands and forearms, hooves and calves were artfully painted with dark crimson soot. Intentional, ritualistic, the soot streaked up their limbs blending chaotically into their thick white hair.

But even through the dark red ash and their black skin below the fur, the blue luminescence permeated out, revealing in pulses the veins and nerves that made up its physical form. connected like constellations by lines that streaked between the stars.

The light would trickle up the exposed skin from their fingertips through their palms, up and under the dirty soot tinged mange.

The pulsing luminescence followed the calming beat of their heart. A rhythm that soothed Virginia with the radiating warmth from the cool blue light. Even the vines entwined in their majestic rack, pulsed with blue power bringing color to the bloom between the antlers.

Their foreboding size didn't cause her any terror. Her hand dropped and her violent intentions drifted. The Stone dagger slipped from her hands and with a dull thud settled on the forest floor.

They had no intention of harming her, she knew that. With an outstretched arm, their slender hand hung lightley, wanting of her touch.

She felt light, floaty, like gravity had been given a reprieve. Her hesitation was more out of facination than caution. This being was nothing short of inspiring, beauty and elegance in their movement, she could sense their connection with the natural surroundings.

Where they made contact with the earth below, grass and stems would flower and sprout. The vibrancy of the campsite had soaked in its blue light like a refreshing morning sunlight giving rise to the new day.

It was a part of this environment, as much as the smallest sapling or massive mahogany. And it was inviting her.

She laid the back of her hand gingerly on their open palm, their skin was both warm and cool to the touch. The energy of its pulsing internal light coursed through her, a connection with its essence like a closed circuit.

With one swift movement they had gripped her forearm and pulled her in, she floated back with their embrace, resting softly down upon the altar behind her. She laid still, her eyes closed, warm and comforted floating inches from the altars sticky surface.

They took up the cooled red charcoal of the small ritual sap fire that had filled to an end on the stone tablets surface. It crushed and rubbed the burnt fiber into an ashen powder. They took up her hands gently and streaked the fine dust up to her elbow, taking great care with each stroke, fraying the edges, blending it artfully into flames of dark rose ash running up her limbs.

The same to her legs up to the knee gently clawing the pattern and design with a drag of its spaced fingers up her calves. They moved over her, their motions smooth and whimsical.

It completed her preparations and stood staring down at her next to the stone altar. They contemplated their next purpose, as if coming to terms with their intention. They reached around the back of her neck and pulled her closer, and gently placed their thumb to the center of her forehead and the forest fell from around them.

Through her, their energy flowed. Her nervous system followed the beat, glowing and pulsing with the heart of the gentle beast.

She knew their full title... Moreover she now knew the meaning of their name and purpose. "Anesidora O Guia das Mães or Giver of Gifts, The Widow's Guide". An exalted creature of the forest, an ancient protector, and a keeper of what they called The Widows Grace.

She began to understand many things, the various forms and functions of the creatures which fill this strange place. The jungle's intentions itself, though not self aware in nature. But still, demanding were its needs, and the difficult cosmic quotient required to fill them.

Their connection filled her with several lifetimes of information, much which she would not retain. They picked through and parsed the information for her, making permanent in her knowledge only the ideas and tools she would need for her next journey, leaving everything else to fade from memory so as not to break her mind.

It passed her their genetic information, the “legacy of existence” a recurring theme. She was disconnected, ethereal. Flashes of a ritual, a tribe of humans amidst their towering animalistic gods.

Indistinguishable was the wall between her dreams and the waking world. Her mind was not within her but outward facing, making connections with the tendrils of the universe.

Over and over a picture of light interjected their conscious connection, each flash became more defined. A monolithic tree with outstretched branches lined with every flower of the jungle. Its massive scale stood alone atop a mountain peak, but not a mountain, a towering pyramid, with sharp angles made soft from weathering through the centuries it has stood.

The roots strangled the pyramids peak, protruding, prominent, it stood strong above the forest floor below. The large arcs of its roots glowing with a sheet of liquid light. Like unmixed oil paints merging at their edges, the colors of the fractal patterned light melded and pooled on the thin flat surface, a pond of energy at the hardwood's foundation.

It repeated, until it was all either of them could see. The large slabs of bedrock, hand crafted and now weathered, owned by the forest which had reclaimed it. Lit up by the ethereal light of the gateway the sturdy heart of the thick wooden stem was in a state of constant renewal.

Their eternity in a single moment which abruptly came to an end. Her guide gave themselves to her to fulfill their purpose. The verdant growth at its feet intensified, the altar embraced with new growth which decayed alongside the vicerele visage of her benefactor.

It dissipated with a blue glowing ash, drifting up towards the canopy until the last flake of its thumb peeled from her forehead and rejoined with what she now knew as the one constant, the energy of life.

It had given her a gift, not just its life, but its understanding. She was filled with purpose, although she could not tell if it was her own. She was more than just herself. She belonged now to something greater.

But she also gained something personal, a feeling, a connection. She could feel Chris, and he was crying out from the jungle, lost, in agony. With a shout of his voice, penitent, longing, she sprang up from the cold tacky slab. Alone once more, she reached to touch her forehead, reminiscent of her connection.

She wrung her fingers together over the layer of soot, she watched remnants of energy climb her hand and up her arm, condensing a lingering light in her chest.

She slipped her bare feet down onto the cool soil below, gripping into it with her toes, she felt more grounded than ever. In the moment she connected with the earth below all around the campsite encircling her, the rumblings of movement, tearing of vine and breaking of branches coiled around her.

Grass sprouted from around her feet and tickled her arch below. the light of its growth fading as the last of her guides energy seeped back into their mother earth.

She was entranced by the distant light through the woods, so much so the emerging trouncing and crashing of the forest behind her made little difference to her. A shadow loomed above her winding and entwining through the treetops. Yet she didn't even glance, nor peek, nor a peripheral gaze. She let it be, considering it as natural as the trees around her.

The thick girthy form of a massive serpent pulled itself from its resting slumber and hovered over her, blocking the rain from hitting her. It followed in her footsteps, the moss and soil on its back trickling down around her as it uncoiled and followed in her steps.

She led them both into the dense wood following a hidden trailer that glowed with life and energy, she had brought them both to a wall of mist, a dense warm fog swirled like liquid flowing upwards from the forest floor.

She lifted her forearms into the mist and it moved around her solid mass. It left a dampness on her skin that cooled when she pulled her appendage from the thickened moisture.

The serpent pushed through the mists above her and she felt the draw of what lay beyond. Chris's voice stuck in her ear, a call to her, a desperate whisper to join him beyond the curtain of moisture. She lifted her head, closed her eyes, and spread out her chest. With her arms wide she plunged through, becoming a distant shadow deep into the dark heart of the misted veil.

Chapter 16 -

Title

The rain had completely stopped the moment they emerged from the curtain of mist. It wasn't silent, but more an audible muffled sensation. A deep pulsing roar of natural bass encompassed the domain of the open grove. Both Dawn and Juda felt it, heard it, like a barrotone chant, keeping a rhythm.

A dark clouded veil blanketed the sky diffusing an intense light from above, The large glade was overcome with the dense steam rolling outward from the deep vents cut into the forest floor. The fog rolled up over the tree's and bush that lay overturned, inexplicably blasted inward towards the epicenter of the now flattened woods.

Roots torn, the brush blown inward, something had drawn in with force the forest's sacrifice. The blasted forest remains had a thick layer of fresh vegetation, littered with primeval flowering blooms and ferns. it was thickest near the central glade, where hung a large monolithic sphere hovering mere inches from the ground.

The thick growth at its base has been kept from touching its surface by some invisible force. The same force made a perfect round impression of the orb in the ground below.

The heated sheet of steam kept close to the ground until meeting the cool wall of the standing forest's perimeter. There it rose up to curtain the outer treeline with the dense mist they pushed through. Juda had launched Nutz up above the tall growth in hopes of some reprieve from their desolation in the guise of a familiar landmark.

"Shit."

"Again?" Dawn was getting a little tired of the constant mishaps.

"Well I think I recognize the ridge to the south west, could be ACRN is just on the other side. But..." He trailed off, rifling through his pockets.

"Buuuuutttt."

He fumbled open his compass and watched the dial calibrate itself. "According to my compass that would put north not where it should be soooo..." He trailed off again.

"Will you finish a goddamn thought please."

"I dunno, sorry, It's just. I wish I could see the stars."

"At least that's something."

"Yeah. I guess" He continued to look around, trying to find another point of reference.

His meandering focus had lost Dawn's attention and she wandered past the upturned roots, and wound her way toward the center of the clearing.

"Dawn?, Come on Dawn..." He shook his head and followed to keep her in eye shot.

"You've never watched a movie before? Stop wandering-."

Rounding the corner he saw it. Standing next to it made Dawn seem small, it was over a foot taller than her, floating absolutely still. The Sphere monolith.

"I've seen something similar before!" Dawn began analyzing the sphere

"How the Fuck have you seen this before?. How the hell is it just floating there!"

"Listen. They found these Spherical stones all over Costa Rica The umm... uhh Diquís Spheres, the lost Diquís tribe."

"We are nowhere near Costa Rica."

"I mean we are closer than Bosnia."

"Uhh yeah..."

"Sorry, context. One of the largest spheres found to date was found all the way in Boznian Jungles in Africa. Since then several have been found all across South America, Peru, Columbia, Ecuador. No explanation on how they were formed or even moved."

"Still though HOW!?" He gestured at its unearthly levitation.

"Yeah that. I have no idea."

"And it's like the entire jungle was uprooted towards it like a magnet! Any record of that?"

"Well no..the other spheres were ancient."

"So then why the hell is it here? Why are WE here?"

"Ask as many questions as you wan't. I'm actually trying to find answers here."

"pfff answers. right."

"Those other spheres were ancient, this... this is brand new." She was scouring the orbs surface, on her knees trying to get a better view of the orbs underside.

"What the ... " The smell of burning rubber hit her nose. A piece of embedded bent steel curved around the back obscured from her view. Between them a furnace of pressure glowing red, as the orb pressed into the stone below.

"huh."

She shifted her focus a few hundred paces away...

"Feet?"

a pair of feminine feet, colored red with soot streaked up the shin, step by step they approached from the distant treeline.

"Shit. We should go."

Dawn Locked her foot into the twisted uprooting next to her and lifted herself just enough to peer over the top of the orb.

A wall of heat, waves like warped glass peeled off the orb peak. It obscured her delicate features in the distance, Dawn had to squint.

"Ginny?!"

A few more steps and she became clear, although she seemed entirely unaware of Dawn.

"Gi-Mhhmmnmm"

Juda pulled her back and down, her ankle twisting in the roots, extending past its threshold and a splinter of pain shot up her leg before the root made loose,. The two were thrown back to the ground.

“Mmmm hmmm mmmm!”

Her muffled cries through Judas tight grasp she tried to reach her leg but he held her steadfast. He dragged them both behind the wooded camouflage.

She was breathing heavily through her nose. Her ankle wasn't broken, she could put her weight on it. Through the pain it was Judas incessant stare out through the entanglement that held her attention.

Through the tangles and dirt she watched Virginias' approach. But it was the distant stir from the wall of mist, the toppling movements of the tree tops that had them both fixated.

A giant serpent's head had pressed on through the treetops out into the open meadow following in Virginias' footfall. Its large tongue snapped through the air tasting the world around it. Patches of emerald scales speckled the long past roasted skin, burned and stripped of its armor, now exposed to the forest floor and its dangers.

A ruthless violent past scarred its maw. A massive head burnt by fire, one eye whitened by the kiss of the flames and a large scar running from nose tip to its crown had been cleaved through, splitting the top of its mammoth head in two.

Ancient and towering, its casted shadow that dwarfed Virginia below, it pulled over top following her path. A menacing colossal cranium just past a meter in length swayed high, taking great care to remain close to its mark.

Its jaw dropped low, its head split in two along its gaping scar. Moving independently but in unison, the splayed skull stretched open into a yawn. It's fangs protruded from the independent parts, stretching out into warm wet air. Venom filled pikes as long as Virginias' arm. It towered like a giant worm, surveying the surroundings through its one good eye, testing the air.

The last of its thick anatomy slithered out from the vapor veiled thicket. It had been through hellfire. The rain of ash and fire, impacts from meteor fall like the surface of the moon, large striped patches of exposed flesh, its scaly armor hacked and torn off in some long forgotten ritual. An eternity of history etched into its girthy ancient embodiment.

It used its mammoth size to clear the debris from the treeline to the orb, taking great care in its movements to keep Virginia from any danger. The ground moved beneath them with its hulking movements, lumbering towards the sphere altar.

It heaved its heavy mass, its underbelly pressing into the mud and dirt leaving a thick trench, knee deep and a meter wide, similar to the rut that Judah had stumbled into. Dawn

and Juda were lucky not to be spotted, they stumbled back further in between the roots and felled trees for safety, as the behemoth approached the orb.

They both leered through the roots, watching in disbelief.

Chapter 17 -

Title

The forest had gone silent, the rain had stopped in an instant, the solemn silence was a cold reminder of Sajo's isolation. The fearsome nocturnal forest now gave way to light, scented of fresh soil, and burnt clay. Lingering and unnervingly mute, restrained in the center of the open clearing, the orb postured, daunting and indistinct.

Another crash permeated a deep echoing bass that emanated from what felt like within his skull. The ground shook. His peripheral caught the motion, but what he saw he couldn't fathom. A large slithering tail breaking the silence of the forest low roaring silence.

"Ho!...kay..." He almost peaked out into a yell, but muffled his reaction into a whispered worry.

"Jesus christ." He pulled back to cover, his safety slipped and the bullet in his chamber stood ready to break past its brass casing

The tail had disappeared back through the mist, he had lost sight but could still hear its rumbling. The former wilds of the clearing now lay like a grave of nature, shaking and shifting with the reverberations of the creature's movement.

He Swung around his covered protection, aimed and ready. He stepped back out, probing the tide of vapor for movement. The threat was gone, his arms relaxed, lowering to his sides and he was once again entranced by the impossible orb.

It had power, energy, its low growl like a heartbeat, perforated its surroundings. It was intoxicating to watch it hold fast in its unnatural stillness.

The overcast sky shifted between red and yellow hues, giving the glade a surreal authoritative tone. It played off the ashen streaked white of Virginias' vesture which caught his scrutiny.

He knew her, it had been years, but he knew her. Virginia Mora. By his recollection she had returned to Vancouver to be with Chris in his failing health. She became overshadowed, as did his mind rife with panic. The towering beastly ophidian snaked its way from the misted jungle ceiling, hovering above Virginias' steps, following her in tandem.

His firearm raised from instinct, but he hesitated. What could his pistol possibly provide in stopping power against the grotesque goliath viper. He struggled to scrounge his panic

stricken mind for alternatives, she was nearing the orb and the serpent was nearing its mark.

“VIRGINIA!” He let loose his cry knowing well of the attention it would incur.

She didn’t move or flinch, nor gaze in his bearing. His call fell in the air unheard or unwanted. Attention cast from the serpents summit however, that was more than enough to instill him with a guttural dread, which caused him to clench every clenchable muscle he had.

No forethought, no plan, he lunged through the war torn mine field of thrashed nature as the beast's torrential rage filled the ravaged glade.

Its anatomy was well suited to the hunt amidst the fallen topiary. No sapling , nor seedling, nor seed or sprout was safe from its trampling pursuit.

Sajo was far more agile and covert than the beast's first assessment. It slithered soundly over the brush and debris, taking little notice of the damage to its bare, scarred, flesh.

Droplets of saliva flicked from its tongue' tip, capturing the flavor of the mist, tracking and sensing Sajos formidable musk.

It seethed and spat, slinking and scouring the fallen saplings of the spoiled sanctuary. Its roaring hiss was more like a loud static in his ear. He had to stay moving, keeping a labyrinth of brush between him and the beast.

The deeper he sank into the maze, the slower he moved, the beast thrashed about clearing its own route to the scintillating flavor of his sweat. He had dug himself in too deep, walling himself off. He was forced up through the thicket and to the tops of the massive trees' strewn about, toppled by the orbs' initial implosion.

From the height of the massive trunk he was able to survey. The glade was wider than he first thought, but thick with dead ends and tangled trails all coalescing at the heart, at the orb. He ran the length of the thick wooden stock, summiting the dirt and clay that filled its torn roots.

Virginia had neared the orb, standing stoic, faced with the statuesque monument.

It was a drop and a jump from the thick rooted tangle below for him to leap the short chasm of bramble below. He teetered on the edge trying to gauge the jump's length. The few seconds he had to decide flitted by and he was forced across regardless of his odds.

He slammed on to the large boulder across from his pedestal of roots. its surface slick from moss and rain. His fingers pressed out the water from the mossy rock face, fumbling to find a handhold to secure his weight against the stone side.

His combat boots were not meant for climbing, his foot holds precarious at best. He latched to the side feeling unsure of all his grips, this rockface was not inclined to make his ascent an easy task.

A small slipp and he caught himself on a foothold a few inches below. His hand clasped the rock forcing him to choose between falling or dropping his firearm. It was lost, now consumed by the thick mud and ruined underbrush below. The jolt spread throughout his limbs and they held fast to the slimy surface.

Thrashing from above meant the serpent had tracked him now up and over the felled forest floor. His foot steadied on its new platform he pushed up and hooked his hands to the boulder's top face. He heaved his body upward, he felt the adrenal enhancement starting to fade.

Lifting himself up, he rolled himself atop the large vine wrapped stone. the moss had collected enough water to soak the back of his shirt, he caught his breath.

His head rolled to the side against the screaming terror from the back of his mind. The forest had become too silent. The snake pursuant of his gamey flesh had fallen quiet. There was nothing.

He sat up slowly keeping an eye to his back, waiting for some sign of the giant. but nothing. Nothing but a growing shadow above.

"SAJO!" Dawn screamed out across the glade, trying to warn him.

With the turn of his head the peripheral form of the massive viper froze him still. He had locked eyes with Dawn peeking out from fallen brushwood. It was only a moment, but enough to convey so much.

A hot snort of breath from above ruffled his hair, a tongue as thick as his arm flicked past his face as the creature lurched ever closer.

It grew dark, the wet wall of the snakes' esophagus encased him. It pressed against his shoulder gripping his arms tight, like a soft moist coffin pressing down around him.

The muscles flexed and pressed down around his ankles, it pushed him further with a rush of spittle, and he slid deeper into the maw of the forest mother.

Each push deeper, hotter and fouler than the last. Claustrophobic and crushing, his strength would give out from the struggle for space.

He was resigned, trapped in its crushing throat being enveloped further into the digestive stew. He could no longer force back his arms against the mammoth beasts muscles, they caved in like a crushing stone slab.

His elbows pressed into his sides popping his ribs from his spine he couldn't even take a breath to scream. One by one each rib gave way, popping and severing ligaments and

muscle. He lost feeling from his waste to his toes, as he felt his torso twist and tear his spine.

The slippery internal flesh of the giant beast's esophagus pressed him deeper down its massive gullet, but a faint bulge in its chest as seen by his horrified friends. The pressure had forced his shattered ribs through into his lungs, the puncture evacuating the last of the air into his chest cavity.

He felt the pressure in his face, the heat and pulsing in his veins, his hips finally cracked and twisted, his organs ruptured, and the warm sensation of hot blood coursed into his gut. He would consciously drown in his own pooled blood under the immense pressure of the snakes' abdomen.

He coughed up his salty blood like seasoning for the small morsel he was. He drifted to black, leaving all but the small twitches and impulses left in his neurons to fire and fizzle as he slipped into his digestive oblivion.

Chapter 18 -

Title

"Virginia!" A shout from the forest edge. A voice familiar to Dawn and Juda, but their attention had been too fixated to notice at first. The Giant Serpents' attention was drawn away, the two looked on watching intently, keeping enough debris between them and direct sight with the beast.

"Holy shit Juda"

"Sajo!" He nervously whispered.

Sajo had darted out of sight into the thrush. The Serpent was attentive in its hunt.

"Shit Juda. What do we do?"

"I don't know man!? What the fuck CAN we do?"

"Shit, shit, shit, shit....We can't just stand here!" her anxiety escalated her tone as she began to panic.

"What about Virginia? That thing was basically escorting her!"

Virginia had stopped just shy of the orb, her hand passed through its invisible field and pressed against the slick surface. She began to weep, her knee's met on the forest floor.

The Serpent thrashed about the bush seeking out its prey. Sajo had re-emerged from the thick brush by now, climbing up and out of the dense maze below. The serpents' thick hide

would appear wrapped around the large fallen trees before submerging below the ocean of green in its pursuant obsession.

"Jesus it's massive..." Juda was in awe.

"Where the Hell did he go?..." She scanned what she could see across the ravaged forest.

She could only hear the great snakes crashing, She wrapped her fingers through the roots and dirt to step up for a clearer view. Sajo had made his last leap scratching at the stone surface to maintain his grip. He flipped himself over onto its large altar-like surface. Dawn leered. Ancient and scarred, the emerald jewel rose up out of the thicket below casting its long shadow down over Sajo on the stone slab.

"SAJO!" It came out of instinct, there was nothing she could do but watch the savage serpent's great maw split in three, peeling its head apart down its great cleaved skull. The pieces enveloped Sajo whole. wrapping its thick head around his would-be corpse.

"NOOOOO!!! SAJO!"

The serpent stood tall, its head pointed to the sky as its throat pulsed and pulled Sajo down deeper and deeper. She could see the bulge that was once her friend crushed and pressed down into the literal bowels of oblivion.

Juda cupped her mouth and pulled her down in an embrace. The serpent head turned to inspect the commotion but took up its interest in Virginia once more. Satiated with its snack, it slid back toward her.

Virginia had found herself once more with her grief, the orb had connected her to her loss and she dropped from its devastating grasp. She wailed out with tears and pulled herself from the orb. From the fallen roots behind stepped out a majestic creature, Dawn's view obscured that she could only make out the beast's silhouette.

It stood tall and dark, like a shadow between the tree's. It approached Virginia from behind and knelt down to embrace her as she sobbed. Its form was dog like, and its intentions seemed benevolent as it approached her.

Thick black fur tinged crimson streaked up its human-like arms, a jackal's head adorned with trinkets and tribal emblems. It towered four meters tall from tip to tail kneeling to meet Virginia who seemed like a child beneath its bulk.

It pulled her in, pressing its chest to her back, and placed her hand against the orb once more. She was overcome, clenching her fist to her chest, it struggled to pull it away and press her hand into the ground.

When it was over, Virginia had become quiet, and with her the Glade fell silent.

A daunting shriek perforated the stillness of the misted forest glade. Even in Virginia's sorted state, she still felt the spike from its startling shout. Both Dawn and Juda felt the

electrifying jolt surge through them. A bright glow from the forest dark shone like a projector onto the screen of mist at the tree lined edge.

It was familiar to her, Dawn felt it as she did once before, and that same torrent of fear swept her logical mind into the void, her breath became rapid to compensate for the resurfaced dread she felt that night at Dead Horse Camp.

Chapter 19 -

Title

Virginia's first steps through the foggy barrier before she reached the uprooted glade and she was already lost in the mist. It seemed to encompass everything, no trees, no plants, no ground, just mist. It pushed against her with intention, it wanted her out, but its incorporeal mass was easy to ward off.

She swam through it, in an ephemeral dance through the haze. She emerged like she was breaching the water's surface while floating in a lake. Gently her toes dug back into the lush verdant carpet of the glade. She had to pull herself out from the thick wall of condensation.

In her first few steps she had become lost to the forest. The sprouting of life around her footfall, the connection to the tree's, the air, and the in between. An enchantment befell her, a whimsy and euphoria, like a nearly woken state in the cool dew of the morning.

If she closed her eyes she could see the glade, full of form and life. She could visit their vessels, become what they experienced, a sensation that was as liberating as it was wild.

She wavered in her steps, nearly forgetting her tethered body as she explored life of the glade. Everything was organically structured, all with a chaotic and intricate form and function which surrounded her.

Back and forth her physical form would sway with her tether. She stepped towards the center of the glade as if being gently pushed by gusts of wind. In just a few steps she had become so many things, felt so many perspectives, been so many sensations.

She had become everything save one, one which now cast a long looming shadow over her path towards the glade epicenter. But its presence was not to be feared, this was the protector, she was Mother. Virginia had a purpose tied to the great snake's existence, she had never been more certain about anything.

To her the Forest queen was covered in emerald scales, its face sentient and renewed. Its body is protected by the luminating emerald armor that coated the entirety of its thick hide. This was not the creature the others had seen, to her it had majesty, its true form brightly lit, overlaid against its now marred bestial cadaver.

Virginia felt its majesty, but also its sorrow. The torture it had endured of the flesh however did not manage to mark its essence, which she saw true.

Above her the great giant loomed, keeping her safe, and clearing the way. She followed the path it laid for her, coiling around her as it swayed and pushed the debris until the path was clear and she could see.

The orb...

Virginia became fixated, all thought of life in the forest fell, the serpents and its power sidelined by the lure of the levitating sphere. The Great snake veered as its hunt for Sajo began, but Virginia stayed entranced.

The Side of the sphere had streaks of metal, warped and crushed into the perfectly smooth surface. The semblance became clearer the more she pulled herself back from her astral exploration of the forest around her.

She had reached its perimeter, the blasted forest cupped it in shadow around its base, the top lit by the ever changing hues of the overcast sky. She gasped, she felt very human again, grounded, the weight of her fell once more on her bones she nearly dropped.

The round streaked metal in the rocky texture, the half melted and bound wheel from a wheelchair pressed into the side of the orb like a compass embedded in the edge of the sphere. the bottom corner she could make out its handle warped and bent around and under toward the glowing pressure of the crater below.

She reached right through the orb's barrier, her hand pressed to the wheel's surface and she knew it was his. She gasped, cupping her mouth, a torrential rush of tears overcame the power of the jungle deep. It brought her back to Virginia Beatty, a widow in intolerable pain.

It was sorrow at its truest. A shattered whole so close to its missing remnants yet unable to convene and complete one another. It was excruciating, like all her grief at once, draining and weighing her down to the ground. She heaved for air between her tear fall, her hand fell from the orb and the pain subsided.

Her lucidity brought about a sense of reliving memories, a moment that flashed her back to her bed, to her nightmares. Her alarm clock's red numbers seared her vision with intense red light.

Streaming rays of blue light warmed her as they intensified, enveloping her. She was still catching her breath when a large black skinned hand touched the back of hers, trickling with blue energy it gripped softly around her and raised her hand back to the orb. It held her palm steadfast against the dark monolith and again she was overcome with her loss.

Her other hand was clasping Chris's Journal tightly to her chest, the pressure she exerted against the anxiety was all she could do to keep it from spilling over and taking control. She felt the beast's chest press to her back, full of light and love, understanding and compassion.

Its other hand pulsing with the electrifying blue light touched her shoulder. Its black fur brushed her skin as it slid down her arm and up to her breast. It gripped and pulled her

hand away from her chest, spreading her fingers and the journal slipped to the ground as the Jackal headed creature delicately pressed her fingers into the soft earth next to the leather bindings.

Her initial resistance nauseated her, a reflux of stomach acids rushed into her mouth as the suffering caved her chest inward with anxiety, when finally she gave in to the creature's empathy. She knew it had her, so she let it overcome her and the pressure let loose, releasing from her chest. A shock like lightning shot through her body out her hand into the earth below.

The ground drew her sadness like poison from a wound, it pulled along with it her fear, her remorse, and her regret. It wasn't gone from her, it just didn't affect her anymore, she was now in control, she had power over it, a relief she had never known.

The creature slid back, pulling itself from her. The orb seemed smaller to her now. She knew it, understood what it meant to the forest, to the universe, to her.

The legacy of existence, the pure essence split, the two lovers created, two souls forever entwined. The orbs, their summoning, the forest, their judgment, and through the gates an ancient ancestral obligation.

The lover always called first an open mind and a strong will. Their widow's call draws the second into the primal forest, to find one another and begin their judgment. Beyond the gate obscured, she had come to be judged and what lay after was not yet for her to know, and may prove never to be.

She teetered in her recaptured daze catching herself on the satiated serpent's coil, keeping her stable enough to regain her footing as she stood back up.

The Snake queens' thick body coiled, protecting Virginia and the orb. She could see all around her, glowing eyes and beating hearts secluded in shadows of the forest's edge. Like her doe headed benefactor, blue energy trickled through their flesh, fur, feathers or scales revealing their varied true forms. Many forms, many faces, some familiar, some entirely alien. They had come for her, to bear witness to her judgment.

Then a whistle nearby, almost in her ear. The distant jungle flashed with light out the canopy, the misted walls' opaque molecules played and bent the light.

What was to Dawn a ghastly screech, violent and agonized, to Virginia it was a melodic whistle, full of yearning and lament. It was a voice of seeking, a sound of shattered pieces searching for their whole.

As the light drew in the sound seemed to step away, When the specter entered the glade it's foreboding whistle grew farther away. Dawn was frozen, Juda as well. It had come for Virginia, and she for it. It had pulled her here back through time, through memory, through her dreams to the widows legacy.

The Deja vu overcame her, the smell of her car's air freshener, the cold stale air of the 4th floor underground parking lot, cold concrete choking her startled chirp.

The torch-like gaze of the specter had pierced the veiled wall of drifting mist. Entering into the glade, a half torso, its head shifting through the forms and faces of eternity which it had worn, the face of every widow called to the forest's judgment. Beautiful and weathered, their smiles put her at ease.

Each brought with it a spattering of experience, some brought language, some brought music, each shared with her something of theirs that they themselves once experienced deeply, passionately.

Below the translucent and beautifully diverse faces, loomed a skeletal visage wrapped in a shifting particulate of ash and smoke. Its wide, circular eyes wrapped in an ever changing fractal pattern of color that lined the center of pure white.

It's exposed spine flicked and sensed its surroundings under a ghostly levitation. Its bulk floated silently over the carcass of the forest towards Virginia. Around it the forest would bloom and decompose, the sway in its steps left a winding path of life to decay as it wound toward the center, to the orb, to her.

Chapter 20 -

Title

The Skeletal hand ripped through the misted wall of the forest's edge. Dawn was fixated on it in her hidden borrow between the felled trees. Juda Felt it as well, but unlike Dawn it was not familiar. Although similar in form, he knew this was a different creature than he had seen that night on the plane's outer fuselage.

Still the two looked on, frozen in the Specters presence as it passed them by. They could only listen as it approached Virginia, she lifted from her sorrowful connection with the daunting orb to meet it. They each maneuvered to get a better glimpse.

Dawn watched on as Juda fiddled with his wrist controller. Virginia slipped around the orb, a single finger caressing its surface as she moved to meet what Dawn and Judah saw as a horrifying apparition.

Ginny seemed unafraid. The Emerald Queen bowed its head almost in respect to the ashen phantom. The Spectre had moved to position itself behind her mimicking her movements but Ginny didn't even seem to notice, or if she did she didn't care.

With a whimsical stride she moved about the daunting orb, acting strangely, her movements soft and almost unnaturally smooth, she seemed to move as if in a dance with some invisible partner. A sudden change in her demeanor, from whimsy to angst, she leapt at the orb and began to claw at its surface with haste and intensity.

“The hell is she doing?”

The drone Nutz had left Judas' shoulder mount and flung itself high above the glade and he began to record.

“What the fuck?” he had jammed himself into thick steep mud filled roots of the unusually large fallen Kapok tree. His face lit by the unnatural light of the screen casting Nutz 'perspective back to him.

“What the hell is she doing?”

“Fuck if i know, she seems really out of it?!” Dawn whispered.

“Shit should we do something?”

“Be my guest!” She whispered angrily gesturing towards the still looming wurm that held its ground above Virginia and the orb, surveying and tasting the air for threats.

Chapter 21 -

Title

The mist rose from the broken woods, the air had become cold and the condensation from the warm jungle filled the air thick to the knee. The specters entrancing movements parted the fog below as they edged closer to Virginia, fixated on her, and she on them.

Virginia felt eerily calm, like she had lived this moment already, it was merely a passing memory of a faded past, another life in a line of many. She looked to her hands, they morphed and shifted in choppy flashes, some old, some young, some colored, some alien, the many hands of those who made their own journey before her, the widows lost.

Through their eyes she sees, she lives their lives moments, brief but forever. The faces of their families, their love, and their sorrow. A chain spanning infinity, unbroken and vital, but its purpose still obscured, for it is still beyond the great gate that lies true understanding.

Ripped back through time to her lover's fate, her sorrow joins the rest, her experiences blend into one existence, without time, without limits, not as she once understood them.

Then she felt someone else, someone familiar and warm. She felt Chris.

She turned to face the sphere obelisk frantically searching for a way through. She found herself attacking the orb with reckless abandon, scratching and clawing at the surface, she could feel him inside trapped and alone. The Specter had reached its last step and stood silent behind her.

She scrounged and scraped, clawing at the orb. She began to pound her clenched fists against its metallic surface which cracked like shale under her wailing. Her tears were

turned to mist before they could reach the heated base under the pressure of the orb pressing into the ground below.

The specter cried with her, its wails piercing the thicket of brush of the dark forest which encapsulated them in the glade. Her thrashing drew the specter closer and closer from behind, it matched her thrashing.

Whispered voices from the forest edge, the animalistic creatures who came to bare witness began to speak among themselves, they watched her and the specter thrash, a sense of worry and doubt between them emerged.

She wailed and wailed, her crushing blows gaining power and intensity as the matching movements of the specter eventually pressed into her, forcing its form through her, into her, the crashing wails became louder, more pronounced, the fracturing shale of the surface began to crater and deep cracks began to form in its shell. The Final afterglow of the specter subsided along her spine and with it its strength ripped through her, an infinity of souls crushed through the orb's stone encasement. Searing light, the forest erupted, Virginia became... everything...

And then nothing.

Chapter 22 -

Title

Juda Pulled Nutz in closer trying to record the ritual, his eyes fixed on his wrists screen. It helped him to contextualize what he was seeing through the LED panels' movie-like perspective; Dawn however had no such luxury.

The orb seemed to grip Virginia holding her rigid. The specter drew closer, and began to press into her, her body only heaved with the pressure exerted as it began to enter her from behind as she crashed down upon the stone surface of the orb.

It Pressed its head first through the back of her skull and through into her head its spine settled against her back and began to merge to match. its shoulders arched backward against her as it struggled to integrate into her flesh until the last wisp of its essence had disappeared beneath her skin.

They thrashed and cried out against the orb's surface. Her eyes widened, pupils dilated. In a blinding light Dawn and Judas' reality snapped, merged with Virginias'. The Majestic Jackal and its kin lining the forest's edge had become non-corporeal. A deep low rumble of the glade subsided to a collection of worried whispers.

The Jackal rounded the orb against its powerful glow, pushing inward to meet Virginia's eyeline. It seemed concerned as it inspected her, reaching for her. The beast stood nearly a story and a half, its legs slender like a greyhound covered in streaked ash up its thick fur

lined legs. From behind Dawn could see its straight haired tail draped down, nearly touching the ground. It flicked and moved with it, keeping the creatures balanced.

Dawn's chest felt almost dislocated, it was pounding so hard, She stepped out from her cover just enough to peek, Deez's camera mounted to her shoulder out to get a clear view. She too began to record, using its functions to examine closer what she was witnessing.

The orb had changed, it had ribbons of glowing light wrapped around it in intricate patterns, like symbols they seemed to pulse with some commanding power. The Jackal seems to almost read them, feeling their texture and shapes, its flesh met with electrostatic discharges as it softly maneuvered across the orb's changing surface.

The Large entity startled, it stepped back from the Orb. A powerful cracking sound from the stone obelisk resonated outward, all around the mist floated up into a fog condensed and formed into needles of ice suspended in the diffused sky. The soundwave cut through the suspended frozen mist which began to drop like knives from the air into a thick cold slush on the forest below.

In a fury of light and sound Dawn was forced back into her cover, Deez and Nuts returned to the safety of their docks. Judah covered Dawn from the shards which poured down in a hail of cold needles. The Jackal Blocked the ice with its forearm, while Virginia stood letting it wash over her.

The Serpent reared back and gave itself some distance from the Orb, its body language denoted concern or worry as it gave space to the Jackal and its ritual.

Like a drop of copper on the tongue, the air filled with the smell of energized metal, the icy mist turned to warm rain once more and the dampened silence of the glade was once more overtaken with the usual sounds of the jungle.

Dawn and Judah peered through the roots which framed their vision through to the orb. The Jackal stood, its arms dropped to its side. Virginia lay motionless atop the orb, draped over it. The rain hit them both hard like pellets. The Jackal whined in worry, a huff through its nose shook its jowls accompanied by a short squeal indicating its distress.

The forest's edge was empty, no voices of doubt from the great tribes congregation they had vanished with the blast. Something was wrong, even Dawn could sense it. The Jackal with its ears tucked back approached the orb with caution, its fingertips decided to fall to the draw of Virginia who lay still.

With its touch came two flashes in quick succession, the first a thick sheet of blinding light that filled the area like an ocean which blew the jackal back. Then the bolt that tore through the sky like a tear in space, it ripped down like a zipper to the ground racing to meet Virginia, crashing through her to the orb below.

It crumbled like sheets of shale beneath her, dropping them both. The dust poured around her and she was engulfed in the orb's debris. She sat up atop the shattered remains unable

to see more than a meter. Her chest wrenched with a sudden pain, hot and heavy it pulled her over, rolling down onto her hands.

She yelled out with the scratching from behind her ribs, she pounded her chest with one free hand, the other gripping and tearing at the wet fibers of the forest floor. Each wave overcame stronger than the last, pulling her up and pushing her down. The intensity begins to lift and contort her from the ground. She reached to hold on and pull herself back.

Dawn darted from her concealment rushing to the fracture orb. The dust had fallen away and she watched Ginny struggle.

“Dawn! Hold up! No!” Juda was entrenched in his hole making it difficult to pursue, nor did he wish to attract any unwanted attention, the snake had vanished with the bolt, and the Jackal was regaining its footing.

Virginia surged with another powerful wave finally ripping her from her earthly tether, the roots and dirt flung up with her as the specter began to rip itself back from her flesh.

Painful but bloodless the Specter had an urgency to it, trying to claw from her body rejecting its host. Another bolt shot through them but remained like a tether from the sky to the ground below. It coursed through them in their hovering struggle, this time blowing Dawn back, winding her against a fallen trunk.

Juda had freed himself from his hiding in time for the blast to push him back. He stumbled, blinded feeling his way, Dawn was entirely disorientated, the blow to her head left a small mark of blood from the scrapes in her scalp. a torrent of wind had picked up, and the forest began to creak.

The electrifying bolt remained sustained and the distress of the specter increased and it wrapped its hand around Virginia's body pulling itself from within. Its grip left burns, its handprint singed her skin, one wrapped her belly at her side, the other grabbed for her neck as it pulled itself from her torso, it held tight until it separated itself.

The bolt of electrifying light that lit the glade created a harsh contrast of light and dark. The specter was pulled upward from her trying to keep its clench on her throat but the draw was too strong. Its grip slipped and it was torn and shredded in the intense energy until its last remnant dissipated in a colorful light.

The last of its essence sparked the chain, and Virginia could feel the entirety of existence siphon from her, diminishing her. The orbs rubble below had become superheated, and a growing structure of upturned roots grew like molten glass up the shaft of energy towards virginia.

The light mixed and played with the glassy roots tinting them red with fire. The brilliant blues and reds twisted around her, swirling with a fractal pattern that shifted like a kaleidoscope.

The crystalline strutting plateaued like an altar below her convulsions, pressing into an invisible field which surrounded her. She spasmed with a cascade of specters which poured from her. thousands, millions, there was no way to tell. The spirits spiked out from her into the sky while others crashed through into the ground below.

Virginia felt the warm blood trickling from her eyes, out from her ears, and the blood's warmth as it crossed her lips from her nose. Helpless she writhed as the deluge of anima made their exodus tossing her about in her ghostly levitation.

The Shrieks were ungodly, ringing in Dawns and Judas ears. They clasped their heads trying to drown the sound, but it was not enough to quell the sensation running through them. Even still, over the shrill wailing the crashing of the great serpent in the tree's echoed out into the open air of the hectic glade.

Dawn had kneeled into a crouch the pounding pulse of the ineffable energy that had encompassed Virginia kept Dawn from closing in. Dawn held her arm up against the winds swirling with the dross of the forest. She crept forward trying to reach for Ginny.

"GINNY!" Her voice rasped from the volume she needed to commit to overcome the wind and energy.

"GINNY! PLEASE!"

Virginia was unaware of Dawns' presence, nothing could draw her attention from the whole of existence which departed her. Every step she had walked through, all the lives she had lived, entwined in eternity as one half to the whole.

"GINNNNNYYYYY!!"

Dawn had forced her hand through, scraped and cut by the speeding debris gusting round Virginia's unearthly suspension. She pushed through the dense energy, the sensation reminded her of her hand in the wind as Florence whipped down the highway.

The energy blasted her forearm with waves of heat and cold, nearing Virginia's frenzy with her hand when she was ripped back falling softly into the arms of the Giant Jackal headed being. It held her away from Virginia whose energy blasted into its back as it grew exponentially.

Cradled by the immense creature, sound and light overwhelmed her, all she could do to cope was clench her eyes shut and coddle her head from the building ring in her ears.

Virginia was pulsating with the energetic expelling of every life, every existence that had once been merged with the specter. Lifetime after lifetime, eon after eon, every experience and emotion, every nuanced moment of their individual lives flowed forcefully through her, slipping away from their unification and banished into the realm beyond death.

Histories and experiences lost, It pulled her mind back through all of existence, to the first moments of the universe, and then nothing.

Chapter 23 -

Title

The wet thicket layered across the ground scraped her face as her body dragged to a stop. An audible ringing was muffled in her ears, and waves of light flashed through her lids. The Jackal, unable to withstand Virginia's power, forced Dawn from its protective embrace, throwing her to shelter behind an ancient trunk.

Above her the Jackal hung motionless, she leered further past the ridges of the aged bark and a fearful awe paralyzed her. Split from its shell, dissected and layered, the Jackal remained alive but disjointed. Layer by layer it has been pulled apart, flesh from bone, nerves from flesh, spread and separated, held in stasis in the light of Virginia's Blast.

The jackals' lungs floating outside its body inflated and expelled as it whined in fear. An exasperated gasp pulled her from her locked gaze with it, to the empty eyes sockets of Juda. Her heart sank, her breath stopped, Judas' body hung quietly, pulled apart in stasis above the vibrating ground in the same manner the black furred Jackal had been.

Dissected and displayed, separated into systems, each role within, spaced apart as if for examination. The disassembled parts held steadfast errily in the mist and light. Blood coursed through veins that strung across the mounds of flesh and sticks of bone, the nerves twitched outstretched trying to sort the input of the steam that lifted from its own heat.

Both their eyes naked without their sockets could only stare blankly at her, unable to wet themselves; they reddened and dilated with the light. Their faces hung long their maw wide open, pulled from the structural confines of the skull behind.

Their flesh hung loose without their bones but still suspended in position. a pulse of organs, and digestive tract, set the tone of their suffering in real time, the exposed organs and raw tissue stung by the crisp cool air.

But she could still see their dread, still feel their utter terror and confusion, or was it hers. Before she could react the light flickered and both bodies in their vivisected form fell like sacks of wet meat to the ground, mixing with the dirt and debris. Dawn was splashed with blood from the Jackal as its felled form crashed into the forest before her.

Nothing could keep her there, the muffled ringing began to build again, the light over the edge of the tree began once again to intensify, pulsing and throbbing with a deep bass in Dawn's chest, she fled.

She was barely aware of her body as it thrashed towards the edge of the misted veil at the edge of the ruined glade. It guided her away from the danger, its instincts more powerful than her conscious will.

The cliffs around her shook off the loose shale and dirt that gripped thier face. The tree's vibrating, the ground hummed, her feet struggled to remain steady on its surface as she ran. A wave of sound threw her, cartilage crunched as she was slammed into a wall of stone.

The ground was relatively soft in comparison, a cushion for her to rest as she could no longer hold onto her fleeting consciousness. Her head throbbed with the swelling of her brain, but she was out before it overwhelmed her.

END OF ACT I

Act II - No Turning back.

Chapter 24 -

Title

It was a strange sensation to be awoken by, slipping from awareness to dreamscape, as the drag of your carcass rips through the thick entanglements. A volley of light speared through the flesh over Dawn's eyes, pulling her back again, this time the evening sky radiating with colorful and cloud cover, fire and smoke burning her sinuses, and a lumbering presence, weighed in its steps around her, its movements slow and deliberate.

A sharp inhale, a cold drop of rain hitting the back of her throat. her eyes squint and twitch from the light and the mist of the heavy rain that bounces off her face. The refreshing rain failed to quell the rising pain in her head, every subtle movement felt as though her brain was crashing into her skull.

Stiffness in her neck exacerbated her headache, and made it difficult to lift herself enough bringing the forest into view. The darkness of the thick wall allowed her eyes to adjust more gradually, opening them wide to let the darkness of the forest absorb the light.

The stone behind her was warm, a familiar arrangement of stones lined the fire pit in front of her that spat and fizzled with the rain that tried to starve it. She pushed herself up the warm slab of the overgrown altar behind her. Her hand sunk deeper into the cushioned ground than she expected, making it more of a struggle to lift herself.

Lifting her hand the water pooled into her imprint in the ground, surrounding it, a larger imprint, a footprint, animalistic and large. Her heart sped, the surge of blood caused a wave of pain through her neck and skull.

She managed to scratch at the stone behind her for leverage to her feet. She looked around panicked, then Nauseated, and then toppled over with dizziness where she lay again unconscious.

A breeze on her face, not consistent, frantic even, like a cool breath rapid and beating. She thought it was strange before she was fully awake, her eyes slid open again to movement. A small blue blur came into focus, and the little bird flitted around the ground lifting debris feasting on the insects below. Its wings flitted, pushing the air around her face, unaware of her presence.

It gave her a moment of calm, her head felt substantially better, but she feared moving might trigger the pain so she laid there watching. Her rest was interrupted by a surge of burning in her throat forcing her up to leaning on one arm. She spat out a dollop of blood, wiping her mouth. The bird fled into the safety of the old growth.

Her side was tender, she lifted her shirt to a deep purple bruise running along her ribs. Her head throbbed with remnants of the swelling, while her thoughts raced with the potential internal injuries.

“Fuck sakes.” the word fuck felt cathartic. She rose to her feet, much slower this time, she was reasonably sure she had a severe concussion, her focus was all over, and her side ached with a warm dullness.

She coughed again, this time nothing but saliva, some good news. She sat next to the now dead fire, its coals still warm, but nothing to burn. The emanating embers shifted with their heat, the embers radiance pulsating with the temperature changes causing a hypnotic transition of reds and oranges.

Her focus shifted to the darkness of the charcoal lining the edges where the coals had cooled, it drew her thoughts to the dark events of the night prior, it was then she realized she didn't even know what time it was, or how long she had been out. She didn't know for how long her friends had been dead.

Her physical pain dissipated, overcome by the emotional turmoil left in the wake of the visuals she relived in her head. Sajo, eaten alive, Juda torn apart, dissected by a malevolence and thrown to the dirt in pieces.

Her tears welled up before she noticed them, wiping them from her face. The distraction let her mind isolate her pack standing out against the backdrop of the mighty forest. It was small, but the surge of hope was enough to pull her to her feet and rush over.

It sat haphazardly against some roots at the end of the path which she was dragged.

“GOD DAMNIT!!!!” her voice cracked with her rage. A distant crashing of tree's quelled her shouting as her paranoia set back in.

“God damnit...” she whispered, the silence of the forest was all that echoed back.

She stared at the pack a moment, it was the drone in its dock that snapped her into action. She began tearing down her gear, taking stock of what little she had, inventory, batteries, chargers, her phone was still full, although basically a brick without a signal.

"10:08, still early. What the fuck!" April 9th it read. she had slept all night, at least according to her phone. She shut it off frustrated.

"This is stupid..." Her stomach gurgled in agreement.

She sat in disbelief. Her gear splayed out, she rested her elbow to her knee and her head into her hand. A long expiration of breath infested with anxiousness, left her chest. Her head was hurting consistently again, her focus was hard to direct.

She just sat and stared, running over and over in her mind the things she needs to do, the eventualities she will encounter, she was a realist for the most part, but still retained a strong sense of optimism regardless. Although she had very little to be optimistic about, this was a time to be pragmatic. At least the rain stopped.

Her thoughts ended with the howl of her stomach. She didn't feel hungry, nor was her gag reflex currently looking forward to it, but she knew better. She rifled through the front pouch of her bag, she had scooped up a bunch of protein bars off of Florence's back seat the night before the expedition.

A few bites and she had enough, packing what remained away safely. She sat and chewed with thoughts of her trusted Land Rover.

It was the sensation of Florence's shifter in her hand that triggered another swell of tears, her side ached as she struggled to hold back, she needed to cry, beyond cry, but her injuries wouldn't even grant her the reprieve to relieve her stress.

A few short intentional breaths and she clenched her chest tight to swallow deep and stop the flow of beads forming in the corner of her eyes. With her will regained, she unclenched, her stomach growling again as she released her tension.

"Oh shut up." She didn't want to waste any more rations.

Her stomach retorted with a witty gurgle that her internal dialogue translated to "Tough crowd".

She intensely packed her bags, teetering on the brink of rage. She organized in order of practicality in her mind.

With a short quick twist, flipping the shoulder strap over her arm, the bruise on her side ensured she was reminded of its condition with an enduring throb. She didn't feel safe enough to stay, otherwise she would rest, but she was painfully educated of the risk of every moment she wasn't pressing on.

“Okay... ok, ok, ok, ok, ok...” she said in one long exhale. Her mind running down her plan. She was determined to find her way back to the ACRN facility the way she came in, and the altar gave her a good idea where to look.

The first few steps back into the daunting forest were the hardest, dripping and dark, but full of life and sound triggering a surge of cold down her back. She couldn't get a bearing, but used where they first entered this campsite to retrace their steps.

She was moving slowly, using the barked behemoths around her to stabilize her steps. Careful footing avoided the tangle of roots that gripped into the sustaining soil. It had only been ten minutes and she was beginning to feel lost.

“Shit.” She stopped, grazing her surroundings with her eyes, eating up the scenery in search of a landmark of the impossible tear in the forest that ripped into their lab.

Nothing.

Her feet were sore, she slumped back and slid down a tree with an air of defeatism. She shook her head as more and more of the impossible things she has seen raced through her mind.

“FUUUUUUCK!” she loudly whispered, pressing one fist hard into the forest floor. With a few heavy breaths she calmed again, her battered side a little sorer than before.

“Well now what Dawn.” She couldn't tell if she had said that out loud or not, but the question was valid all the same. She had half a day before she needed to make camp, she needed some water, and if possible find some more food, her rations should be a last resort.

But all that wouldn't matter if she couldn't find something dry to burn.

“Shit” She realized she also didn't have a way to light the fire easily.

Her options were limited, and her life in the balance. She stared through the bush in the direction of the blasted glade. She had no yearning to revisit the misted veil, every horrifying moment tried to push its way into her mind as she contemplated it. She needed Judas' pack, she didn't have a choice.

Chapter 25 -

Title

She had been standing there for well over 10 minutes, an outside observer might think she was paralyzed. The wall of mist was thinner than before, its warmth replaced with a cool moisture rolling off the now thinly veiled curtain.

She was waiting, patiently for movement on the other side. The Mist gave her a sense of security as she watched for shadows and shapes. Nothing outside the ambient noise of the living jungle had peaked her senses, and with a breath she stepped through once again.

The area in the open daylight had a shimmer of crimson that the ash bounced back, it had flashed her back to that night at dead horse camp. She nearly stumbled from the thought.

The red ash covered the entire glade, much of the epicenter smoked with cinder, some still smoldering, she took the opportunity to grab a stick and shove it deep into some nearby embers, this would give her the fire she will inevitably need later.

The bright orange of Judas pack peeking from behind the roots where he left it. "Ahh, shit..." She pulled her hand from her side to steady herself against the trunk before pushing off.

She regained her composure as she stepped forward, lowering herself using the gnarled upturned roots to slowly guide her down to her knees next to his pack. An uncontrolled surge of chemicals recoiled her hand back as she pictured him pulled apart.

She closed her eyes and took another breath.

The handle on the pack was soaked through but warm, she peeled off the rain cover and shook it out, laying it down beside her as she slumped down on the ground. She started pulling from the bag, carefully inspecting and accounting each item.

She couldn't help her growing optimism.

Extra food, flare gun, mosquito mesh, his solar cooking stove/charger, portable battery bank, his wind up LED flashlight-

"Shit." her excitement had straightened her posture, which had now turned to a hunched slump. Nothing to start a fire with except the flare gun, and she'd rather use that for something more important.

"WAIT"

She swiveled the pack around to its straps, he had a small compartment there, he always kept his little round plastic kit in it. Slid her fingers around the back hinges flexed and pinched her thumb as she slid it out. Judas used to always complain about that, claimed it was cursed and would bite him as a sacrifice each time he pulled it out. She shook it, the lyrical beat of its content enveloped her with even more optimism.

With a squeak of the rubber seal she popped the end off, the cylindrical lid dangled down off its rubber string. She almost laughed when she saw it, a 'big ole fatty' as he'd put it, sticking out of the end, the aroma hit her nose like a slap in the face.

She urgently tipped the casing out into her hand. A handful of matches along with his butane mini torch slipped gently out into her palm.

“Thank fucking Jesus Christ yes...” Her eyes closed, she basked in the momentary success, this meant at the very least she could get dry, she packed it up precisely clipping the container with a carabiner to her belt loop.. The rush of blood as she stood to her feet added to her euphoria and relief.

Short lived, a cracking of fire startled her senses. She lurched her body around to stare down the glade toward the remnants of the orb. The next part was the hard part. She rounded what was left of a now shattered orb, through it a plateaued altar of what looked cooled molten glass swirled with mixing blues and reds throughout.

She could still feel the heat which intensified with each step closer, but she was now focused on the next few steps, her eyes would round the obelisk first, the debris and blood replaced the forest's rich greens and browns with a deep red blanket of ash.

A mixed bag of relief and confusion when Judas' last resting place came into view. No body or viscera which she wasn't looking forward to seeing, but no body either, just a path of blood mixing with the dirt trailing off into the forest deep.

“Maybe I hallucinated it? Maybe an animal?... Jesus. “ she trailed off back into her inner dialogue, frustrated with all the maybe's, sickened by the what if's.

She leaned over the giant tree which had kept her from the same fate, and there too the body of the Jackal was gone, like Judas, only some sparse leftovers remained. The word “Leftovers” in her head triggered her gag reflex, she heaved over with a violent expulsion that did her injuries no favors.

“Ohh ho ho god... fuh huuuuck!” She winced,

Her eyes darted around for a distraction being caught by the realization of just how quiet it had become, and a sudden darkness that surrounded her unshuttered her eyes.

She was met with the hulking form of the emerald mother of the forest; its mass blocked out the warmth of the clouded sky, flicking its tongue from its scarred face as it searched and slid silently over the aftermath of the glade.

She gasped and cupped her own mouth, her reaction so quick for a moment she thought her hand was someone else's. She was frozen in place until she realized it hadn't seen her. She waited for the snake to bow its head away before she slipped back to her packs and pulled herself delicately behind the uprooted cover..

Carefully yet frantically she dug out a hole under the felled trunk, slid herself and the two packs below and shoved herself back in under it. She was panting heavily, her breast pressed firmly into the dirt, which offered a cool light pressure that gave some relief.

She slowed her breathing, timing her short breaths between auditing the sounds around her. The serpent's distant movements occasionally revealed as it dug through debris searching.

She held back a cough as the hole filled with a waft of smoke from nearby. Her chest burned as she tried to hold her cough in. But her exhale betrayed her, forcing her to press her face into the dirt and let it out.

The soil tasted like the smell of fresh clay and ash. When she got herself under control the audible silence forced the sweat from her brow. It trickled down beside her nose, tickling its way over her lips.

A nearby ember cracked with moisture, she twitched with it. She was breathing Shallow when a shift of the nearby brush made clear the beast's proximity. The longest minute later and her burrow began to shrink with the creature's weight above.

The size of the massive scaled form pressed into the bark, flaking it off down into her hole. Its twisted movements flickered the skylight as it wound its way past her debris above.

She thought it would crush her, when the flex of the tree was relieved and its spring opened up her burrow wide. Peeking from beneath she could see the stake she placed in the embers and her mind raced to formulate a way to it unseen.

The underbelly of the monstrosity equally as scarred, flexed and twisted as the thick muscle pushed its imposing anatomy up, around, and over the fallen forest with relative ease. It had been stained with a bloody hue from the ash compressed into the cracks of its armor. Its tail slid graceful past her, hugging the tree across from her before the bestial form came to a stop.

It began to rummage, its head now quite a ways from her despite its tail being so close. She pulled herself out of her hideaway draggin the pack with her. While her eyes remained locked on the snake she began to slide the straps around herself, taking her smaller pack and strapping it to her chest.

She hastily wrapped up the rain sleeve of stuff up in a rather elegant maneuver and shoved back into Judas' pack. She whipped it up and around herself managing to draw its straps tight as it settled on her back.

The serpent's mammoth head turned, spreading its split head to taste the air. The one slice of its head seemed to look right at her as she hurriedly ducked into a crouch and pressed herself against the nearest cover.

She was within arms-length of the tail, its scales were thick and as the tail gently moved she could hear the faint click they made against each other. The emerald green of each held a dull glimmer, much lined with moss where it could cling. The under scales were a brilliant white, scratched and dented with the passage of time, some melted from fire.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, her hands were shaking making it difficult to draw the little house she used as a lock pattern. She had her camera app on her quick launch, immediately switching it from the selfie view. She remained crouched behind the debris while facing the snake and slowly moved the phone up into view.

The Emerald snake lifted the hulking mass of a tree with its head, sliding down and off itself then pressing its weight against it to slide it over further. Its tail end slid past her and she flinched, dropping her phone which landed facing screen up.

Her finger had closed her camera app as it slid from her hand, managing to brush the new drone app on her home screen. Deez Sprung to life launching from her shoulder in a furious eruption of sliced air up into the sky.

"Holy shit!" it scared the shit out of her, as did the notification sound from her phone when the drone's camera finally connected. She knelt down and scrambled to zero out the volume.

Her breath dissipated, her chest constricted, as a winding mass of green and white began to uncoil overtop the broken forest, reaching out further and further towards what she could barely make out as herself on the tiny screen, blasting photons of terror into her eyes.

"Fuck no, fuck... fuck fuck fuck fuck!" Without thinking she ran out next to the giants' tail, following along it from the outside, nearly pressing herself to it to maintain her concealment. The foreboding shadow crossed over her first as the massive forest master coiled over itself tasting the air, investigating the disturbance Dawn had created.

She wasn't conscious of her hand at first, which had laid itself to the snake's tail to keep pace to its movements. As soon as she had noticed she pulled away, bringing her attention to her red stained hands. She pulled herself under a bowed branch, winding a path through the upturned roots, as she followed close.

The serpent stopped, it began tasting the area, pushing at the tree's and searching her burrow. Its tail had sped up pulling away from her as the beast coiled itself close. She stood exposed behind it, the twisting tail followed the thick serpent wall as it pulled tighter to itself.

Its rummaging was loud affording her some speed as she rushed toward the burning pike she had buried deep in the hot embers. She ripped it from its smoking ashes at its red hot tip. She had rounded her head over her shoulder as she stood back to her feet, her eyes locked on the beast who continued its barrage of the area.

She prompted her body to turn to the forest behind her, but her eyes broke the command and she snapped herself back. She leered into the distant glade; a form laying on the ground, standing out from the forest around her.

"Ginny!" She whispered to herself as the prospect raced through her head. She heaved forward with the weight of the two packs, while trying to remain light footed in her rush to Virginia's side.

Her steps became heavier as she neared, not from her gear but from the focused realization of Virginia's state. Her skin was near white, she lay with the disengaged stare of the lifeless.

Dawn didn't make it all the way to her, she had stopped with her shocking realization, standing statuesque amid the toppled garden.

She looked away lost to hopelessness frustrated with herself for having hope, her head hung on her shoulders. Through her swelling damn of tears, something out of place, standing out from the debris at her feet. The tanned hide marred with dirt and ash, a leather bound journal. She was drawn right to it, keeping behind cover as she took it up and hastily leafed through its pages.

She had little time to inspect, the pages poured out the scent of the ACRN offices, a nostalgic memory she knew. An aura of cold vibrations brought her breath to a mist, and her core to a chill. She clenched hard into the leather of the book, her nails were digging into the cured flesh indenting it.

A soft ripple ran through the soil beneath her, drawing in towards a pile of ash at Virginia's feet. Dawn's eyes stayed affixed to the pile, it shuddered lightly as the vibrations beneath reached the piles outer edges, wisps of air played with the top layer of ash, causing it to dance and fall, shifting the grains below. From within the grains something began to push through.

Chapter 26 -

End of The Widow

Virginia's body blasted outward with waves of heat and radiation, strands of what felt like herself reached out and clung to the physical world around her, energetic tendrils grasping around the roots and flora, bonding with it to anchor herself.

Each wave built upon the last in both intensity and marvelous color. She felt it suck her inward towards a tiny point and blasting back out to the edges of eternity. A part of her snapped free and she could analyze and dissect everything, taking stock in the base elements of existence. She could disseminate every particle, and each quantum partner an infinity away.

Time itself seems to step aside and usher her curiosity, her exploration around her. Juda, the Jackal seemed trivial, they felt like a single cell under her microscope as she strove to understand everything in her eternal moment. She pulled them apart, layering their components, observing their connections and the reliances on one another.

She found it fascinating, a deep understanding of flesh & bone and their tie to the brain. She could watch the pulsating signals of energy shooting through the nerve ends, finding their way to the brain stem. She could follow their path and view the centers of the brain controlling their horror.

A throb of bass behind her pulled her away. Her singular focus turned to a shadow in her own immense light, to where the orb still hung silent. She felt as if it had locked eyes and then she became immersed in the dark.

As if pulled in, the Orbs tone enveloped her. She was displaced or was it the orb that wrapped around her? She couldn't tell, but the crushing darkness around her began to assert its will, trapping her, pressing her now formless identity tight. She willed each breath against the immense pressure. With each push for her life a crack in the darkness, not of light but sound.

She pulled her slipping shape together like a cloud condensed in the shadows. Pushing out again and again, each time cracking and shaping the darkness around her. In a cascade of light and sound the shadows broke and she felt her physical form coalesce again.

A blast hit the glade, with her at its epicenter, the orb was shattered, its debris hovering still around her, vibrating and shifting from matter to light, until the bright flash of her escape from the darkness faded to a dark hue of orange across the glade, which slowly dulled to black.

Amidst the rubble she awoke herself once more. She felt disconnected, terrestrial, everything around here seems foreign from her as she struggled to retain her newfound knowledge, which slipped away moment to moment.

She felt as if the slip would never stop, that she would lose more than the eternity she had just experienced, The real fear of falling past herself, her own identity and forgetting who she was. It loomed over her, that one seed of doubt pecked at her fortitude, her indomitable will now made human once more.

Every moment of doubt like a shard piercing her resolve, which began to cascade over her, she couldn't combat the ethereal forces ripping through her identity, her own self preservation. This place had taken so much from her, it took her previous life, it took her mind, it took Chris.

His image, his name, bolstered her, she began to pull herself back from the endless dark, finding traces of who she was through the memories he shared with her. Her focus became them, the two lovers entwined in this delirious fate. Her mind's eye drew his face for her, his eyes opened with brilliant light.

Overwhelmed, she cupped her hand up to the brightness to dim its aura, its intensity settled to two bright dots encircled with intangible fractal designs swirling with color and she stood in trance with The Specter, with Chris.

She wanted to pull away as it moved in close, but the feeling of Chris's presence steadied her. It cradled her, laying her to the ground among the shards of the orb. She laid next to the now freed remains of Chris's wheelchair, and she stroked its metal surface.

Ripped away, the chaos began to engulf her. one after another soul after tormented soul they ripped their way through and from her. Each lost to oblivion took with them the lifetime of experience, ripped away and lost to the neverend black.

Controting her they strived to hold on to her tearing at her ethereal form within the flesh trying to grasp on, to stay as a cohesive whole, but to no avail. Millions if not more tore through her, some smashing into the ground below, some fluttering into the sky above in a cascade of fractal light and furious sound.

She felt the sorrow, the loss, she knew something was wrong, something had upset the balance between the two souls, the widow and their beloved, the caretakers of existence. Every moment was agony, every soul a piece of history erased. A catastrophic mistake was made, she and Chris would be the end of everything.

Their union, her will, her resolve melted away, her identity grew beyond herself and into the world around her, and she could do nothing but give herself over. She understood she is the last soul, the remnants of the widow, the end of a line spanning eternity to its very beginnings. So much lost which now must begin again.

Chapter 27 -

The Desolation of Sorrow

The rubble of the orb stood steadfast against the weight of Virginis corpse, the Specter just stared down at her, as if lost. The silence crashed down on the glade, even the thrashing of the serpent became muffled then mute. The Specter reached out its arms and sank as if to fall to its knees.

Layer by layer the silent shroud was broken, single voices began to mix into a choir of loss. Each voice but one of the infinite souls called before. They suffer unimaginably, an eternity of sorrow felt as one.

Eons of true love gone, driving the specter mad with its tragedy, every soul ever called now torn from their one kindred counterpart that once resided within the widow. The Specter began to lash out, as the chorus grew, it became unbearable, all the voices, all the sadness and grief, began to change the specter, change it into something never seen before.

It began to pull in on itself, as it fought to keep control, screaming flashes of the past souls blasted through the turbulence in and through itself. It escalated, more and more, a storm of souls enraged and bleak. It fed its own demise, shredding its sanity through the hale of misery, leaving nothing but the desolation of sorrow.

The Skeletal figure of the specter toiled throughout its internal ordeal, it stretched and shrieked, and then recoiled over and over. A panicked thrashing against its invisible tether, a single anchoring point that swayed as it tore itself asunder in every direction.

Its eyes blasted with shadow and light, in waves the shavings of fractal light shimmered off the edges leaving an after image hanging in the air. The Specters cohesive form waned throughout the ethereal struggle, until rolling back in towards its endless epicenter.

The Forest basked in its sadness, the gigantic upturned roots, curled back, recoiling from the deep emotional implosion that irradiated all it touched. The forest floor erupted with all the variations of life, wondrous and beautiful, which decayed to red ash and rose up into the sky in cycles.

The Ruined forest soaked in despair, changing it, as it turned a near black crimson. The glade pulsed with life and death right up to the forest's edge, it grew with the unbound sorrow, all the leaves and pedal faded to match the shadow, making it difficult to discern between what was blooming new life and what had crumbled in a rotting death.

The cycle of death slowed at the forest's edge, pulling inward toward The Primal Soul in its ghostly spasm. The spectral heartbeat from an eternity of loss grappled with the philosophical logic of death, all in an attempt to contain the emotional consequences that raged within. But in the end, the battlefield still remained, the irreparable damage done. Sucked into a single point that fizzled and snapped out of existence, the specter was gone.

Chapter 28 -

From the Ashes Comes Sorrow.

The red ash fell softly, through the still breath of the glade, down to what remained at the forest floor. A savage landscape of new life in a disorderly patchwork of decay and death. The vermillion charcoal snow dampened the sound, not that there was much to hear but the rustle of granulated ash trickling down over itself.

Virginia's corpse lay empty as the ash blanketed the glade, the last of the surreal dark rose flakes finding their places on the forest floor. The surrounding vegetation swallowed the tangible grief that had swooned over it, and then the quiet overtook.

A light dusting covered what remained of Virginia. Her body cooled as the steam rose from it melting the crimson dust, soaking it into her clothes leaving them tinted red. She laid still as the glade, the opus of silence broken only by the soft cautious steps nearby.

Dawn could only stare, she had hoped, and that was her downfall. How could anyone have survived what she witnessed? Virginia's cold stare lay as a reminder of her isolation.

A pile of ash at Virginia's feet began to shift. It quivered with wisps of air that crumbled the ash back down unto itself. From the scarlet ash it wretched itself free, shaking off the charred dust. The skeletal form was fractured, like glass, pulled apart into shards that moved with one another as a whole. between the fractures the ashen dust trickled and fled to settle once again on the ground.

From the settled cloud it stood looming over what remained of Virginia. It stared at her as if to reaffirm its purpose. Its now offset eyes no longer flickered with the fractal light of the universe, but moved like a crimson river of ashen blood to a dark and empty blackness. A Shadow cast out where the light once shown, like shafts of smokey darkness, following the lines of its anguished gaze.

The individual souls of Eons' past, now lost to their grief within the primal soul, merged as a single chaotic identity, their collective sorrow personified. Its purpose was singular yet senseless, it was now drawn to sorrow, drawn to loss, to feed its self indulgent grief.

The forest had become a hunting ground for the damned, and its prey had just stumbled right into the mouth of its madness. Its inhales became deep, although it didn't need it, the energy that kept it held fast, pulsed to a heart beat, it felt her life before it saw her, Dawn could only watch as it came into sync with her own breath.

Deep and fast her breathing widened her eyes, taking in every unfathomably terrifying moment. The small pack strapped to her chest felt as if it were the only thing stopping her heart from bursting out to the ground.

It wasn't the creature she had encountered at dead-horse camp, it was changed, what were once eyes of light were nothing but a blinding shadow, its skeletal figure barely cohesive constantly shifting with the red ash that mixed in with its movements. Like a black hole of sorrow it spread across her like a wave of depression, her stomach churned with the loss it felt, and her own suffering amplified.

The Shadowed specter turned to face her, a haunting gentle bob to its floating ghostly form had her straining eyes following to meet its powerful stare. Animalistically it rolled its head as it inspected her. Down, around and up it surveyed her head to toe, the palpating hammer of her heart audible, her skin clammy and shivering.

Coming into its gaze shrouded her in darkness and it stood out in a brilliant red hue in the shadows that now enveloped them both. Locked with her it dampened the forest around her in shadow, she was stuck within, and its sadness flooded her in her entirety.

Within the shadows it stood wreathed in flame and blasting out waves of unimaginable torment. Her eyes dried and burned in the shadowy smoke, starting into the tortured abyss as it approached her.

Then she was freed! The overpowering sorrow subsided, and she could see the ghastly geist locked intently at another target, past her, or more disturbingly above her. Its sight line of shadow continued to rise above her, the shadow grew long, and the serpent queen lurched against the sky of the new dawn.

Her eyes ached at the edges of her vision as they followed the apparition as far as they could in her paralysis. It rounded her, ignoring her, floating past toward the basilisk. Her fear subsided only to once again spike, a sudden regain of motor function, she whipped her

arms up and clasped her ears, the leather of the journal pressing into her cartilage in an attempt to censor the wailing. She twisted herself around.

The Emerald titan raised its giant head, looking directly at her, fully coiled, poised, it lunged. The Shadowy ethereals shrill outcry bounced off the debris of the glade echoing through the roots and dust.

When the horror settled its wails, Dawn's focus shifted erratically to the Serpent, The rain left behind from its vicious snap, hung in the air as an outline of its beastial form. A ripple through its scales as its muscles fired microseconds apart, throwing its mass toward the spectral essence; they crashed into the ground in a fury of shadow and rubble.

As if she had already left before her body had caught up, Dawn found herself pelting through the forest away from the serpent and the spirit as they thrashed in the crater of the glade.

Screeching and pounding the ground in their struggle, it was all Dawn could do to clasp her head tight as she fled through the thicket. Her reckless contortions as she lobbed herself over the tangled floor, spasmed an agonizing twinge through her bruised ribs, but her legs just would not stop.

The humid jungle air lay heavy in her lungs with every exasperated breath. Her diaphragm was sore, it was struggling to keep up to the stress. Even at her best she had not run this hard for this long, fear clearly a strong motivator.

Her backpack made it difficult to ensure her footing as it snagged and tugged at the forest around. She struggled to find her way through the tangle below. Her inner dialog was frantic, scavenging for order while the sound of the chaotic battle behind her swelled and faded, the thrashing moved about the glade. She cried out against the agonizing memories that felt like they spiked in her head, nearly toppling her from her over exerted pace.

Her body finally pulled her back, reigning in her anxious retreat, causing her to teeter. Her backpack gripped tightly to a tenacious branch set on holding her back. She reached for a tree for stabilization but her other leg missed its mark. She slammed hard into an old stump reaching for anything that could hold her up, but nothing offered up itself to assist and she hit the ground hard.

Her echoing cries permeated through the dense forest, she couldn't help herself regardless of the nearby dangers. The crashing glade had become distant in her head, her more immediate concern was the searing pain rushing through her side.

Her chest was struggling to pull in the air as it burned like fire from the overexertion. Pushing through the irritation, she could feel the damage with every breath. She rolled herself to her other side inflaming her ribs, her shoulder arched to absorb the sting.

She was choking back the cries, but they pushed past her will regardless. She lay curled between the thick roots around her, clenched and sobbing, her one hand dug deep into the

dirt. Vibrations shook the soil around her, the distant crashing of the battle rushed towards her, drowning out her cries.

The forest erupted around her, In a flurry of dirt and leaves that blinded her, as the giant snake's mass slammed against the roots of the great Kapok which protected her.

All she could do was curl herself up and hold tight as the serpent thrashed. Locked to its snapping head the Specter crawled and clawed at the snake's one burnt eye as it was whipped around fiercely from the serpent's recoil.

The serpent's size was dwarfed by the massive forest around it, as she peeked up through the haze of dust. It almost fit into the scale of the wooden titans that stood steadfast around it. The emerald mother used the tree's around itself like an extension of its own body, wrapping and tensing around them for leverage and speed.

The specter's screeches became so strong Dawns' clasped ears still tricked out with blood from the pressure. It wasn't until the screeches grew distant that she realized she herself was screaming.

Her eyes unclenched through her stuttered breathing, which she forcefully slowed as to quiet herself. She lifted her head up enough to survey the thick dark beyond her protective roots. Broken branch and bent frond, the forest pressed and torn from the havok.

The distant thrashing dissipated and disappeared, she leered over the giant roots, clenching their elephant like skin, nails dug in deep. Her eyes felt like they could pop from her head, she stared so intently. She turned Judas' pack to the giant sloped roots and slid herself to the ground.

The Trickle of sweat and tears splashed down onto her small pack strapped to her chest. She felt utterly broken, loneliness draped around her, and the sensation of defeat was strong.

Rationally she knew these were the exact thoughts that would get you killed here, but failed to hold true against all the irrational things she just suffered. She no longer had a baseline to draw her conclusions from, this was not the world she had understood, and that scared her more than anything.

She hated the lack of control, she loathed being at the whim of the world and others, and now here she sat, free to do whatever she likes, but entirely at the whim of this terrifying place. Inconsolable emotions twisted through her, frustration breached her walls, and she began to crumble.

Her heaving sobs again exacerbated her side with each much needed inhale. The shallow short breaths between sent the cold, anxious, shock through her, a cool sweat emitting from her skin and tensing her entire body.

A gentle rock was a small saving grace against her turbulence, her head cradled to her knees which she clenched around her pack tightly hugging it for comfort. The tears didn't

come easy, she was dehydrated, which led to the unfortunate stress to her sinuses which now ached with the strain.

She sat with her sense of defeat for nearly an hour, head down using the leather journal to prop her head atop her pack. Her body could no longer tolerate it. Her sobs became twitches and a dull ache nested behind her eyes, her tears became dry and stiff on her face, eyes heavy, and she drifted.

Chapter 29 -

Not a dream anymore.

Drifting there, a thought crossed her mind, a memory, something Chris once told her.

“Somewhere between awake and asleep we all find a realm of imagination, a place where we wander, barely aware that reality is broken around us. It's a whimsical feeling at times, horrifying at others, but always culminates into our eventual jolt to consciousness.”

This time it felt different, her waking experiences seemed so broken from the reality she once knew, that the jolt that awoke her did not dissipate the feeling of the dreamscape, but instead heightened it.

The sensation was made worse as she audited her surroundings. Her injured side took stock of itself as she lifted her head from her pack. It felt as if her vision had to catch up as she tilted herself up to sitting, almost like a hangover, complete with the stiffness in every limb, and a severe need for a drink.

A small gust and a whizzing sound broke her from the untethered sensation, deez had finally found its way back to her. Its light gusts blew the cool air into her face as it gently latched itself to its dock on her pack.

She had to rub her eyes for them to focus, they were dry and dusty. It took a few clenches of her lids to squeeze enough liquid across to take in the view clearly around her.

The Packs were heavier now that her body had time to rest, stiff and sore she slid them off of her, a release in tension made her yawn. She twitched, her side felt like someone had snapped an elastic band across her skin

“Nng Ah!, ow.” she whispered, to herself, and gently rubbed her side.

Her pack beeped as Deez made connection and started to charge, the battery indicator flashes and drops a percent to thirty-seven, a reminder she had limited resources, which led to the inevitable, “I’m All alone.”

She plugged her phone into Judas pack and unfurled the rolled solar panel that dropped down it, wiping it clean of debris. Juda was always the techie, and she was thankful of his

obsession with gadgets now more than ever. A red light flashed, not enough light was reaching her here under the canopy.

Her defeat was hard to overcome, mostly she wanted to give up, this is where Dawn's journey would end, an insignificant soul at the base of an insignificant tree, but another speck of dust in this overwhelming forest.

Against all odds her optimism, which often crept in under the guise of sarcasm, spoke out. "What else is new..." Hardly optimistic, but she got the sentiment, and it helped. She opted to find an open patch of sky and rest while her devices trickled charged.

It felt like morning, the light was a hazy blue gray, and mist had started to rise from the soil, just a light spatter of mist in pockets pooled in the deeper recesses of the forest floor. Dawn took notice of the shallow mists rolling away from her downhill along the slight incline, this gave her the inspiration for higher ground.

A stream, a river, a body of water, she wanted to find something that may very well lead her to some sort of help, someone who might know better than her. Deez was charging, and she was starving, so she decided two birds, one stone sort of deal.

As exposed as her little rest stop was, she had a bit of a struggle letting it go, a few steps out and she was already yearning for its familiarity. She hadn't felt this way since she first came to the jungle.

Chris Beatty had already sort of adopted her under his wing by then. She came up through an internship in Vancouver's head office, and quickly became a project for both Chris and Virginia, where Dawn saw an opportunity for a free expedition to the Amazon, Chris and Virginia had dedicated themselves to bettering her, preparing her for something more.

This haunted her as she took each careful step up the increasingly steep shuffle through the vines and mist. Juda gave her a lot to think about.

"Shit Juda..." she paused for a moment for a breath and a bit of grief.

It never once occurred to her that Chirs had bigger plans, "mind you" she rationalized to herself, they never told her either. Didn't stop her from thinking possibilities, and more focused, her lost time and friendship with the two of them.

She had always respected what they were doing at ACRN but it wasn't her ambition, which to her was always Chris's legacy to maintain, they were just employees and interns. When she finally arrived in the deep forest she didn't expect it to change her like it did, and it was definitely not in favor of Chris's ideal future for her.

A few sips of morning dew that filled pockets of the large leaves nearby gave a rush of refreshing vigor and flushed her face. She washed her hands in it, cleansing the dirt red ash from under her nails. She returned to the open air of her rest stop, digging through her pack

for another morsel of protein bar. A short snack, as even through the hunger her stomach protested, the stress was holding it back.

At first it was daunting, the dense bush, the constant hazards and folly that could trip even the most veteran explorer up here, costing them their lives. "Decay is a fact of the forest, death is an eventuality, not an inconvenient truth to be grappled with." A passage from Chris's fathers series he always would whip out to sound prophetic.

But what he taught them wasn't to fear the forest, but to respect it, much of which was passed on to him by his father, and the tribesmen he met as a child. It was hard not to get caught up in it all. We all came at some point from this, it fascinates us, either into curiosity or in fear, we all feel some sort of emotional lure to the wilds.

"Huh! Shit!" He foot slipped in her meandering thoughts. The blackened mud soaked moss pull right off the stones damp surface, it was a short fall, but her ankle was still sore before the twist, and she had put nearly all her weight down to stop her short descent.

The thickened bark scraped her palm as it slid down its side to catch the abrupt step. It left a warm sticky red residue, the sap lining the meaty edge of her hand with a red streak she wiped off using the giant taro leaf that bent its frond from its own weight, almost as if offering her a hand.

The tree's here, although spaced, still had an unnatural girth and height, even as the forest began to thin as she ascended the slope. Each trunk was smeared with sap built up over the decades, staining them a deep rich red.

It had become warmer as she ascended, which she passed off as her own heat, the trek was no easy stroll, and she had been pushing herself well past her limit. She had been moving for at least an hour if not longer, her feet were wet, her hips sore from the added baggage, and her ankle prompting her to take a break. She obliged.

She had held the journal in her hand the whole walk, its cover was a little rough now from the moisture it had absorbed. It was warm, the pages miraculously dry considering the high humidity.

Again she could smell the lab on it, Chris's office in particular, he had a penchant for e-cigs and various flavored oils that all sort of meshed into a distinct sweetness to the air. She, like Virginia, had a good catalog of Chrises journals, as much of it was mandatory reading through her internship, mandatory reading for the whole team, and also like Virginia, she had no recollection of this one.

The tree's here had begun to spread as the incline became less hospitable for their roots to dig deep. It felt expansive now like a great hall, the breadth and size of the goliath trunks became far more apparent now that she could see deeper into the dark. This spot in particular was nice and open, it gave her a good line of sight and some decent cover as she rested.

"Dawn would have probably loved all of this." It stopped her in her tracks, she was just leafing through, and it called her out by name. It almost felt like she heard it out loud, at least that was the sensation it left.

She had to leaf back a few pages to find it, it stood out distinctly as it was the last line as it ended a sentence at the end of the page. It was the first passage she read, no context, no understanding of the experience he had had prior to the entry, and it didn't bode well for her mental state.

Here was a man's voice in her head, clear as family, playing in her head as she read words she would have thought he would never utter. They spoke of prophetic notions on experiences with a Stag Headed creature, and its tie to a forgotten city only he had seen, or hadn't seen, hallucinated, he wasn't sure, the uncertainty digressed into a rambling rant of rationalizations about what he witnessed, all rounding out in the only words that felt truly Chris.

"I wish I could talk it over with Dawn, she knew these tribes' histories better than me, infact, Dawn would have probably loved all of this..."

She did not.

She took the existential dread as a good kick off point to continue her trek, as one would. Seemed rational, "perhaps I can distract myself with a little exercise. We've been doing that for ages" sorta mind set. But of course reason fails to stand against obsession.

Knowledge becomes a dagger when obsesion sets in, It poked her sanity. How the hell can her experiences be linked to Chris? Did Chris know? How could he, she came here of her own volition, she came here because of her obsession over Percy Fawcett. When free will again came into question she got quite agitated as she pushed herself hard up the mountain side.

Percy yet another nagging question on the mountain of worry and doubt she has already surmounted. What lye in front of her, both a metaphorical and literal uphill battle. Her inner dialogue spoke similarly, which forced out a wispy laugh to herself.

The air had become cool here, her breath was obvious now. The next rocky outcrop would afford her a decent view unobstructed, but the cloud cover was still dense, more so it had darkened, a foreboding shadow had recondensed in the dark of the woods, a familiar transition for when the rain would set in over the Matto Grasso.

"Of course" the first drop hit. It was nearly the same temperature of her skin, she felt the hit but little of the moisture that soaked into her properly sweaty shirt. She wasn't going to make it. She had to dry out and get out of the wet, she suspected a few blisters already, not great for a trek through the forest. The Ideal hollow presented itself, a massive trunk opened with time and the incessant chew of insects. made for a cavernous retreat.

She felt good setting up her modest camp a few feet into the giant sideways stump. She felt prepared for survival again giving her a much needed boost of confidence. The rain had yet

to condense into a full downpour, and she had a small fire going, burning mostly leaves and bark dug out from a nearby fallen tree. The Goliath felled trunk encapsulated her chosen site. It wasn't much but enough to dry out her feet.

Juda had a neat contraption of a backpack, pulled out like a tube, popping out like ribs as she dragged out the waterproof cover. It popped out into a tiny pup tent, each rib pulled apart with FABRIC, until pulled tight and pinned, with the last ring placed flat to the ground and staked to complete the single person cocoon.

Small yet it still afforded dry shelter and a spot where she could have a fire and stick her head out. The opening where the backpack lay gave easy access and acted as a pillow when it came time to sleep.

She had to empty the pack a little to afford her some room to lay on it comfortably, but she opted to pack as much back in as possible should she need to flee. Her tiny fire smoldered, struggling against the natural moisture hanging in the air. She kept it small intentionally though as to keep from prying eyes.

The pack tent had an overhang she popped out, rolled its extended flaps out and staked them down, which was a nice touch, it gave her a dry spot to stick out her head and read in front of the small fire she had to nurture while her socks and shoes roasted dry.

"If I could make sense of time I'd feel better. I'm not sure what order these events have played out, not even sure which ones were real and what I imagined or dreamed. mounting evidence would seem to indicate much of it is real, and honestly what it did prove was the most insane of it.

Even if I wanted to justify this rationally it would take me years and repeated experiences to make sense of it all. All I know is that when I am here, I am healthy, my loss of motor function subsides, I can breathe a full lungful of air, I can stand on my own two feet without fear of randomly toppling over. That's tangible, repeatable. But at what cost, what am I giving of myself to this nightmarish place? What will I have to give? Will it be worth it?"

It felt deeply personal as she read, a side of Chris unfamiliar from the sure footed wanderer with a lust for adventuring through the dense rich forest. He thirsted for knowledge, here he questions if it's worth even knowing. Without the context of events it was even more concerning. This passage seemed to be a continuation of a prior book.

She shuffled forward, trying to scan for things that reflected on these earlier passages. Some not so inspiring words caught her eye as she flitted the pages scanning, torture, disembowelment, madness, mutilation. Ritual was repeated many times, a recurring theme in the nightmarish word cloud forming in her head.

The visuales her mind spat at her, set her up for panic, that's when the first spark erupted. It caught her very much by surprise, she hopped in her tent with a full body flinch, before she knew it she was on her knees outside her cocoon, just past her tiny fire, as the light deeper in the forest faded with the slow drift of sparks settling down onto the forest floor.

POP!

Another loud eruption of sound and light, as the sound of rain grew as a backdrop of white noise. The Sparkes emitted the fractal patterned light in various colors and forms, beautiful and bright they bombarded the surrounding forest with their photons.

The cavernous valley of trunks behind her began to let loose the barrage of droplets initially damned in by the rooftops of the rooted giants. As the rain poured down, the forest's red skinned trunks began to erupt more and more in a spectacular form.

A Kaleidoscope filled her widening pupils as the forest blew out into a fantastical barrage. It rained down water and light, the drops not evaporated by the heated sparks from the exploding sap, managed to catch and refract the light farther, forming a galaxy of fading dots that flared and dissipated as they dropped heavy to the damp floor.

The sheets of rain penetrated deeper and deeper down the hillside, giving the forest a depth she had never experienced. Through all the horror this beauty kept her raptured, pulled aside from the agony of the experiences that led her here.

A Distant plume erupted, a quick ring of rolling fire shot up the barked exterior of a particularly thick rooted trunk. And another, this time closer, the heat from the ring made thick translucent waves in the moisture. Erupting and Rolling over themselves up the sappy bark pillar only to dissipate diffusing outward as it extinguished itself across the rich green canopy.

Another, and another, this one right next to her, she felt the heatwave, the sap left behind. It fizzled and sparked leaving a short trail of orange and green embers that flitted themselves out with a sputter and hiss.

The more the sap sparked, the more the rolling rings formed, patterns in the deep began to emerge between them, rolling rings following one another rhythmically feeding on their sticky fuel, and riding up to release, mesmerizing her.

As if time had slowed she searched through the thicket for the next eruption, bewildered and excited. They seemed to trickle in and out in waves as the swoons of droplets fell heavier across the forest.

Her heart felt the stabbing rush of chemicals, her esophagus constricted so tightly she couldn't even swallow to relieve it. a sharp spark lit the forest not twenty meters out, the distinguishable white ivory of the skull raptured her in fear.

Hanging silent in the forest's black embrace, the sparks reflected off its glistening wet surface as they dropped. Floating sturdy, the large canine skull drifted, impossible, cocking ever so slightly, almost inquisitively.

The bright white reflected the light well, standing tall next to the trees. Red streaks of congealed blood filled the porous bone surface, tinting the deeper cracks a fleshy pink. The elongated cranium led to a mouth of thick pointed fangs which dripped with the rain that

pummeled its hulking shadowed form. The rain's percussive bounce outlined its dominating shape lighting only its outer edges from the reflected light of each drops mist.

It was massive, its shape was hard to discern, but its four thick legs silhouetted by the meandering sparks made its giant size obvious, even among the towering trees. A hulking mass, dense and sturdy it was nearly as entranced by her as she was with it.

It was only a moment, mostly a glance as the light flickered out. The next blinding spark was close, making it hard to see past it, but when it settled and the bulky form had simply vanished, she was left with a sense of urgent retreat.

A flurry of color and cloth as she was overtaken with flight over her fight. It tied and tripped her up. She had launched herself through the opening and to the back of her small fortress of fabric. her pack attached at the front skidded towards her, closing the opening and ripping up the stakes then held it sturdy.

She had entered with such force she nearly winded herself against the thick inner wall of the large hollow where she had made her camp. She instantly regretted her decision, she felt more helpless, she no longer had the imagination of her youth, she knew the thin veil of tight knit polyester was not the armor she once imagined protected her as a child.

Instead she felt trapped with her fear of what might come next, she was holding her breath but her heart was pounding making it difficult for her to probe the sounds of the flickering forest.

She was swimming in fearful assumptions, scenarios, scattering her focus for solutions. She was so tense, she might as well have been a statue. the longer she lingered, the less she heard.

As quick as the river in the sky carved its streak of condensation across the forest, it expelled its wash, falling silent as the rains calmed. She kept watching, as the sparks subsided and the looming dark took root through the natural grand hall.

The Flaming rings ended their race to the forest's top, the sparks began to dissipate into a few tragic ignitions as the last of the rain found its path downward.

The rain had fully stopped, the sparkes and plumes migrated away with the deluge that fed them. And the forest fell flat. The silence was worse than what she couldn't hear through the rain. A hectic silence, filled with worry, consumed with concern.

Her eyes darted deep, trying to discern movement in the sparse brush, but nothing. Nothing for nearly an hour before she finally gave in and began to rationalize the more reasonable of her assumptions, she was tired, maybe seeing things.

It didn't dissipate her paranoia, only helped her ignore it. Even with her heart settled it was still pounding beat for beat harder than it ever had. A new baseline to her blood pressure, which probably didn't help her need for sleep, and her growing hunger.

The rain had passed, but it seemed to leave its darkness behind. Without being able to see the sky she had a hard time discerning what time it really was. As confident as she could be she reset her camp, a little further into the protective wooden shell this time.

She sat watching the woods, she nibbled half an energy bar she had rationed herself. The life and sounds of the jungle began to grow to the comforting dull roar they usually were. But she wasn't going to let it settle her, she sat like a century; devouring with the smallest of bites, every chalky protein chunk.

The tiny bulbs of protein powder turned to dust quickly in her tensely clenched jaw, each bite accompanied a twitch of her eye as she continued to watch the forest from every angle she could conceivably process.

Her focus began to linger longer and longer, her jaw loosened with each bite, cool shivers caused her to pull deeper back into the small enclosure of the tent, and her head instinctively hung lower until resting on her pack.

Chapter 30 -

When her eyes snapped open to catch herself, it was too late. She had already slept through until morning, as the flickering blue light of her phone expressed disapprovingly.

"Shit"

The drool felt cool straining to her pack as she lifted her head. The new light that poked through was still gray, but bright. The woods stained red with sap to the upper limits of her peripheral gave it a haunting yet beautiful hue in its glisten.

"Pillars of Blood, heh, good metal band name..." It sounded morbid but it made her chuckle nonetheless.

She dragged herself out of her slumber by sitting up using her pack as a seat. The small coals still retained enough heat to warm her digits, her socks and shoes dry but stank of thick smoke. She yawned and stretched remembering with her aching side about the good times they had with a twitch and a "Fucking hell"

Rolling her head and neck around in a stretch, she yawned at its crest, shaking out the shot down her spine. She wiped the water formed in her eyes and stared at it on her finger, she smeared it across with her thumb, clearing the mud and debris on a small patch on the side of her index finger.

"I need some goddamn water" She spent the next twenty minutes filling a travel mug from collected water on the surrounding fronds.

Might have been the slow start-up of her morning brain, but she always felt safe and calm at first light while camping. She had a similar euphoria now as she took her time rolling up her pack and reassembling her gear.

She took her time and accounted for everything, reserved her energy in preparation for her next jaunt up the hillside. She ran down her list outloud to herself.

“Gotta be some food around, maybe some mango, mushrooms, or maybe some edible ferns, if I can find a tributary I might snag some fish, a tilapia or two.” She was sure glad for her training now. Although Juda was always more the naturalist, holding true to his stoner stereotype with a hobbyist level interest in botany.

She dwelled on him a lot as she foraged, careful not to step back through her memories into the night of the glade. She always had a suspicion of his feelings, but it was always something she ignored, mostly because she never really sought those attachments with people.

But a few instances of his bumbling awkwardness always left it lingering in her mind, so she never really broached it. Much of her memories of him are always in a group of other aspiring researchers.

He and her bonded pretty quickly after he became her dealer. But like Chris she kept from getting too close as she knew her intentions were to leave ACRN. She wondered how Juda really felt about her leaving.

A stroke of luck.

“Cassava! yes!”

A small sturdy tree protruded, nestled amid some other fauna in a small patch of natural garden. The healthy thick stems hopefully meant some strong raw roots. She dug down deep and scratched the pebbles and dirt away revealing a smaller than expected stash of starchy nodules.

“Don’t be disappointed with eating another day, ass...” she sarcastically headed herself off in her own head.

It took considerable effort to wrestch the roots from ancient dirt that gripped them. The long slender sticks, lined with hair like roots and protrusions, held tight to the upturned turf.

She smacked them hard against the ground to knock off what remained, and started the tug and ripped them from their upper stems. She put some aggression into it, her aches and pains be damned. This was an opportunity to vent some stress and she was going to take full advantage.

It was slow going, she hadn't thought about a destination, just getting through a day or two with some fresh food and clean water. But her sweat had built up, and as she tore at the roots she had shook loose the past few days of grime, drawing the ever ravenous ire of the surrounding insect population thirsting for her.

“Shit” She smeared an abnormally large mosquito across her shin catching it in the act of stealing her precious dna.

“You little shit.” It left what would be a concerningly large smear of gore if she didn’t just watch it swallow down a substantial swig of her human juice.

“Right, next problem please. Fuck sakes” Another one on her list of needs, protection against the maelstrom of insects. One she could tackle. They began to swarm around her

“Kindly fuck off please!” They didn’t comply. A snappy satisfying rip of velcro and she slid out her repellent.

The intense chemical sting of the deet surrounded her, the vapor settling adding to the layer of sweat. It reminded her of the day she bought it, where she followed her steps to the pulled chicken sandwich she had shortly thereafter.

“Uhhhhooohhh.”

Both her and her stomach groaned in unison as her tastebuds filled her mouth with a flush of saliva which she swallowed down, void of flavor, which made her yearn for the saucy sweet slop all the more.

She was oblivious to what was sure to be her own overwhelming musk, the cold sweat and fear left her particularly ripe. Her special brand tinted the repellent sweet on the air. Sweet like a BBQ pulled chicken sandwich.

Everything was reminding her of it. A small chicken breast shaped mushroom growing next to a small patch of thick yellowed grass that looked suspiciously like fries taunted her further.

As if sensing his touch on the back of her hand, memory mixed with sensation as the moment replayed in her mind, Juda slapped her hand off his fries.

“Jesus Dawn, this is why I asked if you wanted fries!”

“Come on, it's just a few fries”

“It never is though is it?”

Her nose crinkled with her sideways smirk knowing he had called her out. She didn’t care, snapping away a few more.

“Well you said lunch is on you today, so I call it fair game.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at her, “infuriatingly charming” was how he would often introduce her to his friends, and it always threw him off, she had that power over him.

“So... I. I gotta tell you something.”

"Yeah, What?"

"I'm Quitting ACRN"

"I know..."

"What? how?"

"Ginny Asked me to persuade you to stay."

"So this isn't a free lunch?"

"Well financially free, but yeah strings attached."

"Well let's hear it then, what's Ginny's grand plan to have you convince me to stay?"

"It's not a plan, come on D. We all love you, we all want you to stay."

"Wait, everyone knows?!"

"Dawn, the facility is a dozen people crammed together in a concrete bunker."

"I'm sorry that it sucks, but I'm pretty set in stone. This never was a long term for me."

"Yeah I know, I told Ginny and Chris as much. but they told me to try."

"Look, I don't need an intervention here. I just need some support. You guys all see ACRN as some grand adventure. and all important. It consumes you guys. it's all you talk about, I just don't feel that. I want that feeling, but it's not here."

"Can't really compete with that can I?"

"It's not a competition, it's my life, and I need to find my own obsession."

"Okay ok, I get it. Sucks, but I get it. Chris won't though, not at first."

"Yeah well, ACRN is his legacy, not mine, he will just have to come to terms with that."

"He spent so much time and money on you and getting you here"

"Yeah well, if he's looking at me purely as an investment, then I think I have more than paid for myself"

"You know he's not like that"

"I know I'm just anxious, I know the right decision for me, I just hate that other people's feelings can hold me back from making them."

"Feelings get hurt, you can never win. Chris will support you regardless."

"I know"

"Fuck this, we need shots."

The thoughts of tequila shots flexed her gag reflex, and she shook her head with the shiver that shot down her back, with it her focus back to her reality.

She had sufficiently caked herself a few times over with the aerosol. She gave it one last quick shake to determine how much she had left before packing it away. It slid down next to Chris's Journal giving her pause to stalk its indented cover.

The edges of the book's pages were marked with pencil indicators to specific pages. She slid the journal out and stood with tilted hips resting one leg at a time as she flitted through the pages. She stopped at the first marker, a tab of lead, drawn off the page with an arrow to a circled line in an entry.

"The Fire had become lit. A split trunk across from me jutted with a stone tablet which stacked atop the lower roots that had grown and gripped around it. Its surface sputtered with sparks and sap."

She flipped to another circled Entry

"A sweeping section of wide river bent around the forest edge with a single spire of eroded rock jutting from the center. A small tree sprouted from a rocky peak. They guided me out under the shadow of the Monolith. An intolerable heat wrapped around me as they dipped me in the shallows beneath. The water boiled around me, searing my skin, until I was submerged."

The next entry was scribbled quickly, the page stained with a light print of the side of his palm in red where his hand laid as he frantically wrote, smearing the fine lines of his palm lines imprint.

"I headed south from their encampment, this was the first time I have felt this conscious, usually It's a blur like a lucid dream. I had believed at first they were my friends. They are not, they have been doing unspeakable things to me. But I saw something last night when they dipped me in the waters at the boiling river rock, a boathouse far down the river to the south. Another landmark, I am getting close to retracing my steps back to them. Maybe I can prove this isn't just a dream."

"He's marking landmarks!" The realization shocked her, her eyes widened as she stared into the blanket of forest.

"He was here. He was actually here."

It was a life line, a starting point, the stone slab at the ritual campsite she awoke at was one of his first stops, which means she should be able to find this encampment provided she can first find the river.

She slapped the book closed on her free hand, and jammed it back into her pack. She had some bearing, a sense of purpose again, which went a long way in re-invigorating her coupled with the refreshing late morning mist, she almost felt good.

Chapter 31 -

The laceration on her shoulder, her bruised ribs, neither could compete with the newfound determination.. The dull ache in her ankle was the only thing still slowing her down.

The extra weight of the packs made the incline upward feel steeper than it was. The tree-tops had opened to the familiar overcast, threatening to relieve itself, to feed the forest's unending thirst.

The air had cooled and been coaxed to enter into the gaps of the forest here, the breeze was gentle but enough to lift away her sweat, causing a chill. She was taking her steps steadily, finding her footing before lifting herself up to her next step.

The packs had chafed the straps at her side, she ran her thumbs underneath to resituate and relieve them, underneath felt cold as the air snapped up the trapped moisture.

She had become more lazy after leaving ACRN and her cardio was far from what it used to be. She heaved heavily until her chest stung with cool crisp air, taking a moment to exhale and rest her legs.

The incline made it a much slower journey than she had anticipated. She hadn't realized just how out of shape she had become, she had pushed herself on pure adrenalin for this entire excursion, and now with her body in a more resting state she was finding it difficult to keep up with herself.

The thicket forced a slow winding path up the hillside, at times she would need to backtrack to find sight of the cliff above ensuring she hadn't wandered astray. It felt like half the day had slipped away as she pressed onward up the slope.

The whole forest still had an intangible surreal quality to it, the shifting light throughout the day flowed in and out of the tree tops in brilliant hues of orange and violet as it scattered through the brush below.

As it thinned the treeline broke out over the valley, letting more light through the dense stalks, the shifting colors more noticeable as they contrast against each other through the distant pockets of light reaching down to the forest below.

Columns of colored light splashed on the more exposed trunks through her ascent. Their bark was torn and stripped from exposure, leaving the red stained surface of the ancient wood below.

The Cliffs face was only about ten feet at its tallest, but it would be enough coupled with the steep incline to see over the immense green crested pillars canvassing the thick jungle.

The view was surreal. The dense clouds outstretched beyond view, patched with a natural yellow hue fading into a dark violet, tinting the forest in shades of purple and orange. The tone in the light made it feel like late afternoon.

It felt unnatural, but beautiful like a painting. The diffused light of the trailing mists of distant rain redacted the light further into patterns of shaped light drifting down to fill the vast reservoir of the winding river below.

“Yes, River, Okay good!”

Her excitement was electric but the jostling and constant pull downward had loosened her tightly wound stomach to offer a degree of relief from her constant anxiety. This of course immediately spurred the need to relive herself, the stress of it all had her holding everything in, both physically and mentally.

She dropped her pack, in a hurry, she had faced some crazy shit in this insane forest, but the urgency here nearly matched any of her experience. Shovel in hand, with a sani wipe and some precious toilet paper, she sought sturdy shelter from prying eyes.

The great Kapuna towers over the rest of the forest, ancient and massive; they spread their roots into the vast ecosystem below. Guardians, sotic and sturdy, Dawn was dwarfed by the mass of dense fiber that protected the tree’s overgrown shell.

Her first strike into the ground at its base shrieked with ringing metal off jagged stone. A sense of foreboding pressed into her, heavy with judgment. The moment her second strike hit she dropped her shovel, overcome with a sense of irrational obedience, she jumped back from her small divot, as if scolded like a child caught in the act.

A long drawn creak reverberated deep in the soil and up the trunk that had her entranced looking up at the giant. She stared as it sat silently, seemingly peering through her examining her intentions.

Cold steel caressed her palm lifting her shovel up from a protective crouch. She folded it up and stepped back from the tree. keeping locked on it, like a prey to predator.

It was crazy she knew it, but here in this place, was it impossible?

“Oooh kay, just in case, and I’m not saying you are, but Just in case, I’m sorry and I will find somewhere else...”

She hated that she had to even question it, normally she knew what to expect in the forest, but here she couldn't chance not considering even the most ridiculous hypothesis.

As she wandered further she swung herself around and continued deeper, finding a suitable fallen tree and built her little dug-out. Unfortunately she had re-consolidated her guts into a tight knot, but it was now or never, the walls had been breached and the floodgates would not hold.

"There is a moment, alone, the relief seems to conjure euphoria, a calming sensation when the weight of the world is lifted and you feel the true call of nature." It played in her head, Chirses's fathers documentary series, a special episode on how the jungle is filled with feces.

It became a sort of meme in its own right, even a gif she used to use around the office of him saying "The True call of nature" on loop in all caps with the stupid dumb smile spurred from what he probably thought was a solid play on words at the time.

It made her think of her phone, how she couldn't just sit there and thumb away at her friends obviously staged "my perfect vacay everyday" pics, or guzzle down some trashy nonsense article on how keto will kill everyone and turn us all into fat loving zombies.

It was a sense of disconnection she probably knew better than most, since she spent much time working with Chris in the jungle, but here, it was worse. She didn't catch herself crying until she had to sniffle back her sinuses.

SNAP!

A loud thump followed. sound of brushing leaves, and a single clomp of stone. She could see out to her packs, laying on the cliff edge where she left them in a hurry. The shock had prematurely ended her nearly complete jaunt into the woods.

She began to formulate a plan as she finished up with a wipe. "Get my packs , and skirt the cliff's edge, keep an eye on--" Her thoughts stopped.

Behind her packs over the edge of the drop, movement. Two large antlers, but not antlers, twisted root and vine, swaying and turning. dark and wrapped in patches of dark crimson sap, the shape rose up and the sunken sockets of the canine skull peered over the edge inspecting her pack.

The creature's stature stood tall above the cliff, standing at least fifteen feet. Backlit by the intense overcast sky, the details were hard to make out but its form and silhouette were daunting enough.

The beast prodded the packs, nudging them with its head like an animal. It tugged at it, and then sunk back down below the cliff. It had snagged a strap with its mouth and dragged them both over the cliff with it. The solid contact with the ground below made her wince.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck...” She whispered frantically as she slipped and scraped at the sani wipe package trying to open it. Multitasking, she used her heel to push the dirt into the hole to cover her deposit, and finally mastered the foil packaging.

She moved slowly and deliberately as she wiped her hands, and crumpled the sani wipe into her pant pocket. She crept towards the cliff top overlooking the forest, listening to the beast's movements, trying to imagine its position.

A roar, but a voice all in one. An agonizing yell, and a coarse growl merging into a symphony of terrifying sound, echoed out as it trounced around hidden behind the rocky ledge. Shorter grunts and growls between the outbursts even had an unearthly quality to them, a deliberate sound, with no actual voice. Regardless it sounded unwelcoming, and the energy it put into its groans seemed full of frustration.

An excited exhale escaped her as its head peeked up over the ridge once more, but its attention was still downward at the fallen packs as its feet. She froze a moment before acting, twirling like a dancer behind the closest tree.

She remained close to the tree's, reaching carefully out with her toes for each foothold, rolling the flat of her feet slowly down, feeling for the soft peat. The beast had grown quiet. Very quiet.

She had emerged from the edge of the forest and pressed herself low to the stone outcrop scraping along its surface as she lay on her stomach and inched herself to the edge. She felt as if she was going to lose her fingers as soon as they wrapped the edge of the cliff, she lifted herself off the ground leaning on her one wrist and lifting with her toes.

Her pack laid helpless and alone at the cliff base.

“Where the fuck...”

It was unsettling, she instantly felt watched. She stared down at her pack like a fallen soldier, pleading for her help, but she could swear she felt the sniper eyes. Debris had been kicked up around the pack, sprinkling it with dirt, and a paw clearly stamped in sap on its exposed surface.

Her confusion worsened when she inspected the tracks from above, a mix of hoof and paw, with trenches that looked like something was dragged along with the footfall. The tracks were like a lion, stag and bulldozer had a fight. It was like nothing she had seen, and nowhere to be seen.

“Fuck... Fuuuuk. It came out under her breath, through gritted teeth, as she contemplated retrieving the packs. She needed them. without them she was dead, getting them could get her killed. She resented her choices for being intentionally difficult and lacking.

She waited and surveyed, she nearly became a part of the stone as she tensed. An agonizing few minutes later she heard the terrifying call again, a ways into the jungle. It may have moved on, but that didn't mean she didn't have a limited window.

She found herself not thinking as she took the leap from the top. Luckily she was closer to the lower part of the cliff, but with her ankle it still ended with her eating dirt. A little winded she was fine, managing to pull herself up from the muck, she searched the dark wood for movement.

She kept low, the packs were slightly squished under the immense weight of the creature as it inspected it, but everything seemed intact. With no time to account for everything she had swiftly strapped herself back in. She had pressed hard against the mud leaving a distinct impression behind her heel.

She was up and running, ensuring her footing, watching every foothold the ground had to offer her. Vaulting up and over the landscape of boulders and roots, she was slowly being funneled down toward the basin below.

A chest stabbing screech of the deep bellowing shrieks turned her surefooted gallops into an uneasy dance of elegant missteps. It was a struggle to stay on top of her fleeting dexterity.

The snaps and crunch of bow and brush came stomping up from behind her. Its cries mixed with its thrashing into an ungodly racket chasing her down the tedious incline. Her body refused to stay caught up to her mind's decision to flee, each step as uneasy as the last.

A lull in its pursuit, it continued its frantic calls as it searched for the next steps she had left behind. She too took a pause to catch her breath, she had no choice. She scanned and listened. Without a visual, it seemed far enough away for the moment, so she took an uneasy rest.

She kept low and peered down the steepening slope. A ways down from her a well defined clean edge cut between the browns and greens. The slope would end abruptly to an instant fall off. With the creature still distracted trying to pick up her trail, she slid down the slope to meet the edge of the drop.

It was mostly a wall of mud, swept away from an old landslide that decimated the forest below. It left a scar of carnage down to the distant river bank at the end of its destructive trail. It would be impossible to climb down, and even harder to navigate through the wreckage and ruin, especially as the light started to fade into evening.

She would have to skirt the tedious edge and follow the shallow grade of soil down to the edge of the forest intact. But it would leave her exposed.

The decision was made for her. The forest erupted behind her, the mammoth beast had picked up the trail and started carving a path right to her. The thicket thrashed preseed

aside by its lumbering form. Her brief moment of pause gave her an obscured view, but enough to know it determination.

She shuffled along, the torn edge of loosened soil nearly gave way beneath her. She pulled back into the forest only as far as she could without becoming bogged down in the underbrush, while staying a safe distance from the uneasy ledge.

She had become less cautious in her footing, racing to keep the distance between them. She was nearly halfway down when it had finally broached the broken forest. It teetered at the edge, nearly losing itself over the drop from its momentum. It stabbed its thick front legs into the ground to steady itself.

Dawn had pulled herself back into the forest for cover, but her distraction slapped a protruding stick against her battered ribs.

"AHH FUCK!" followed by a deep inhale.

The quiet that followed resonated.

Peering back the two stared each other down a moment. Its brutish mass swallowed what remained of the fading light. It cast a long shadow, clomping there on its two massive stalky arms to keep its ground.

The red soaked skull peered at her, a catch of the light on the creature's retinas shone back at her making its focused animalistic stare at her all the more daunting. Locked on her it began taking uneasy steps along the disintegrating dirt at the edge of the fallen forest.

She backed away, before swingin around to run, nearly offering herself up to the ground, her stumbling caught her though, and she lifted up into a stride. The trouncing behind her shook the ground with the beast's heavy stature.

She had reached the base of the muddy cliffside where the slope ended and met back with the standing forest. In a moment she turned back, the hastened approach of the beast brought it to the peak of the soil cliff.

It shrieked at her, stopping her in her tracks. She watched it think, she saw it contemplating, the intelligence behind it felt more than an animal, like it had intentions for her.

Short lived, the moment passed and the ground began to give way beneath the brute. It scraped and scampered back to avoid the fall but its size gave gravity the advantage, and it was pulled down the slope, sliding down out of view in the torn up forest below.

For a moment she felt empathetic, it looked almost helpless as physics took hold, grappling it down to the earth. The crash she heard sounded hard and painful. Turmoil in the obscured debris meant it wasn't over yet.

The trail ahead was plowed clean of underbrush, the edge of the landslide had carved a mostly clear path for her to follow down towards the flowing edge of the river. The ground

was still wet and stuck to her feet she slogged through with considerable effort to keep up her pace.

The thick uproot jutted with spears of stone and stick, a marred landscape ripe with traps pinning and prodding the frantic beast as it pushed itself up and out from its gnarled embrace.

It fell from the stack of ruined roots to the forest's edge below the mound of mud that held it sturdy. Finding its footing, it rose to meet the path forward, Dawn but a struggling speck nearing the river.

The bank is made of loose stone, ground by the river and laid bare in the hot sun. It was still warm radiating heat from thermal mass. The mud on her shoes made the rocks especially slippery. she found her footing and stared back down the path to assess.

She tapped her shoulders and Deez 'flashlight burst an array of LEDs to life, sending the light rushing into the darkness down the sunsets fading path.

The last of the day's light outlined the creature's sharp angles against the stark woods behind it, heaving itself to its feet to stand tall. Its eyes caught the light like two dots in the dark. Its vocal growl was still audible over rising rapids that tore down the waterway.

The Twisting roots protrude from its head antlers of bark and bone, they too were wet with sap and glistened with a red hue. Thick stalks of bark and roots filled out the hulking shoulders and poured themselves down to the ground. The details were small and distant, but enough to make clear this was nothing of the world she knew.

Its path led straight to her, she stood like a target, it aimed and fired itself towards. Its wide stride pushed to a full gallop spitting up the mud. She broke her gaze, and pulled out her phone, her finger naturally sliding over the fingerprint scanner and unlocking it, with two taps Deez had gracefully dismounted and hovered next to her head.

She ducked out, rushing into the shallows and dropping herself next to a large submerged rock for cover and left Deez in her stead. The beast raged closer and she submerged her phone to hide the light.

The creature blasted out from the fallen tree's and out onto the embankment as she sped deez away into the tree line of the far bank. She triggered its flashing lights and emergency alarm, it hissed and squealed through the thick foliage.

The beast didn't miss a step, She clung close to the rock keeping out of view as it passed her and across the shallows, penetrating the far forest wall. Every near miss was heart stopping, as it pursued the little drone into the woods across the river.

No longer chased she still watched in horror as her little mechanical savior ducked and dodged through the most precarious of holes in the bushes pushing further in to lead the horror away from her.

Full sport mode with all sensors on for object detection and avoidance meant what was left of her battery was drained. Like a fading heart beat, her phone vibrated as it struggled to keep itself aloft. all manner of warning and malfunctions popped up on screen.

The return to home button taunted her, like an ethical quandary she could save the poor thing but sacrifice herself. She knew it wasn't rational, but it still hurt to see the last bar drop , the lights go out, and its alarm die down like its last cries in the distant forest.

Relentless crashing followed, peaking out her small phone speaker. Even on the lowest setting she heard the beast flurry rip the small drone apart. The distraction meant she could move.

She stood slowly from the shallows, the water dripping off her. she drudged herself out to the shore line, keeping a few inches into the water as she followed its winding path downstream away from the terror behind her.

She had enough time to make it a considerable distance before the creature had retraced steps back to the river. It scoured the distant trees in both directions, and stamped in frustration before fading back in the forest deep continuing to retrace its steps.

She stayed hidden until she could move again out of its line of sight. Her dread subsided but it kept her alert. She continued to wander listening to every bellow and crash in the distance, keeping a rough idea of her proximity to the beast until it had faded from earshot entirely.

She found herself more relaxed, though she was mourning the loss of her little electric friend. Her tendency to identify more with her devices and machines than people, led to a probably unhealthy attachment to them. She felt like she just sacrificed a beloved pet, what's worse was, Juda trusted her with him. Deez was a him, she just decided that in the moment.

Something nearby made its presence known with a snapping of a branch that brought her from her unwarranted guilt right back to her very warranted paranoia. The river had thinned even more, slowing down over a wider span.

A dark shape against the clouds shifted and melted into the backdrop. A tinge of campfire in the air drew the correlation, a large plume of distant dark smoke obfuscated the faint orange glow kissing the clouds. An unmistakable sign of a large fire.

She left the shallows for the bank as the river began to rage faster and wider. Her first steps marked her reentry to the forest on the thick sand. She estimated an hour or more of walking and decided it would be faster and safer on dry land.

Her feet were heavy, soaked and soggy. The sponge of her insoles squeezed out the moisture around her toes making a warm soup of muddy water around her feet. She shook each foot to remove the excess with each step, making her stride wide and awkward. She

swung around and sat firmly on a large moss covered rock and slipped off each shoe to empty its contents.

Retreating from the sound of the flowing river the forest began to remind her of the lurking life behind the shaded wall. every snapping twig set her off. She was sore and exhausted again. The crash of chemicals made it hard to coax herself to slip her shoes back on a press forward.

Each foot felt like lead weights as she lifted them, each shoe seemed intent on being as difficult as possible, chaffing and snagging her skin. Her insoles wanted to roll up into her toes making her all the more frustrated to have to start over.

She may have very well laid there and given up had the smell of campfire not be sweetened by the scent of cooked meat. A Thick meaty inhale had her back on her feet and rubbing her injured side, but the smell was intoxicating, and a growing need for somewhere warm and dry in the night was palpable.

A few minutes of meandering and a trail from the beach into the woods presented itself, it headed in the direction of the fire light, and kept close to the shore. She felt safe just obscured behind a thin wall of vegetation. She paced herself a little more, less rushed, more intent on getting to her destination with some strength left.

As her reserve energy slipped away she wandered in her head inline with the path she walked. A straight shot through her last few days, overcome with confusion, wrapped in guilt, and soaking in regret.

Sajo must have come looking for her, Juda followed her everywhere, and even poor Calo was just helping her follow her now ludacris dream of finding Percy Fawcett. It was no wonder no one found him if he ended up here. Saying it to herself just added to her dread.

The more she thought about it, the more she began to believe it. Maybe Percy did find something out in these woods, even some of what she had read in Chrises journals felt oddly similar to the correspondence Percy encoded to his wife near the end.

“Madame Blotvousky?, Blotovosky? Bladder Chovskey?” She ran through all her incorrect pronunciations in her head. Madam Blavatsky was the most talked about tie Percy had to Theosophy, tho motto “truth above all” was a tall order to fill in this place, she wondered how Blavatsky would have found truth here.

Theosophy may have driven Fawcett to the forest's depths in search of something more than just a lost civilization. He came here looking for the actual truth, one she felt that step by step, and mostly for the worse, she was experiencing first hand.

Unfortunately the truth as she saw it so far was unfathomable, unacceptable, this ritual she witnessed nagged at her, all focused on Virginia, El Tunchi and the widows call. The giant snake which she still grappled with the reality of, and now this horror haunting her through the fiery woods.

All a far cry from Percy's vision of a grand and prosperous lost city he likened to Atlantis itself. Her only actual through line in all the myths and chaos was Chris and Virginia.

"What the fuck we're you doing out here Chris?"

She caught herself speaking aloud, half asleep, she pressed her weight heavily onto her heels with each tiresome step. A refreshing sprinkle lifted her face to meet it. Her eyes opened to a brilliant emerald sky, swaths of swirling mists played with the green, thinning it to yellow, offering a glimpse of the starry night sky beyond the veil.

A dark shape in her peripheral shot her eyes back down and she choked back her next breath. When the shape became focused the edges of a weaved wooden arch became clear and she exhausted her lungs from her deep held breath.

"Jesus, it's a fence. Dawn."

Half pretending she reassured herself as if standing there with... herself.

She inspected closer the old wicker arch, the grass around it had grown tall, through, and into it, wrapping around it and the handmade fence that stretched out in both directions as far as she could see into the dark. A proper threshold is a common marker of tribal territory.

Chapter 32 -

Moss lined the skywarfaceing surfaces across the fenceline, the vines reinforced and rejuvenated its rigidity. The path that crossed through was well worn on both sides of the gate.

The rain may well have cleansed the tracks, but the well trodden trail left little space for new growth to form from regular use. She had little context outside of these otherworldly events, to offer any sense of what to expect from a tribe in this place. She settled on caution over necessity, opting to take her time and stay alert as she scouted the trail ahead.

It wasn't long until a low thick fog up to her knee swarmed the forest trail making it difficult for her to keep her bearings. Each gap in the wood offered itself as a path forward, producing themselves into an ever weaving maze of trampled dirt obscured by the thickening mists that felt warm settling around her ankles.

She chose the trails that kept her close to the river, a critical landmark for her, keeping her paranoia in check. Unfortunately her choices led her wandering away from the distant smoke to a small inlet, an aside to the river. It was dark and the mists kept the ground invisible to her. Her first foot sank into the silty sand into the sting of hot water that instantly filled her shoe to the point of scalding.

"Ahh Shit!, what the hell!"

She fell back in a plume of fog lifting it from its clutch on the ground around her. The waters edge simmered and the deeper in it turned to a bubbling mix of mud and clay. The steam sunk in to fill the void and again she couldn't see the ground she was laying on.

From her vantage point the monolith shot up and out of the center of the small pooled edge of the river. the top of the slab dripped with the red oily stain from the small manicured tree that topped it.

The description from his journal did not do it justice, but the connection set her hopes higher, as this had solidified it, she was on the right trail, or at least a trail, one she knew Chris had returned from at least on one occasion.

She scrambled through her pack, and ripped through the journal to re-read the entry. it only reinforced her belief, he had to have been here, he wasn't dreaming, and neither was she. Which was a hell of a mixed bag of emotions if she dwelled too deep on it.

"If only it were a dream." The words felt like a distasteful joke on her tongue. If only it were as simple as waking up from this place.

She picked herself up, and pulled out her phone all in one motion, snapping a tall shot of the natural stone pillar. A quick swipe had zoomed in on the stone carving adorning the front edge of the tapered rock. It towered 3 stories and the markings nearly ran the length.

Root and vine grappled the top holding the short manicured tree stoic in its place looking over the river. The overgrowth hung long, finding any crevasse it could cling to the rocks surface to wind down into the warm moisture.

Disguised by the overgrowth entwined in its nest of vines, an iron chain wound down, resonating a light clink at its loose end. It dangled just above the surface, perturbed by the water's motion giving its swing.

The c-shaped manacle capped the sturdy chain. Stained with blood it still caught the light, its surface still reflective from the heat and moisture.

A bright spot near the surface of the water protruding from the stone intersection with the river, was still shrouded in mist. She pinched outward with her fingers to zoom-in. Her packs pressed in her short sharp breath.

A second manacle wrapped a wrist, whose hand lifelessly gripped the stone's face, its fingers frozen in the tight embrace in what she assumed was rigor mortis. The blue veins that ran through the thinned skin, stuck out against the faint backdrop of the near white complexion, tinted a fleshy pink from obvious burns, the detail sickened her.

"What the fuck" It felt as if her vocabulary had tumbled into a collection of variations on the sentiment. She looked up at the stone peering into the water for a better view in, but it was too dark and the steam too thick.

Some sick ritual, boiling someone alive like that. Her empathy had her visualizing the experience in vivid detail, squirming in her own skin at the thought of being boiled in the bubbling river. The heat meeting her exposed skin made the experience all the more visceral.

The glow of her phone blew out her eyes, making everything behind it pitch black, she scrolled around looking to spot something in the dark shapes that lined the fringe of the river. A dark line stretched out, leading up to a boxy shape topped with a peak.

Tapping up the contrast she made out the dark unnatural shape of the docks, as silhouetted against the river that shone back the diffused night light.

An unnerving snap in the forest nearby was a friendly reminder not to linger. She held for a moment staring out at the rock base, probing the noise of nature for more movement, the silence reassured her she could move, but left the distinctive sense of eyes following her as she slipped back into the dark of the protective wood.

She doubled back up the path and took the trail leading deeper into the wildwood and away from the river. The deeper in, the more the light bled out, soaked into the flora surrounding her, like the rain soaked into the soft peaty sediment that cushioned her cautious footfall.

The sudden grinding of gears echoed loudly when she made the first crank of her manual flashlight. She stopped abruptly, shocked by its intensity. She slowly continued to crank, softer, more calculated now, and the LEDs sputtered to life with a faint dim.

She kept it low, giving herself only enough light to see the way forward, keeping her eye keenly on the trail at her feet. Her socks were again soaked through, and her ankle still stung from the light burn from its brief dip in the boiling river.

It had begun to pour again, the swift transition to deluge concealed her sounds, but cut her off from her natural awareness that the settled sky offered. A blinding moment streaked above, filling the forest in pillars of light as far as she could see. She felt extraordinarily small in the towering giants blasted near white by the photons that bounced back toward their source.

She expected the thunderous roar to accompany the blowout of light, but no fury followed, no raging roll of thunder rounded out the immense energetic radiance, just another dominating silent flash.

Each centralized flash illuminated the forest brightest near their origin. It highlighted the distant forest all around her strobing and pulsing the wilds with binding power. The faded shimmer of a familiar tableau of color and patterns that seemed to settle is geometric symmetry in a rainbow of gradient color, drifting down to settle the floor of the forest in a blanket of dying light.

The Plants and trees both stalk and stem retained the colorful glisten through the fading spark, the light kissed surfaces were a glowing an array of shifting color which faded from the edges inward to their brightest point. The shadows and untouched vegetation broke the

patterned light into a starry shimmer of swooning dots that too eventually faded back into the darkness from where it was born.

Surreal and otherworldly she was drawn back into the intense sense of dreamscape that had chased her through this ordeal. It inspired her amid her waking nightmare, the awe of it, the new experience that few had ever seen.

She stood somewhere truly new to the world she came from, familiar but alien, or more aptly she was the foreigner, she was alien to this place which reminded her so very much of home.

As the silent pulses shot through the forest, the rain shook the foliage that retained its glow making them dance, shaking the shadows. But the silence persisted, like a flash of a camera, they pelted the forest all around her. A moment of weightless uneasiness unrested her stomach until she felt as if her weight had been set back onto the soles of her feet. Her hair itched as it raised from her scalp, each strand ever so slightly outward in reaction to the forming static.

The heat splashed the top surfaces of exposed skin before the light had pressed itself in. In the instant of light, her hands became bone outlined in a shadowed haze of sinew and skin. before her eyes blew out and the brightness cast everything white.

When they readjusted from her tight clench, her lids batted the moisture back into her eyes and they cleared. Her skin's top facing surfaces glowed bright with patterned color, scattered through the subsurface as if radiating outward from under her skin. Through it she saw veins pump and pulse faintly as the blood rushed to her brain in a surge of endorphins.

It was hard not to revel in her own luminescence, which faded with the surrounding forest. A flash of memory to the fiery pillars and the haunting beast in its depths, crashed her inspiration into a soup of caution and some lingering excitement. The fine hairs of her skin tickled as they settled with the rush of exhilaration.

She pushed forward through the flashing forest, keeping watch for the moments of awe, consciously logging each one as a new moment to cherish. She tried not to think about the fact that she may never be able to share any of this, regardless it was the determining factor for leaving her phone in her pocket, an underlying nagging that she is lost beyond saving..

But in the moment it was worth the small white lie. The path was much easier to follow, now lit, she noticed that it had become far more manicured, the care taken to keep it clear of debris, even the ground was littered in small stones and pebbles to soak the mud and build a stronger foundation for her to settle her shifting weight onto.

The sturdy ground felt good, and the well defined path made her feel closer to civilization regardless of what it actually led to. She took a moment to admire, this time unstrapping herself from her backpack encasement and popping the sturdy lid of her travel mug for a swig of earthy water.

Her deep cool breaths brought oxygen back to her system from the long slow satisfying swig. It was so common now the flashes of light felt mundane. They had grown more frequent but less intense, they faded quicker and left behind less afterglow, but combined with the quicker succession it seemed to drown the forest, giving an underwater aesthetic of the light dancing on the surface waves.

The caustic patterns formed at the flashes overlap, making the forest look like a vivid coral reef filled with bioluminescent life. The rain too had softened, sharpening her focus into the bright night forest.

A few moments more of rest and appreciation, she hauled her heavy load onto her unappreciative back and pressed onward up the path. She had become extra slow with her exhaustion, the dark of night began to set back in between the now separated flashes, and the dimly lit surroundings gave her body a natural kick into sleep time operations.

She fought it, her body rebelled, neither of them were winning. Her Brain diffused the tension by grasping on to the thick shape blasted by light with the flickering storms dissipation.

Stone and stick piled tall filling the gaps of the large slabs carefully and artfully wrapped in vines and plastered in clay and mud. Between the slabs a daunting black door, it surfaced rippled with each old log that filled out the width of the massive entrance.

A sustained flash and she was at its base looking up at the massive entrance's size. The light that creeped from below had no flicker of firelight and faded with the natural illumination of the pulsing storm. She heard nothing from the opposing side, but she still took precaution when pushing herself into the massive structure and peering through the small crack she made.

Her breath became louder in her ear bouncing off the thick door as she pressed her face into its side to peer in. The rain had cooled the air and her mouth projected a shot of mist through the crack before she pulled her breath back to a shallow control.

Her LED light dimmed to extinguished and she slipped it back to her pack. Using both hands she pushed the door a little wider to get a better view. The mass vibrated the metal lashings that hinged the heavy door and a stuttering low rumble accompanied the small push open.

The adject side had stuck into the mud that it had kicked up as it scraped the earth. It held the door firm, wide enough for her to slip through. She was justifiably nervous, finding it hard to push past the doors threshold to peek her head around to get a first glimpse.

It was a very short lived peek, but she managed to dart her eyes around thoroughly in her panic and get a good sense of layout and scale. But the main detail that stood out was the red, the clear splashes of crimson speckling the flat tan walls of the structures and landscaping within the strange villages' tall walls.

Smoke layered itself settling between buildings and driving a deep overtone of dread. The fires were out but smoldering, the torches not lit, but the smell of fresh cooking was still in the air.

It was a battlefield, the aftermath of one at least. When she finally regained her confidence she noted clearly seeing no movement, then recounting further, there were no bodies. Her head drew past the door again, this time circling herself around to face the door, gripping it with both hands to guide herself through.

Chapter 33 - The Village

The space was small, the towering walls that lined it cast a long shadow, but cleared of trees she stood exposed once more the cloudy night sky, raining it's cool scattered light into the architecture below.

It was very primitive, mostly, with the exception of well sculpted clay structures, walls and adormnemtns, and some pleasing landscaping, the retreat in the jungle was mostly made from the elements found onsite. Lots of sharpened pikes stacked together on an angle to build pointed walls separating sections of the village.

The pathways between were made of river rocks and caked in vibrant moss between. The grounds were layered using the natural slope down toward the river to cut out leveled surfaces to build on.

The buildings themselves seemed to use live wood grown into structural load bearing arches and cropped and manicured pillars. Between was filled with bricks of clay and sod, carved with intricate symbols and artwork.

The colors were muted and earthy making the splashes of gore red all the more prominent. Bodies were nowhere to be found, but

“Vicera and leftovers seems all the rage at this particular murder party.” She didn’t even realize she said it outloud.

It had been sometime since whatever ravaged this place, enough for the fires to go out, and enough for whomever who remained to come out from hiding. She had kept close to walls, and maintained covert explorations of the encampment before feeling safe enough to explore more up close and personal.

Unnerving totems made of dried grass were formed into shapes of disembodied victims scattered throughout the fortified settlement. Each eerily unique and macabre piece, decorated in antlers and animal bones. Some were hung, others propped up on pikes like scarecrows, others tied to the walls of woodend shell surrounding it.

Standing now in the center of the raised encampment she was confident she was alone. The wide path cut straight through the village to the main gates, which were much larger than the gate she had slipped through.

More daunting, the sizable gate had been ripped from its hinges outward, violently. The sturdy stone slabs crushed and topped leaving the gate a pile of rubble strewn out into the forest path beyond.

The massacre was the epitome of epic. Most of the buildings were crushed under weight, much of the free standing obelisks marked with iconography had been toppled and covered in ash and dust.

The largest structure stood between to old Kapuna's whose bark had been stripped and torn, The massive hall laid in ruin, all but its large door remained standing between the great Kapuna roots that wrapped the back wall.

She approached closer to the old growth, touching the odd scrapes and scratches around the powerful trunk. She remembered watching the Giant serpent Queen grasping and wrapping the trees as it moved violently through the forest surrounding the glade.

Her massive weight and sharpened scales ripped at the bark, leaving scars, banding around the girth of the giant stalk. She took her hand back quickly and her eyes widened at the realization, she turned away from the tree looking outward into the circular square that welcomes her up to the great hall.

Throughout the destruction swaths of dirt rolled up into ridges, familiar deep trenches pressed into the ground, cut grooves through the mayhem where the giant serpent left its mark in the turmoil. blood and viscera strewn about, leftovers from the quick snack she must have made of whomever lived her.

Awestruck and horrified, she sank down and sat on the ground. It was a bit too much to take in, worsened by what looked like an arm lying not twenty feet from her. Innocuous gore at first, when she focused enough outward it became apparent it was not human at all.

Unclipping her packs she stood up out of them, wandering over step by step knowing whatever she found she would regret knowing. The skin and pattern seemed to shimmer revealing cracks between thin scaling along the forearm.

She stopped a few steps from it, unwilling to inspect any closer. It lay in a pile of blood, red like her own. It had one long finger, and one short, with an opposable thumb. The sheen from the scales was a pattern on a dark gray base, wrapping round the slim but muscular frame.

"AH!" she yipped, claspng her mouth to stay quiet, the digits on the dismembered limb twitched disapprovingly at her investigation. She stepped backward to her packs strapping back into the security of their weighted embrace.

She mostly wandered for the next half hour, just staring blankly thinking in her head as she paced and meandered. She had come full circle in her thoughts and in her path, bringing her back to the rear entrance she had come through.

Here the village was mostly untouched. The carnage was centralized, leaving the few untouched buildings she now found herself standing in front of. Her body decided to contribute with a healthy gurgle, and the urge to urinate. A Slow focused deep breath with a forceful exhale released the tension and made the urgency to relieve herself more poignant.

She entered the closest abode, small but delicately cared for, its exterior was overgrown but maintained. Like the rest of the building here its entrance was much larger than her, as were the large shelves filled with fruits and dried goods, cured meats, and a strong smell of spice that stung her nose in the best way.

It felt like her stomach had dropped 6 inches in her belly, creating a gaping hole that only the sloshing air could fill. It caused another milk curdling gurgle, all in demand of reparations for lasting this long without a proper meal.

Her stomach's demands be damned, she was on a much more important yet less dignified mission, and when the wooden bucket presented itself, she didn't hesitate to fill it's wanting repository to her own satisfaction.

Drawers dropped and knees pulled tight. She rested her elbows on her knees and hung her head as the relief washed over her. She caught herself nodding off with the warm satisfying release of liquid. before being reminded by her hunger that she had other obligations first.

She yawned, her jaw sore with tension from being clenched for so long. She rubbed the aching connection where her jaw met her head. It relaxed more than her jaw, her eyes and throat loosened, and for once she felt nearly relaxed, which of course spawned another eye watering yawn.

She awkwardly unzipped the pack on her chest pulling out some precious tissue and leaning over for the final phase of her relief mission. Top heavy and unbalanced she found her weight shifted a little too far forcing her mid stroke to reach out for the ground to steady herself.

"Whoa Shit!"

She had pivoted around on one foot, her ankles still confined by her pants, but managed to stay grounded standing up into position in time to barely dodge the bucket. It tipped over splashing the ground beside her, she shimmed herself a few steps back to avoid the growing puddle it left.

"Heh ha!" The laugh surprised her, she felt it build, destroying her will to hold it in. She laughed out loud as she regained her composure and pulled up her pants.

"Smooth and subtle Dawn, ha! As always"

She kicked over some dirt to soak up her leavings, and turned to her next mission. It was like a grocer's for her, so much stock, fresh and cured. She for some reason still stood on the side of decorum and prepared herself a small meal before eating.

It was almost a meditation when she cooked, she often did in the mess for the entire team at ACRN. It was really the only way she felt she could connect with the people there. She always felt like an outsider, part of the reason she left.

Her lone wolf mentality played a fairly substantial part in her inability to connect with others. She knew it though, didn't bother with hiding it either. But it didn't stop her from wanting her own pack. The particularly bittersweetness of the memory served more as a segway into a sense of longing for a return to the calm moments.

It was a quiet evening to welcome Virginia back to the remote cliffside lab, just before Chris's physical symptoms manifested.

"Okay so bare with me, I did manage to snag some mostly ingredients from Ciao, but since I was working with whatever we had in the fridge, I present to your reluctant taste buds, this week's clearinghouse meal, 'Hash it out' Hash!"

"Oh jeese, At least Chris didn't cook it"

Chris laughed. He was a fairly quiet guy even when in trusted company, usually still working in some back corner of his head.

Virginia had already generously consumed the wine she brought to share and clung to Chris's arm Laughing harder than she should have at the quip. Catching herself, her smile settled to match Chris's Stonewall expression.

"Oh, no, hun, i Didn't mean to hurt your-"

Chris's quick shift to his notorious shit eating grin, Judah was the first to crack chinning through the room as it erupted into laughter.

"AHHHHH, Point Chris, Match Goes to Beatty!"

"HAHAHAHA, Get your sports reference outta our nerd safe space!"

Judah sternly stared down Dawn's nerd challenge.

"I'd happily bet that my love for football equates to a level of fandom that would easily qualify as Nerdy!"

"Shit" Smiling, she placed down the last plate at the table of eight, taking a seat herself opposite Virginia and Chris.

"Alright, Alright, Alright, alright, calm down, I wanna speak at you a sec"

Chris stood shifting his pants as he rose up.

"Alright , everyone listen up, Mathew Mchonohey is gonna impart some wisdom."

"Yeah, yeah, Seriously though, I'm mostly just proud you guys have helped me release the next chapter, and the continuation of my fathers series. Each one of you has really built a piece of yourself into this and I think it shows."

"Awwwww"

Dawn Slapped Juda on the shoulder, shaking her head with an eye bulging intensity.

"Not your moment"

"Right, Sorry, sorry everyone, proceed my liege"

"Thank you Peasant" chuckles all around, winning Chris back the spotlight. He could always hold a room, much like his father.

"Honestly though there wasn't much else to say, I just want you all to know I consider everyone of you a unique part of this legacy now, not just mine, but ours. So yeah, umm, I mean, yeah what else is there? I Dunno- just-"

"-AND that's as far as Chris's social graces will take him this evening, thanks everyone for your participation." Virginia always could one up him, and she liked to pounce when he stumbled, a form of flirting between the two the team had become sickeningly accustomed to.

They all knew how he got when expressing himself emotionally, part of his reserved nature. The signature fumbling when crossing the emotional threshold was part of the charm he had over people.

The Laughter settled into giggles, into sighs of satisfaction.

"Shit."

"What's wrong Dawn, your box wine not hashing it out with your cooking?"

"Huh? yeah" dismissively she seemed to retreat behind her eyes as she sat up.

"Sorry Everyone , Sorry, I've got something to say too"

The settled smiles starting at attention made it so much harder then she was expecting

"I.. I Uhh" her throat ballooned trying to hold back tears, as if the words had lodged themselves firmly in a tight ball, but she puked them out forcefully

"I'm Leaving ACRN, three weeks. Sorry."

She sat in the silence of the shock, all focused on her, she kept focused on her fingers as she picked at the cuticles.

And they sat there in it. They made her suffer in it, suspending any closure, forcing her to feel exiled in the same room.

“Dawn” Juda locked her eyes to him, his face cracking bit by bit, his composure crumbling, until they were all laughing and patting her on the back. Confusion, worry, doubt, all sloshed around until the unveiling of the paper sign Virginia whipped out from behind their seats. ‘Bon Voyage’ it read, haphazardly scribbled in a rainbow of pencil crayon.

Chris sat with a stern grin, the two of them in a moment among the excitement. She mouthed ‘thank you’ across the chaos, he smiled, nodding his head with the weight of loss her departure was causing him.

“We will miss you!!” Burst out in one voice between them all. The residual echo off the thick concrete settled her out, back to the carefully prepared meal in front of her, sitting alone in the store house of the ruined village.

A heavy sigh, full of loneliness escaped her.

Some fruit, dried fish with a flavorful mix of spices, she took her time to savor them as they were nearly as gourmet as any restaurant. Her memory still lingered with the longing for friends and familiarity, happily offset by the savory meal she had managed to muster.

Chris had thrown her that party, regardless of how he felt, she had no idea until Juda told her, now the memory had a tinge of sadness she never had before. She hadn’t betrayed him but she could at least understand the feeling of betrayal in his place.

The sweet mango washed out the tangy fishy flavor with a mouthful of juice. Its acidity cleaned the tips of her fingers where she then realized just how filthy she had become.

“Fuck I want a shower” she sunk back pressing hard into the wall behind her. She sat on the cool dirt floor cross legged with a plank of wood in front of her substituting as a plate. She actually felt full.

“Oof, I may have overdone it...” She had to tug her pants down a little to make room.

A few deeper breaths of smoke filled air had her cough a little, her eyes closed as the food's euphoria set in. It was so easy to drift, but she woke herself from the micro nap and laid out herself a proper bed hidden in the back in a shadowed corner. She took the time to make it comfortable, she intended on a proper sleep, and this might be one of the few moments she could get some.

Chapter 34 -

Her flesh felt loose and heavy on her skeleton, the waves of aching was enough to squeeze out a groan along with her sitting up to cup her head. It was bright even hidden at the back of the archaic store house.

Her eyes refused to open for any meaningful amount of time until they had adjusted for the new light. Her breath was labored and deep, still filled with a hint of smoke giving her a bit of rasp as she cleared her throat.

Reluctant to start another day, it took a bit to warm to the idea of standing. She stood over the meal from the night prior, picking at the best bits trying to force her appetite. She spun around and sat on the stone tablet surface of the raised table.

The exhaustion had carried through her nights rest, her brain fogged over as her system struggled to restart. Looking at her bed she wanted to crawl back in, but began to pack against her own resolve not to.

Her shoulder was especially resigned to giving her grief, she must have slept on it, and now it was giving her shit for the mistreatment. She rolled back her shirt at the collar, it stuck with the dried blood, the wound didn't look much better, but it wasn't infected.

She poured over it what little water she had left after taking a swig herself, rinsing away the top layer of grit and blood. She knew the sting was good, and also helped remind her how real her situation was.

Lifting her shirt her side pulsed, still battered the purple bled out to red at its edges. It was more tender today, but still tolerable, she pressed in feeling for any broken ribs, and she was relieved to find none.

Lastly her sock rolled back to show the yellowing of her twisted ankle. It was still red from its scalding dip, but even still it was the least painful, she felt pretty sturdy on it, but made a mental note to take each step carefully.

It had taken considerably more out of her than she realized packing up her gear. She had been pushing past her limit non stop and was paying for it. The night was relatively quiet, the surrounding wood barely stirring her as she rested. But still, she was tired.

The wooden pikes forming the tall walls had given her the comfort and security to sleep hard. She didn't want to leave right away. It seemed safe enough here to poke around in the daylight, and the prospect of being alone in the jungle again didn't sit particularly well.

She unrolled the small pad of solar panels and plugged in her hub to charge all her devices. She lay it in the open atop a stone that had already soaked in the morning warmth. The Light was intense although still overcast, and felt like more rain was coming so now was their chance to charge up.

Same for her.

Less groggy now she had more of an appetite. Half a soggy protein snack later and she was down one bar, up one on her phone though, and both she imagined, felt all the better for it.

Her plan was to follow the river to find the boathouse; she had a fifty-fifty chance of choosing the right direction, but wanted to avoid doubling back. The pages of the journal had soaked in a bit of the moisture in the air making it feel denser, heavier.

She strolled page by page, half attention, spiraling around in all her questions. His scribbles and drawings marked around the entries drew her out of the fog more than the words. Some intricate, some scratched in with haste with cliff notes and reminders.

It was a snapshot of a Chris she never really knew. They were close but never like him and Ginny, and she envied them, not because of some unrequited yearning, but of the connection they had found in one another.

A connection that would seem to follow him even here as a sketch of Virginia filled an entire page would denote. The only color over the pencil sketch was the red of her lips and hair which stood out brightly off the damp page.

Her mind flitted with a memory of Chris feeding Virginia a fresh strawberry she had given them from her trip back from Sao Paulo, her lips matching the soft seedy surface. It was just like them to be overtly affectionate.

She caught herself in a smile thinking about them. All she could have wanted was something like what they had, not a lover, not a friend, not even family, but a true partner in all things.

Dawn was always a blacksheep especially in her small family. Her Parents before they passed were wholly decent people, with entirely average ambitions that didn't suit her adventurous nature.

When Chris found her reeling against a world who had no interest in her ambitions, it took little convincing to onboard her into ACRN as a fresh start, surrounding her with people of similar frustrations.

Even Virginia saw her potential and always encouraged her, but spending decades believing that her worth and value equates to how malleable she was to society, meant she had little trust in her own judgment, and even less in others.

She had two choices back then, let people in, or run, and as could be expected from her track record she ran, convincing herself it was because there was something more for her out there. She was feeling a little less confident about that now hearing his words about her.

"Dawn was supposed to be here with me. I'm glad she left now, Ginny said it was the same thing she would have done at Dawn's age, of course I didn't believe her, at the time I felt like an older brother watching his little sister grow up."

"Huh."

It caught her by surprise, he had never told her, and in a way she kinda felt the same. Just hearing it said in context sort of changed their bond, like her relation to him made sense.

Her calm had become twisted with the silent contemplation that accompanied the reminder of Chris's plane crash, and the haunting glazed eyes of what remained of Virginia in the glade. She shook it off best she could, shuffling the imagery back into the vault, looking once more for distraction in the pages.

A bright pink sticky note had been pressed into the page, scratched out below the scribbling a sketch of a building, a familiar silhouette, matching the shape that carved out shadow from the light across the camp from her.

Two Cropped tree's sharpened and bent over time into an arch stood against the structural load of its crumbling roof, but the similarity was undeniable. The passage pointed to the note.

"Something is coming, something they Fear, something the ancients don't want. The Light of Genesis they call it, they think it starts with me, or ends with me?"

I wish this was the nightmare I first assumed it was, I've managed to pull myself from whatever drug addled state they keep me in. I don't understand what's different about me, they torture the others they bring here.

They don't even ask questions. Baptizing them in the Boiling River, dissecting them on their rack of souls, as if experimenting on them. Torn limb from torso, head from neck they are dismantled yet somehow still alive.

They cry out and react when their disparate pieces are poked and prodded. The Agony in this breathless gasps to stop more unsettling than the horrific mutilation they had endured."

The words "rack of souls" circled the arrow jutting off the edge pointing to the sticky note. She stood up looking over to the crumbling structure inquisitively. She wiped her lower lip to scratch off the itch of sweat already forming from the humidity.

The journal looked up at her, She threw it down on her packs and sat down over the edge of the raised embankment, slipping down to the lower path below. Winding round the cobbled pathway she confronted the dying building.

It wasn't particularly large, but the tree's used in shaping its structure were, meaning it was one of the oldest spots in the camp. Standing at its entrance and looking out over the camp she came to realize everything funneled to this building.

It was a fairly large courtyard with a firepit at the center, 3 tall stones surrounded the pit of ash, notches cut out on the edges facing the flames with strong sticks jammed into them to hang their food to cure.

She circled them to come to the arches. Dust particulates shone brightly at the casted light bouncing around the interior from the gaping hole in the roof. Hanging in the light swung chains with tools and instruments, all covered in red.

Peering closer in, a stone pillar about 4 ft tall had been toppled by the falling ceiling, the others remain in place positioned around a large center slab.

Entering she stood at the base of the arranged ritual site, She swallowed her breath with each step forward, the viscera and blood plastering their sides pooled at their base.

The odor overwhelmed, the central slab had the naked torso held down by ropes across the chest and abdomen, a few feet spaced apart on both sides, the arms restricted in similar fashion, and atop their own free standing pillars further out, the hands.

Aside from the toppled pillar it was the same for the legs and feet, at the top a disembodied head rest clamped between two metal brackets and again lashed with intricate rope work.

Abandoned here it reinforced her assumptions about a hasty retreat from the giant Serpent queen, worse a stark reminder of the danger this animalistic tribe of giants posed. She heeded her steps approaching closer with unease.

The room swelled with the smell of death, yet strangely there were no flies or insects swarming the flesh. Above the head pillar, an altar, similar to the first campsite they came across.

Split into the roots of a giant tree that towered out the back of the building the stone slab was salthered in red sap and blood, and lined with smaller tools and trinkets. Containers with unknown liquids and powders, stone bowls with what looked like brightly colored pigments.

The stone surface itself was a myriad of coloured powders, layered and wiped away over time, one edge sticky with the red sap. A hint of sulfur mixed with the elegant perfumes the concoctions emitted, never overwhelming the underlying rot that permeated the entire space.

The sudden sound of dripping water which she dismissed as the rains encroaching, she moved along the bench careful not to touch anything. Feathers and small bones lay loosely wrapped in leather and twine, of sculptured artifacts of various shapes like eerie dream catchers of bone and dried sinew, adorned with colored stones..

Several of the small items were strewn about the ground, as if knocked from their perch in a hurried escape away from the rubble and debris. She knelt down next to a cloven hoof print in the scurried scratches carved into the dirt floor.

She touched the print lightly following the curve of the outer hoof, and examining the central line of the imprint.

“A Tapirs?, but these are bipedal?”

Not that she was a surefire tracker, but she at least was taught the basics, and the gate and positioning reconciled her statement.

The sounds of water dripping sharpened into a loud clicking before settling into a muffled smack. She stood up, surveying across the stone pillars startled. She stood only a moment before her ears honed in on the point of emission.

She stared, eyes bulging, even in the Jungles moisture her strained eyes dried. her breath was short and stuttered, her bottom jaw trembling, almost in sync with the chomping maw of the disembodied head.

The soft sound of water was tainted now by the coarse click of its jaw, the deep sloshing in its breathless throat as its esophagus pulled itself apart with each strained gasp. The snapping pop of its mouth opening and closing reaching again for a breath that would never come.

Movement pulled her away, the far pillar's hand tried to reach out with its exasperations, its other hand clenched into a fist shaking against its desperation. She fell back with a step, forcing a squeaking shriek out of her mouth which only served to invigorate the dismembered mans breathless wailing.

She had kicked up a plume of pigmented dust behind her. The small lip ledge at the arches base was small, but enough to trip her up as she exited the dilapidated ritual site in a hurry.

The cold dirt pressed her cheek, she bit her tongue on impact and felt the rousing surge of the dulled ache run through her ribs. She could still hear its dry lips smacking, trying to push out its pleas without sound.

In the quiet surrounding her fall, a thundering crunch accompanied the broken snaps of bended bow as the side gate pressed back against an increasing weight. She stared through the head high stones of the fire pit that obscured her from the distant wall.

The metal lashing tore through the soft wooden stalks on either side and the two doors lurched against the powerful force behind. With one final cacophony of sound, the two doors slammed into position tossing dust and dirt up and around the fallen frame.

Through The dust the white canine skull leered into the settlement. She had found herself pressed against still warm stones of the fire pit concealing as much of herself as she could.

It sunk the doors into the mulch under its feet as it clomped its way awkwardly into the encampment. She didn't look, but could hear it stop and sniff at the air tasting it. Its grunts and heavy breath sounded difficult and labored, it wheezed as it walked to her packs.

She peeked around for a quick eye line, its hulking mass turned away from her nudging at her back packs, the leatherbound journal slipping to the dirt.

"Shiiiiit" she whispered to herself, her focus now strayed from the horrors inside, entirely gripped by her new predicament. She was frustrated with herself. She had let her guard down, she shouldn't have lingered. She kept herself low and swung around to the stone opposite her, keeping formed to its shape to avoid revealing too much of herself.

From her vantage she could now remain obscured behind the angled pike wall that led her down into the main sunken path through the village. The Walls of spears on both sides made it easier to stay hidden, but at the cost of not being able to see the beast's position.

It clomped around the raised area above her, where her packs lay helpless. She pressed against the pointed wall. Its shadow loomed, its steps had encroached and she could feel the beasts heaving breaths in her chest.

It grew darker as the creature leaned itself out over the edge above her, still tasting the air, thick vines draped down like dreadlocks, dangleing just out of reach above her. It smelled of musky mildew.

Its heated breath made it warm all around her, it was stale and rank. It lurched back and forth testing the air, searching. She took a gulp and looked up to inspect it with more than her fear filled peripherals.

Its mass was mostly wood, wrapped in blood soaked moss. Stringy strands of exposed muscle and tendons held the fringe together at its mammoth shoulders, haunches of bone and tissue entangled in the rotted wood, dirt stuck to the moisture of the exposed flesh. and tufts of black fur lined jutted bone and twisted pink flesh wrapped in vine and wood.

As it leaned out further she pressed herself harder into the mud packed hardwood lining the walls of the trench. The light rain grew, the creature looked up with the heavy drops.

Turning its attention back to its hunt, it peered into the pathways below it, a tense moment when the white of the canine skull began to turn down towards her. It did not see her, but she saw it.

Two human hands covered in mud and blood gripped the canine skull, elbows pulled in tight to the chest, the forearms kinked upwards to hold the skull in place. The limbs began to move, the skull lifted from its wooden carcass, the connective tissues stretched to accommodate its outreach

She could see it from behind, a brain exposed crammed into the back of the skull, a spinal cord notched its way out from between the stalks and vines of its shoulders holding it in. The wrists turned and cocked the skull inquisitively as it peered out across the settlement.

Outstretched now at their length, the arms carried the detached skull using their articulation to let it look around the now drenched encampment. They pulled back in with haste anticipating its movements.

She choked back a scream with its sudden leap across the gap of the trail below. It had leapt the distance landing with a ground shaking thud in front of the Ritual hall of the disembodied man.

Her shriek contained, she took advantage of its distraction and back tracked up the path to her packs.

She scrambled to secure them around her, clipping herself into their security. She knelt down and cupped the leatherbound book, slipping it into the water proof pouch in the smaller pack on her chest as she kept a watchful eye on the creature's search.

One agonizing step at a time she made her way toward the ruined front gates of the settlement. She stopped just shy of the threshold, even though the safety of the village had been compromised, she was still hesitant to leave, staring down the long overgrowth ahead was but a backdrop to her growing fear.

The decision was made for her. A thrashing yell, full of power and agony reverberated off the surrounding fortifications which shook with the beast tramples. She turned as it rose off its front hooves, standing tall and reaching out its skull to the sky with a distraught wailing she had never experienced.

She looked up at its terrible majesty. She could see it now in all its horrific glory, the terrifying screech bellowed from the cravase that streaked down its belly below, not a mouth but a hollow, a flexing chamber of air forcing the vibrating sound through its deep cavity. Its bellows ended in gurgling barks, labored grunts, into heavy panting.

Two large branches protruding out from above the skull like asymmetrical antlers were draped in sickly flowering vines caked in blood and ash. Stones and clumps of clay hung from them, almost ornamental as if deliberately placed.

It lowered itself slowly as the sound settled out. Softly it set down while keeping its gaze on her. The arms pulled back settling into their locked position, the Skull pressed the brain back into its haunch and it just stood there looking at her hauntingly, with a soft sway to keep its balance.

She stood awestruck. It had a majestic sense to its abomination, but the glistening gore made it difficult to appreciate. Her first step back from it prompted a few grunts, as if to say "Don't do it", but she had already committed.

Full bore she trounced through the thick jungle underbrush, the bellows behind her came with the audible calamity of its destructive pursuit. Her knees wanted to give out in fear, her determination argued in favor of running, the debate made it difficult for her to keep her footing true.

It clashed with the sturdy doors slowing it down enough for her to disappear behind the wooden pillars of the forest. It pressed through and stood poised to launch after her, listening for her movements.

She used the thickening density of the forest to her advantage, trying to keep her pace while remaining covert. The thick morning mist had settled in over the valley filling the gaps in the forest with its river of mist. The beast may have lost sight of her, but its pursuit continued, and intensified.

The light of the rivers edge was a relief, she could hear the rapids even over the thrashing behind her. The Light rain had come to full force in its downpour, the ground slick with mud, making her unbalanced steps all the harder the closer she got to the riverside.

The rocky bank offered more grip; she vaulted from boulder to boulder until she was on the pebble beach. Heaving heavily, she followed the beach up the river with her scans, the shape of the boat house small in the distance, blurred out by the intensifying sheets of rain. A short reliving sigh, she had found her landmark, and it was close.

Hauling every particle of her being across the beach, she clenched her jaw feeling her stalker closing in. The First of the silent flashes caught her off guard blinding her for a moment as the storm met its peak. She winced in response. deeper in the forest line that she followed, the rings of fire rolled up the spaced stalks for the blood sap tree's. Rolling halos of light to their tops. Their beauty only offered dread as their explosions of fractale light and fire only made the visage of the chasing beast more hellish.

The arms held the skull steadfast, like a stabilizer for her camera it hung nearly motionless while the body behind tore through the woods. It kept locked on her; its groans and grunts between its horeselike panting grew into a symphony of frustration as it searched for a way through the thick and out onto the beach after her.

She tripped over herself, the struggle between her legs and her will awkwardly settled her down to her knees. The beast finally overcame her, finding its path out onto the beach in front of her. Again it stared her down.

Its body waivered, as the vines tightened their grip again around the bone and wood that held its shape. The strained heaving breaths held the long tear down its chest open. The flash of the sky silhouetted its outer shape but lit its inner form clearly.

The edges of the cravase from stem to stern along its chest and belly were wrapped with slowly pulsing vines and stretched flesh, inside a massive rib cage housing the exposed lungs and beating heart within. The vines laxed and nearly closed with each heavy breath.

It used the chamber surrounding to force the air through the cracks in the bush and gore that protected its organs. The sound forced the warm air out through the cracks in its back and sides which steamed with each grunt.

The small pathways that offer the air an escape shook with small vibrations that combined were a roar, its softer grunts accompanied by a dog-like whimper between each outcry.

The battered arms bared their skin beneath the washed away mud, pieces of the flesh were torn and hanging from the bone. The fingers clasped the skull, the tips white with the pressure they exerted.

They lifted the large canine skull up and around as it paced in front of her. It didn't approach, it only examined her with small stomps and energetic barks, she could only keep it in the side of her vision, she couldn't tempt her head to swing up to watch.

And then it stopped, as if sensing her fear. Its calm helped her unfreeze, she pulled her head up, her shaking obvious even in the strong downpour.

It just stared.

She stared.

They both settled, she cocked her head in response to its curious cock of the bone skull. The flashes surrounding them had her flinching with each silent strike. The ringed plumes of fire light played as pulses of orange, subtly tinting their encounter.

Slowly and calmly the beast lurched forward, cautiously it pulled the skull from its stalk and reached towards her. She couldn't look away now as much as she wanted to, the sunken sockets of the skull bounced the highlight off the exposed balls of the two different lidless eyes. One larger, dark and animalistic catching the flashes of light on its internal lens and reflecting back at her, the other quite human.

Without the surrounding muscle they just settled in the socket, staring straight outward unflinching in their focus on her. Only a meter away the large Antlers made of vine wrapped branches separate the rays of light of each flash, giving the top edges an otherworldly glow.

Her own eyes felt lidless in their unblinking stare back. A sudden jerk up to look past her, and she flinched, finally closing her lids in anticipation, but nothing. Opening one eye and then the other, It was now above her looking past her.

Fully extended to the arms length, the spinal cord stretched out from its encasing of wood and clay, attached to the overstuffed brain matter in the back of the skull connecting through to the eyes that listlessly gazed out to the distant shoreline.

She sat there as tense as her body could make itself, her tears were not her crying but from the sting of sweat that beaded in the wrinkles of her clenched face.

With a distant pop of a toppled tree, the beast snapped back in a frantic flurry of stomping , retreating its skull back into its stalk, Dawn fell back on to the butt and scurried in a backwards crab walk across the pebbles and rock away from it fearing its wrath.

But instead it turned toward the bush, it grew quiet and listened to the sounds of the tree's that shook, the brush that crackled and snapped and then the beast fell silent. In a heartbeat the woods erupted, a flurry of fang and tail the beast and the giant serpent queen were quickly swallowed into the river's raging grip.

She curled herself over into a ball avoiding the debris that showered the beach. The violent bellows of both monstrosities filled the entire causeway with a nightmare of ferocious battle cries.

The shore swelled with waves as the two masses collided smashing into one another. She was quickly engulfed with the rising tide, she had to scramble to lift her heavy load now bogged with water, back to her feet.

She used the packs added weight to pivot on her heels before sprinting away from the chaos. Each step was a bit lighter than the last, shaking off the river water with each grounded step.

The two brutes thrashed in the shallows both trying to regain their ground and get back to the shore, the Serpent fought the raging tides that pulled it away, The Canine behemoth washed downstream to find its footing, aggressively pulling itself ashore, the serpent struggling to follow.

The beast kicked up massive stones at the Emerald Queen, forcing her back into the rapids, hissing and snapping her mass to try to outrun their pull. She had underestimated their ferocity until she succumbed to their draw and was dragged away down river.

Even a mere hundred feet away and the edges of the boat house were still obfuscated by the rain. She had unclasped her packs strapping around her chest to give her breathing room, holding them steadfast to her with one arm, as she used the other to counterbalance the offset weight.

She slammed herself hard against the doorless frame, her legs begging for pause. The roars and thrashing were still deafening as the conflict made its way back to the shoreline.

A single walkway lined the side of the interior, the only floorspace next to the open water. The room was small, and the walls hung with nets and hooked spears. The walkway was mostly blocked by the hand carved boat that sat propped up against the wall and tied off to pin it in place.

She flipped the looped rope of its pin and the boat rolled itself over into the softened rapids. The anarchy outside had ended, only the distant grunts of the Canine behemoth remained after the crashing.

She didn't bother with her packs, although their added weight centered her balance making the uneasy task of stepping down into the boat ticky at best. The shifting weight had her first balancing on one foot before stepping all the way down releasing her grip on the small dock.

She immediately dropped herself down into the seat, the vessel rocked and settled. The single ore was well worn where generations of hands had held it pushing against the rapids. The shack shook the water around the boat's base as the beast rushed towards its quarry.

Dawn leveraged the ore against the dock side and in a single swift thrust pushed out into the faster stream, drawing the boat out into the deeper rapids. The behemoth peeked through the door only to watch her drift away.

In a panic it trounced back and forth in the shallows at the edge of the depths. It was careful not to itself get pulled into the white rapids cresting, crying out after her, it almost pleaded after her.

Between her strokes she watched it, It calmed and stared at her reaching its skull out over the water. Its Cavity opened and a prolonged low whine cried after her. As she was pulled into the faster moving waters they watched one another.

It began following the river with her. It became more panicked and started thrashing, the river had opened up to meet another tributary which pulled her away faster than it could maintain.

The beast reached the end of its beach, and enraged, it bellowed out over the echoing river. As it became crystal clear, the sound of the rapids faded. The sickening silence plunged her heart to her gut, the cold at her back like ice.

The boat had taken root in a track of its own, crossing the rapids against any of her efforts. It kept a steady pace and the water around her became a dead calm, a shadow formed under the boat, the slick surface of the still waters reflected the silent cascading falls where three rivers met, silently dropping into an impossible dark below the surface.

The tiny craft floated in a stasis of sorts, not a wobble or dip; it kept its pace and time causing only minor defections in the sullen surface of the deepening dead waters surrounding her.

Waves of shivers ran through her back, the cold sweat pressing against the heavy pack. It was difficult to turn herself, not just from the awkwardness of her gear, but every sense she had was positive there was something behind her.

Only the dampened bellows of the distant behemoth permeated this silent pool of the three rivers, the edges outlined with the underwater falls where the rivers met the stillwaters edge, draping down over into the pit belowher. She scanned across the dark pond transfixed by the silence of the sunken waterfall dropping into black underneath the surface of the quiet basin.

It was an obvious divide in all directions between the fast moving waters and the unflinching film that lined the surface of the dark sinkhole. Dawn lost her breath, her heart swallowed. It was just a shadowed edge, the shape of it was all she was willing to commit to her field of vision.

The beast on shore had gone silent, Dawn took no notice, only held herself taught under the looming presence behind her, stuck in fearful tension. Its form was hard to define, the edges soaked in the light around it, darker than the night itself.

With a light jolt like hitting dock to disembark, the boat had stopped in the center of the impossible basin. She turned away to steady herself, grasping the sides. It began to pivot, twisting over to its side forcing dawn into the stagnant pool. She made barely a ripple when she splashed out from the security of the overturning boat, submerged now under the surface the vessel had begun to sink down, its un earthly captain stood unphased as it sank lower and lower.

It was a shroud of darkness, its cloaked figure floated around it in the waters in a ghostly manner. Subdued sounds of battle raged in her ears beneath the surface, and a swirling cascade of shadowy forms swirled below her in the basins depths.

She too began to sink, like a current had swept her up she struggled towards the surface, but to no avail. Her packs were heavy, but it was not the source of her descent, it was as if the water here was heavier, swallowing her down farther as the surface became a distant black.

All around her the muffled sounds of steel clashing, muted voices in the rumblings of the deep, yells of anger, cries of battle raged around her overwhelming her senses. Swarmed by dark figures that swirled past her like shadows obscuring the distant surface from where she was swallowed up.

Only the shadow of the beast in pursuit outlined the water's surface which grew further and further from her. Its Hulking form dove towards her. The chaos around her pushed her down, the shadows created a strong current as they whisked past her. When she turned to flee a light below her inspired.

It was faint but shimmered like the sun across the ocean's waves. She could feel the oxygen depleting in her lungs, she was desperate to reach the light, falling towards it in her thrashing to reach it. Each stroke felt like her last, agonizing, she pulled herself down further. But as the point of light got brighter, her consciousness became dimmer until her depleted reserves caused her heavy eyes to close.

All that remained was the sensation of falling, or was it rising? She couldn't tell. It was as if she was being pulled upward now, afloat in the deep bringing her up to meet the air once more. But her consciousness would fail her before breaking the surface, and to her mind, this was the end.

Chapter 35 -

The first mist of the morning had risen from the canopy drawn out by the light. It then berated the tree tops, each drop winding its way meticulously through the foliage to begin their second descent to the shaded ground below.

Dawn twitched from a sudden wave of cold that quickly passed as the first of the droplets brushed off near her temple, leaving a cool impression that warmed from the heat of her skin.

She jolted to alert when she realized she was moving, her back was scratched by the uneven ground beneath her as she was dragged.

She scrambled to her feet, finding herself alone. She stood on a forest path, winding its way down a valley of tree's. No river, no gear, her mind was full of the consequences these problems posed.

"What the fuck... WHYYYYY!" Her heavy heaves spit up saliva out through her gritted teeth as she exclaimed her frustration.

In her haste and fear she had lost which direction she was being dragged. She scanned the treeline for the of the river's edge, but the darkness of the forest deep, soaked in the light all around her.

A figure up the path, stood evaluating her.

"Hello?!" she shouted but something clenched her, ending the call in a whisper.

A song in her ear. A loud whistle, near deafening, she reeled and clasped her head. The whistle became quieter like a muffled voice, the syllables coming into focus. Quieter and quieter it became but the words came clearer, the soft vocals revealing the trampled footsteps rushing towards her.

The voice nearly indiscernible now but she could hear it clearly, her head turned over her shoulder to view what led the encroaching footsteps.

"Wait!" it said, calling out. The vibrations of the sound echoed eerily off themselves.

She clamped her gaze to the figure rushing toward her, its pace stifled by the deformation of the space around it. but she saw it true, the horrified figure of herself yelling silently toward her. Pulling herself towards her as she watched in horror, her other self disemboweled on to the thick undergrowth below her as she ran.

Each step, heavier and weaker than the last. An ethereal gravity emanating below her, pulled at her, pooling her flesh at her feet, and shattering the bone like glass as she forced

each frivolous footstep to reach herself. The tormented creature's words fell deafeningly silent now as its final steps left a skew of gore across the forest path.

When it had ended Dawn regained the sense of self. She aligned herself straight, preparing to run, when a distant figure ahead made its reply back to her. She couldn't make it out as the voice tapered off. She desperately wanted to hear their answer so she sprang forward to chase them down.

"Wait!" She shouted, her voice ringing in her own ear like feedback. "Gah!" She turned her head and winced at the sounds of discomfort. Looking down to her feet they began to twist under her, her boots unraveled with each step, the stitch twisting itself apart and pressing down into the dirt to expose her bare skin.

She stepped out of her first boot and her foot pressed hard into the ground. Like a weighted pendulum her other leg swung past to hit the solid soil below, Her foot became the mud as it split apart from her bone, hanging loosely from the ivory.

Her body began to heave with the strain of each step. With the realization, she tried to warn herself ahead, her voice failing to ring through as her jaw poured down off her face, into her chest. Her lungs dropped from her shattered ribs, exhaling out the last of their reserves.

She longed to be herself standing at the trail ahead, her hindsight brought a jealous anger to her last step. Her last moment was a revelation that in the moment seemed trivial before the long dark at her end, a revelation she took with her, though she did not yet know it.

She again became aware of herself, standing on the bloodsoaked forest avenue, bore witness to her self disassembly trouncing toward her. In that moment only fear held her, the involuntary pivot to flee thrashed against her will as her memory began to catch up with her. This time she carried with her the knowledge of her next steps, she wanted to go back again, jealous of the self that came before, their ignorance to their fate which she now bears.

She began to lose herself in the thoughts of her circumstance, which fought for dominance over her paralyzing fear of unraveling once more. But again each step tore from her its pound of flesh, her heaving breath stolen by her visceral vivisection, ending her once again at the feet of regret, to repeat her steps into a severed oblivion.

A wash with deja-vu she repeats her horror. She was lost to herself and outside herself. damned to watch on as both witness and victim.

She had no idea how many times she had run, how many times she had wished she hadn't. It "was an endless nightmare". Words she spoke in her head, a simple word that changed her fate, a word denoting a time past, that can let one move forward and let go.

"Was an endless nightmare," she said again. more sure of herself.

"WAS!" It was such a simple word with so much power. She called it clear with furious intent, she would not be stuck here torturing herself, and she finally took a step free of the

burdens of what she was, leaving only who she can be. Then it came to her, each iteration, each step she came closer to herself, the revelation came clear.

She felt a hand clasping her wrist, and she at first spiked with worry, as she turned and pulled away, through the eyes of her other self she watched herself fall forward with her steps back, reconstituting her form from the sludge of blood and mud Pulling her up to find her footing sure.

She stood across from herself, seeing through the eyes of both, like an infinite mirror of your own intention and forethought. As she turned her back to look forward along the path, she stepped forward through her, into her, and together they took their next step as one.

From a swing of her arm, to a turn of the head, each nuanced movement she made, another version of herself shed off, falling as a corpse to the ground around her. Each indecision, worry or angst riddled thought shed from her as an empty vessel that fell to the trail below. Each step another shell of herself falls to the ground on the path of corpses she was building behind her.

An amassed grave strewn through the thickened brush. She was left standing ahead of the genocide of her sins, resolved by what her humility would permit. Each undone, shed to feed the forest's insatiable thirst.

And there she stood, at the gates of a darkened wood, where no light nor leer could penetrate. Sturdy stalks which stood in judgment, lined the way forward into the daunting depths of shadow. The way forward lost to her eyes, and the way back lost to her mind. She was shrouded and alone once more in a consuming darkness.

Her sense of displacement from herself sparked the first light in the shade, and another would follow like a chain of sparks as a light crackled to life. With the dimmed illumination formed the shape of an arm, draped in robes of water, its light standing fast against the murk wood.

It extended itself and took Dawn by the wrist tugging her against her will. She fought against it, turning back to struggle against the pull, she faced back towards the darkened path of the dead she had left behind and realized she had nothing to return to, and so she let herself be taken.

A powerful wave of cool, she could feel a part of herself wash away, she struggled to retain her grip. She was consumed by the bubbling waters yet the firm grip on her wrist she could still feel. That same grip that tugged and pulled against her deadweight.

With a violent thrash of water and a flurry of coughing she was dragged out onto the stoney ground. Barely awake she laid motionless, her mind finding its way back to her flesh.

Chapter 36 -

It is a funny sensation, death. Some feel comfort, a sense of floating through a detached state of absoluteness, where others have felt lost, or even anguished by their own grief. It is a purley and unocivacabley personal experience. Some can find solace in that chaotic gamble, some believe there is an intention behind it, some even think that they have a say in the outcome.

"It all comes down to personal experience, one's perception of the self. We sit in judgment of ourselves, whether our guilt or acceptance wins out, is all a matter of will." A stranger's voice spoke out to Virginia. It felt like a memory, but no light, just sound.

"Even death is not to be feared by one who has lived wisely." A flash, an image, the plaque at the base of a Buddah statue, read aloud in another familiar voice, female this time. Definitely female.

"I shall not wholly die, and a great part of me will escape the grave." another voice, male, dictated as if reading a passage, this one more familiar. A friend perhaps?

"Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide, And lead thee hence through the eternal place." Again the same voice, the same familiarity that slipped like a lost word off the tongue. As if to grasp after it, latching to it, an image began to form around it, with the image a sense of being.

The words became an image, the image into memory, and through that memory she found herself again. Her hands were the first she felt of her old self, realizing them holding a glass of red. And then a calming presence across from her, Chris, she knew him, she knew herself, she knew this moment.

Chris sat across from her reading the excerpt. They overlooked the Amazon forest from the open faced balcony of the cliff side ACRN facility. Dawn sitting across from them both nearly spit up her wine as she laughed at the sincerity in his reading, quipping about how he had mustered his inner Shakespearean excellence.

Virginia Laughed, she felt it in her chest, and it was sorely needed. She had always loved this moment, but it was wrong. This happened at night, but here she sat at the start of a new day, the sun breaching the mountains on the horizon over the expanse of the amazon.

"Where thou shalt hear the desperate lamentations, Shalt see the ancient spirits disconsolate, Who cry out each one for the second death..." she heard this, but not in Chris's voice, and not in any language she spoke, but she understood. She looked out over the forest, a distant shadow stuck out above the rolling canopy, she felt queasy as she was pulled into it, standing now at a cliffs edge overlooking a grand tree spiraling out overtop the forest, the sunrise became blinding, she looked over, Chris slapped the book closed and once again everything became absent.

Chapter 37-

The cold rain pressed onto the glade, the heat of the upturned forest evaporated it to mist, and the cycle began again. The vapor veil of the glades wall fed from the condensation of the rainforest's unquenchable thirst, continued to obscure it from the Forest dark.

The flesh of her corpse soaked in the moisture, which formed drops that ran down her side to feed the forest floor. The mist above became cooler, forming droplets that grew into rain. The downpour began, and pools formed in the wrecked and tangled forest.

As the rain mounted, it began to freeze and fall, forming flakes which became slush as they fell closer to the warm embrace of the forest.

The Slushy flakes splattered against her skin, it was the first sensation that came. The cold sting of an icy burn. The burn extended internally, through her capillaries as her lungs filled with the frigid air.

She heaved, with the fiery sensation as her lungs tried to cope, each subsequent breath easing the coursing sear. A struggle continued, sensations returned, and her cognitive awareness became ever present, trapped within an unmovable vessel, restrained to the cold ground as it swelled with the bitter sleet that now accosted it.

The slushy snow mixed into a crimson haze as it mixed with the remaining ash in the air, the blood snow fell across Virginia as she struggled helplessly within, regaining a bit of herself moment to moment.

Each slip of her mind, every lapse of consciousness, felt as if someone else had inhabited her, a different essence each time, like a battle for the mortal part of her, each more desperate to dominate.

A voice rang clear once more, the unknown voice from the darkness before. A man's voice, reminiscent of Chris but not him. "We sit in judgment of ourselves, whether our guilt or acceptance wins out, is a matter of will."

A matter of will, this resounded, it became her point of convergence amid her more intangible struggle, a rally for the shards of herself that had been urged to flee, constituted once more by the will of her intellect.

More than mere self preservation, she had mustered a primal force, one that would attach itself to her, giving her the dominance within to rebuild herself into what was once her physical form.

Again the words rang out "A matter of will" Her body felt heavier than it ever had, like the world was holding her down. Her mind would issue a command but her limbs would only respond with a sensation of a powerful gravity holding her in place.

A waking paralysis, a tormented space before consciousness that binds us in our mortal coil, without escape. Like a prison it snares us within, until moment by moment you will re-exerts itself into a waking state of control.

It began with a roll of her eyes, her lids rapid and uncontrolled, progress that gave little solace to her disconnected awareness. She persisted. A breakthrough in the weariness caused her head to tilt, and the sky became a forest imbued with color and light that scattered through the steam that nestled itself over the pools on the ground.

As her head turned, her shoulders followed, the trailing arm found its strength and rolled over her, her palm slamming to the ground next to her. She stared at the back of her hand. She looked through it, past what it is, and into what it was, what it will be and what it always has been.

Her will surged again, and she had pulled herself up from the dirt and slush, lifting herself with an exasperated yell for the achievement. She winced which fell from her face as smoothly as the drops that hit her. She took a moment for herself, after all, what is one moment against the backdrop of the eternity that had just been coursing through her.

Her knee's slid up through the mud that formed around her, she rested her weight onto them, allowing her to relax her weary form into a kneeling position. She was still catching her breath. It was exhausting to focus on breathing, something that used to come so naturally.

She clenched her fists, rubbing them on her arms as the needles began to prick the tips of her fingers. She was regaining their feeling, they became less and less foreign to her, as she once more settled into the seat of the physical self.

She still reeled against the other forces that seemed to accost her identity, it was hard for her to keep her own name on her tongue as she spoke it "Virginia". She heard it in her head, never as her own voice, always as Chris's, each time she bolstered through the calamity of thought that was not hers.

With what semblance of control she had, she pulled herself up to her numbed bare feet, staggering off toward the forest edge. Each step blasting a chain of connected dots of light like constellations pulsing through the life of the wild wood.

She wavered about as if besieged by torrents which threw her off balance. With each missed step she steadied herself further into the forest, using the substantial stocks of the overgrowth to keep her moving forward. She was drawn in, without direction, she just knew she needed to move forward.

Everything she touched, every movement she made, left an incandescent pattern of what looked like star systems spanning the fabric of the infinite black. Between them electrifying connections that left an afterglow like a bolt of lightning against a backdrop of natural verdant green.

The shooting constellations drew her in, they shot deep into the forest ahead of her like a lifeline into the deep, drawing her along into the safety of the jungle's roots. She felt presence, it was behind her. She turned to look, the forest stuttering in her vision to catch up to her view.

It stood majestic, made of light and color that wisped and snapped around the edges of its luminescent form. A goliath in the glade, its horns backlit by the pale light of the sky beyond. The stag offered her a nod as if to say "Keep going", and she turned back to the path ahead sensing its encouragement.

It had begun to hurt, pain in her arms and legs, coursing with each beat of her weakened heart. She laid her feet heavier into the ground with each subsequent step, following the guiding lights which themselves had begun to fade.

Her strength finally gave way and she collapsed, dropping her into a pool of impossible black. She floated in the stillwater, a single point shimmered below her, distant and growing. Around her a flow of shadows raged, their voices dulled and muted in the water, a faded clanking of metal accompanied their chorus.

A cacophony of internal voices raged once more over her fragile ego. They pulled her back into the chaos leaving her but a spectator in an overwhelming crowd. She felt her body surface for air, and move about, it struggled and pulled against a dead weight, but it was a mere sensation to her, no controlled thought or action, she was wholly unaware as her body moved about.

A few lucid moments in a river of competing consciousness, rapids she was still having a difficult time navigating. With their thoughts came images and experiences, in no manner of coherent order.

"Guide her through" A baritone chorus rang clear. She felt compelled, a small sense of purpose, and after all she had lost through the anarchy of the glade, it was something she desperately needed.

A moment of lucidity, she had been pulling at something below the surface of a still pool, the muddy shoreline wrapped in vines and roots of a great tree that spiraled up above. Rising through the waters, Dawn emerged. Shocked to see her Virginia let go her grasp around Dawn's forearm, she lost her footing falling back. Dawn struggled for her consciousness through her rampant coughing.

Dawn spat and drooled through her tears of suffering, She coughed and gagged, the water's weight slipping off her. She writhed against what she just witnessed, the visage of herself falling to ruin in a path of gore and viscera, and it curled her into a ball.

Virginia watched helplessly, drifting through her experience from behind her eyes not through them, unable to comprehend how she got here, yet another bout of lost time, further fragmenting her already shattered reality. Dawn clenched tighter to herself until she

stopped moving entirely. She just lay there, like a corpse ripped from its watery grave, she laid there motionless in front of Virginia.

Normally Virginia would be worried, she would feel urged to rush to Dawn's side. But she didn't feel in any way connected to the risk of her death, something had changed, it was no longer a priority and so she just sat and stared, curiously.

Rolling along her hip she stretched her legs out to counterbalance as she pulled her head down to the ground to meet eye to eye with Dawn in her catatonic state. She rested her head to her hands and lay with her, scouring Dawn's details.

Beads of cold sweat ran down across Dawns forehead, cracked and broken by the natural lines drawn across her face. They tracked down through the tiny canyons like the earth cut deep by the river's rage.

Virginia traced their path with her eyes, following drop after drop. Dawn was breathing shallow and short, still stuck in her head sorting through her experiences. Virginia just lay with her silently, watching her, waiting for her charge to return. She too slipped away again, her mind wrapped in a fog much like the growing mists around them.

Until a voice captured her attention, pulling her back to the forefront of thought and action once more.

"Virginia?"

Virginia heard her name again, but not in her voice.

"VIRGINIA!?"

It startled her drifting mind back into fixating on the reality around her, she again had to reconnect, bridging out with her emotional tendrils to cross the divide between herself and her body.

"Dawn?" She whispered with what little will she could call-up.

"JESUS CHRIST!" Dawn recoiled.

Chapter 38 -

The darkness had consumed her as she sank deeper towards the light at the end of the abyss. Dawn's flickering consciousness had the large shadowy form of the beast which pursued her in view, it pushed down towards her from the distant surface where she longed to be once more.

As she sank, and her life struggled to remain within, she drifted further down into the depths of the still water until nothing but the darkness surrounded her. She couldn't feel

her breath, and the frantic beat in her chest slowed to a dull thump. Shadows Swirled around her, and her consciousness gave way to the vision in her hellish dreamscape.

The dream became real, chasing after herself in a trail of carnage, falling to a mess of remains time and again until meeting herself eye to eye.

A few lucid moments emerged though the terrifying tranquility, a tug here, a pull there, she was jostled lightly until all that was left was the darkness. Her memory flashed, back through her entrance into this forsaken jungle, to the glade, through the horror that lost her the only friends she had here.

She stirred to a brief consciousness, enough to gasp in a lungful of air, which mixed with the water in her chest causing a violent crash of coughing that expelled the liquid to the mud beneath her.

She clenched her hands into the soft peat, raising her one hand to pound her chest in an attempt to clear her airways, each gasp became easier, but the dizziness took hold and she crumpled over face pressed into the wet soil. The lingering memories of her gore filled dreams taunted her, she feared revisiting the experience.

Finally from the darkness behind her lids streamed in the light.

“Ginny?” she first whispered to herself, her brow furrowed with her confusion, her thoughts slipped to Virginia’s dead eyed stare back in the glade of red ash. She jolted against it.

“Virginia?” She called out this time, pushing through her angsty concern.

Virginia lay motionless on the ground in front of her, just watching her. She was pale, her hair wet and tangled, making Dawn’s sensation of a continued dreamscape that much worse.

“Dawn?”

“JESUS CHRIST!” Dawn recoiled, although her voice was quiet, Virginia’s soft whisper startled her as if it was a deafening yell.

Dawn was uncomfortable, not sure if she was seeing ghosts, she tried and tried to think of a reason, any reasoning behind what she saw in the glade, and who now lay across from her.

She pulled herself up some more and pushed off the sturdy tree which supported her, her arms whipped up in front of her to try and offset her weight and she settled forward crossing her legs. She sat for sometime, watching Virginia moving about in an odd manner, always watching her unnervingly.

Finally Virginia settled, and Dawn regained her composure. Neither of them spoke, neither knew what to say. She fumbled nervously through her pack, her fingers still stinging to regain feeling.

She stole glances at Virginia who just looked at her like a curious puppy. She looked worse for wear to say the least, but Dawn was so tired, and too cold from her dip through the impossible river to question things at the moment.

“It’s getting dark, I need to make a fire.” She spoke aloud breaking the silence, half expecting Virginia to flicker out of her vision like a hallucination. But Virginia persisted, sitting idly and Dawn poured through her pack draining the water and scouring for her supplies.

She decided on a small test “Here take this and pull out the lighter”

She gestured toward Virginia, Judas’ weed kit extended out in her hand.

Virginia used both hands as she reached and grasped the plastic container. She twisted the case in her hands and ran it over her palms, exploring it as if she had never felt the smooth manufactured surface before. Dawn forced the case into her hands and recoiled back. One question answered she was undoubtedly real, this was no ghost or hallucination, at least not physically.

She began building a nest for her fire, a few leaves and some paper left over in her pack, sealed tightly in a ziplock with the leather journal. Dawn squinted her eyes with a curious expression trying to understand Virginia’s strangeness. But through it all, Dawn never felt threatened, but she did feel a new sense of pity which she never had for Virginia before.

“Are you hurt?” Dawn asked knowingly, the image of Virginia’s corpse still seared into her thoughts. Virginia just stared at her, biting at her thumb nervously, chewing at a minuscule flake of skin that had peeled back from her cuticle. Her other hand extended the lighter to Dawn who snapped it up.

“Virginia?” Dawn probed again.

“The damage is done, it doesn’t matter... I lost”

“You Lost?” She insisted.

“Everything...” Virginia again retreated back into her own reflection.

Dawn was distracted by the fire that finally sparked a little life. She pulled herself down the best she could; the dull ache in her ribs protesting, and blew into her cupped hands breathing life into the flame.

“Shit!” She started scrambling around for some more propellant, dropping in leaves and bark, snapping some sticks and flooding them over top of the smoldering heap. With the small fire ignited she huddled close shivering to keep warm.

They sat for over an hour, Dawn had mustered herself again, and prepared for a larger fire. She tended it as they both sat mostly in their heads. Both full of questions, but neither had the cognitive energy to commit to a conversation about it.

The questions were hard even for a seasoned philosopher, the implications of their shared ordeals just can't be rationalized without relying on the mystical. Both Women had spent their lives as scientists, threading the needle of questions towards a logical and digestible answer. No such answers exist here, and that sat abundantly uneasy with Dawn.

Virginia not so much, her experiences here although opening a variety of questions, also brought her understanding, in a way that very few can ever find a way to articulate. But only one experience of Virginia's concern Dawn at the moment, and that's how she went from the glade to sharing this fire with her.

Not that that particular question stuck out, especially among the infinite mysterious the last few days had her chasing answers for. It was Virginia who plucked it from her mind and laid it bare.

"I Died." Virginia said with a realization, The recollection of what came next was nowhere.

Dawn's throat tightened as she spoke "You did... I saw, I saw you"

"Are you dead?" Her question left Dawn even more uneasy.

"I... I don't... know?" Dawn said, plagued with dread as she vocalized it. "Are you real?" There was no answer to this that she wanted to hear.

"I have no idea..." Virginia's unfocused stare made her answer that much worse.

Dawn continued to build the fire. Virginia sat in what seemed like quiet contemplation, where in reality she continued her contention to remain the dominant will, slipping in and out of her own head as if being too tired to hold her eyes open.

Each wave descended on her, a cascade of perception and thought not of her own. They blasted her with experiences she had never lived, fragmenting further what she saw as herself, of what she felt was a cohesive whole.

Everytime Virginia tried to sort through the answers she would lose herself down another hole, sensing her grasp slipping as something else slipped in.

Virginia retreated into herself, and Dawn was left to contemplate her own circumstances. It was too much, she needed to occupy her attention, finding a singular task in building and stoking the fire.

She kept adding to it, finding larger pieces and breaking them the best she could, each snapping branch released the pent up tension she held in her deep wounds. Her side still ached, her ankle sore, and her head was pounding through the base of her skull.

She wanted to sleep, but she knew it would turn to obsession. Normally she'd flick some candy, or match some words to the comforting blue light of her phone till her eyes did the sleeping for her. Sliding herself between the two packs leaning once again against the giant root, she nestled in and let the journal unfold on her forearm.

The words were a jumble, she didn't have the brain power to read, but his imagery, his whimsical pencil sketches and scribbles in pen, that accounted for all his inner thoughts kept her mind still. She skimmed the pages with no real intent, finding the little details that reminded her most of the man who believed in her.

It was a icon of sorts that caught her eye, at first it was just the obvious swastika that adorned the top circle of the iconography, but the core of the image it was attached to comprised of another well known symbol, the reversed and interlocked triangles of the Shield of David, lined in the Serpents ring swallowing its tail depicting infinity.

At its center the Ankh, the Egyptian symbol of resurrection, topped with the sacred word of Hinduism, the symbol of Aum. Separately these symbols represent so much of the world's beliefs, and together they form the symbol of the followers of Theosophy. Their creed "There is no religion higher than truth" scribbled and underlined beneath.

Curiously the tenets of theosophy helped spark her journey here through Col. Fawcett's connection to their beliefs, and theosophy's founder. It unsettled her to see it here drawn in Chris's hand. It all started with that damn letter.

Her inner monologue replayed Fawcett's quote she chose at the beginning of this trek, "There, I believed, lay the greatest secrets of the past yet preserved in our world of today. I had come to the turn of the road; and for better or worse I chose the forest path."

But the words now stung her as the passing memory of the impossible forest ripped through the ACRN facility. Despite the warning signs and peril, ignoring the loss of so many of those who came before her, she still chose to walk this forest path.

As her mind made connections and her exhaustion took hold, she drifted with her thoughts, and probed their meaning in this strange place. It was the closest thing to rational she could think to do. It staved off her inconsolable thoughts long enough for her lethargy to take hold, stepping from her waking nightmare, back into her true dreamscape.

Chapter 39 -

Virginia sat alone, an affront to the dying fire before her, where she sat alive while it flickered and died, smoldering and smoking as it consumed the last of its fuel. She had sat alone all night, though she couldn't remember most of it.

Dawn had nested up between her packs and fallen asleep with Chris's journal in hand. Dawn's light grip let loose the book which slid gently down across the nylon to the ground.

She found herself standing over Dawn unaware of how she got there, as if the mere thought of her approach had brought her instantly to its conclusion, everything between inconsequential to her new nature.

Kneeling, she took up her fallen lover's journal. For a moment she was lucid and she watched the world turn sideways. For a moment the rush of memory placated the other forces which vied for her consciousness until again she lost herself, pulled back in, they flooded the void she left behind.

Virginia sat holding Chris's journal, the pages had yet to dry, and she peeled them back one by one scanning them with little focus. She poured over each page her mind foggy but Chris's handwriting brought comfort nonetheless.

Dawn shifted her position, waking enough to watch Virginia fall slowly into her sorrow.

"I knew it was his, I...I could tell from his writing."

"He wrote it, She didn't know for years... I... I didn't know." Virginia was becoming increasingly distraught, her gaze went empty as she retreated inward through her rambling thoughts. Dawn pulled her back.

"He really loved you. Even through all of this."

"He was lost too." Virginia replied with a concerning stare into a moss covered stone.

"I'm sorry Ginny."

Virginia looked back to the journal, her mouth hung slightly open, she whispered to herself slowly "Gin-ney" she looked down at her own form as she reassociated the name with the body.

Light had made its way down into their surroundings cascading over Virginia as she sat in silence staring at the weathered pages. The new light revealed the wet stone walls surrounding them. Above a hole in the ceiling of stone lit up the stout tree that sheltered them.

Through the light, traced the outlines of baubles tied to the tree, dangling from the branches around them. Extinguished candles lined the thick roots ritualistically. Light flooded in front the entrance to the dank cave where the lone tree sat surrounded by the dark deep still waters from which Dawn had emerged.

Dawn couldn't fathom how she arrived here from the raging river through the still basins depths, and as she inspected closer the trinkets strewn about, it became clear this place was sacred to someone.

Most disturbingly amidst the other strange objects was the nukes tied above them. Their bindings cut into the tree's branches that grew around them indicating they had been here a very long time.

The slow sway of the strung up objects was mesmerizing, with the sun playing off them in a subtle light show. It was surprisingly bright considering the thick rock walls that closed

them in, Dawn had been packing up her bags ready to move on, but Virginia was deep in the pages of Chris's writings.

Dawn still felt uneasy with her presence, she was certain she saw her lifeless among the glades debris, if she had any inclination she was alive she would have stayed with her. A new sense of guilt pushed its way into her thoughts. The same guilt that let slip the question past her lips.

"How, how are you here?"

Virginia sapped herself from the familiar handwriting and her journey flashed through her head before meeting Dawn's inquiry.

"I... was pulled here."

"What does that even mean Ginny?"

"I was called, brought here to find him, to join him"

"Great, that really clears it up"

"It was a mistake, they made a mistake bringing us here"

"What?, what the hell Gin. Ambiguous much?" The frustration in her voice was piercing, like the twinge in her side which she reacted to with a small yelp.

"Your injured"

"No shit, and you were dead."

They both fell silent. Awkwardly so.

"Shit i'm sorry, I can imagine you're as lost as I am, figuratively and literally" She mumbled that last part to herself, surveying the entrance of the cave peeking out as she spoke. A tight path wound its way out the cave and into the thicket.

"Are you up for a hike?"

Something surged in Virginia as Dawn was ready to press on. Ginny's mind fell backwards from the forefront and something else spoke for her.

"I'll show you the way " slipped out as she stood, being pulled towards the forest path. Dawn watched as Ginny took the lead, wandering out the cave and slipping past the brush that had grown over the opening. Dawn pushed through after her.

"Ginny Wait!"

The two walked silently for some time, both still lost in their own heads. As Virginia walked she felt the forest around her caressing the tree's bark, and fondling the ferns and brush

that lined their path. Dawn took notice of her bare feet, covered in ash up her calf and darkened further by the collecting dirt and mud as she strode forward gracefully.

"We need to find a vantage point, get a bearing." Dawn wanted a semblance of control

"We need only to follow the path we've been given"

"What? come one be realistic, we could be just wandering deeper into the jungle, and I have already had my fill of this place."

Virginia didn't reply, she just brushed aside the long stalks blocking the path , pushing onward along the degrading trail.

"Ginny?..."

Her silence flustered Dawn.

"VIRGINIA" Adamant to get a reply she reached out and spun Virginia around.

"Stop! We're just getting lost."

Her eyes had changed, Dawn couldn't articulate but they were not Virginias staring back at her. It was enough to cause her to take a few steps back.

"Whoa. the hell?"

"Not hell, just judgment."

"Okay what the fuck, Come on Ginny, what are you playing at."

"This is no game, and if you treat it as such you have already built your prison here." Ginny's voice had a twisted deep tone that underlaid her natural speaking voice. Dawn just stared back at her, blank in her expression.

"Come, before you lock yourself away here." Virginia turned away continuing her trek along the pathway.

"What the fuck..." keeping her distance Dawn followed Virginia's soft footsteps out of the jungle and out to a cliff's edge.

"Holy shit."

The view was astounding. stretching the expanse of what seemed like an endless jungle that curled itself at the edges to meet at where the sky should reside above, it closed in on itself and spiraled far into the distance. The soft incline towards an epicenter in the far distance created an impossible sideways cone of forest wall fading into darkness at its far end.

The light shone in from behind them, impossibly bright and with leaks of fractal colors that flitted off each ray's edge into the slanted chasm before them. The forest funnel soaked in

the fractal rays that bombarded the spiraling canopy until the crushing darkness at the converging woods' distant end subdued them.

"Okay what the hell, I, this, this can't be." Dawn stared at the insanity, she rolled over channel of forest twisted away from her inward towards its closed end far in the distance.

It was too much for Dawn, she fell back on to her ass with a painful thud and began to hyper ventilate., Barely able to speak between her breaths.

"This isn't real, this can't be real."

Virginia stood at the cliffs edge staring out at the unfathomable scenery, she seemed calm, comfortable even, hardly phased by the spiraling forest that sucked in the light to its core.

"Midway upon the journey of our life. I found myself within a forest dark, For the straightforward pathway had been lost." Virginia turned her head, slightly cocked and looked at Dawn with eyes not of her own. Dante's quote left Dawn even more unsettled.

"NO! no no no no!, this isn't real, it can't be real. The physics, they, it would fall, the light it's strange. I'm not doing this, this is too much, I've gotta wake up, or something."

Virginia had wandered over to her as Dawn's tears welled up. With a soft touch on her shoulder she grasped Dawn's attention, the salty liquid lining her bottom lid, overwhelmed by it all.

"Dawn... it's okay. You're ok" She sounded like herself, her voice familiar, her eyes Virginias.

"Ginny what the hell is this", Dawn Shuddered into tears with her query.

"They... I told you, this isn't a place, this is Judgement, and I will help you face it true." She knelt down and embraced Dawn. Dawn's tears streamed down her face and across Virginia's arm as she clasped to it, like a child clinging to its mother when faced with an unreasonable reality.

"I can't, I can't do this, it's not , it can't be. have I gone insane?!"

"It's not about sanity, it's all about you, about all of us and the mark we leave, the toll we pay. I can only show you the way, guide you through."

"What kind of answer is that?! just tell me what's going on!"

"I can only share what I understand, there are others who know more, I can only be with you, a familiar voice in the chorus." The word 'Chorus' rang loudly with a myriad of voices to accompany. It freaked Dawn out and she shuffled away from her, Virginia's eyes shifted rapidly, changing their hue, flickering with the essence of all the others within Virginia's comforting face.

"What the hell are you?!"

"I... I don't know, I know I am Virginia Beatty, but I also know I am so much more."

"Jesus, you're not making this any easier."

"We are sorry, there is little to say that would be of comfort, to you just more riddles, more questions, but all we can do is show you., be with you, guide you through the path, the rest is up to you, if you will let us"

She, they, wherever stood before her felt genuine, Dawn's thoughts were racing with questions, nothing would ease her, but she didn't feel threatened by whatever Virginia had become, at the very least she was happy to not be alone.

She sat staring for what felt like hours. This new daunting reality she was sucked into kept nagging at her logic, disassembling her beliefs. She felt the tragedy of loss, wishing to hear Judah's stupid laugh, or Sajos stern commanding voice, anything that could help her feel a little less out of her depth.

Virginia waited patiently with her, rubbing her back as Dawn nestled up to her knees gently rocking away the anxiety.

"I just want to go home. Judah's gone, Sajo is DEAD!, shit I just don't know what to do."

"Move forward, time is your currency, spend it moving forward." Virginia's voice again deepened, she spoke the words in Latin although Dawn could somehow understand. The line did feed her a small semblance of security, a small nugget of perseverance brought her back to her feet, shaking off her tears.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes "Shit..." she wiped the snot from her nose and wiped her face with her shirt. She huffed out a lungful of anxiety.

"So what now, what the hell am I supposed to do?" She gestured out over the absurd vista.

"Walk the path, that's all there is, move through this place with me, experience it, try to understand it, it is more than a place, it knows you, and you can know it."

"Real fucking cryptic."

Virginia walked off following the cliff's edge still clutching Chris's journal. She followed the spiral edge of the forest downward into the lower sanctum below. Dawn hesitantly walked behind her, her fists clenched around the straps of her packs tightly, scratching them nervously with her nails as they descended down into the forest.

As the ground leveled out below them, a small stream rolled past gently cutting into the ancient earth. Dawn filled her filtered water bottle and downed the entire flask, only to refill it again.

She offered it to Virginia who stared her down blankly, causing Dawn to once more question her choice to follow her, but with no other options she continued over the creek and took their first steps back into the thick of it.

Dawn caught up to Virginia keeping pace with her. Virginia was still clinging to the leather of the journal; it was like an anchor for her.

"Do you think Chris was here?"

His name caught her off guard, snapping her from her fog.

"I don't know, but I think so."

"Do you think they brought him? That tribe of animals I mean."

"They are not animals"

"What?"

"They are not animals, they are gatekeepers"

"They protect this place?"

"And many more like it" again her voice had changed, the words left her vessel but came from somewhere else entirely. Dawn stepped back behind her again.

"Chris must have been so confused" She muttered to herself

Virginia stopped in her tracks, looking down to the journal laying softly in her hands. The moment of lucidity watered her eyes with grief. Dawn nearly bumped into her while staring at her feet as they wandered.

"He... we were taken from each other, it was all a mistake, a terrible mistake"

"I'm.. I'm sorry Virginia, I miss him too."

A terrifying screech echoed over them, Dawn snapped to look back at the distant roar. The life of the forest erupted against it, scattering birds jostled the tree line and the echo twisted its way past them into the deep of the green brush.

"Jesus, what the hell was that?" Dawn's blood pressure spiked with the racing of her heart, but Virginia remained calm, unaffected by the horrifying bellow.

"We have to keep moving, or risk dwelling here forever" Virginia moved onward, Dawn kept her eyes locked behind them as she followed.

As if a cruel jokester the forest's roots snagged her footing and toppled her over to the ground with a comical thud. Her chest ached with the impact, her Ankle swelled and tightened in her shoe once more.

"Ahh, fuck."

Virginia just kept walking, with seemingly little concern for Dawn who pulled herself up, a light breeze shaking the tree as if to laugh at her misfortune.

"Shit." She persevered in pursuit of Virginia who had gotten further down the path without her.

Chapter 40 -

The slick still waters sat unperturbed like a puddle around the base of the Tree's roots. The sun still shining through the caverns crack at its peak, drifting the light through the baubles and branches. a small wave rolled over the roots that stretched into the water, they rolled again and again getting stronger and stronger.

The surface breached with foam and mists, the thrashing of the antlered beast tore at the calm surface gashing through it in an attempt to reach the shore. Its massive body loose from the wet that seeped through the cracks of its form, the white canine skull drained of their cold waters. With it the sounds of clashing swords, and screeching warriors, it burst from the waters below.

The sturdy stalks of its front legs slammed on to the shore as it pulled itself from the dark pool. It struggled against the ethereal visage of lost warriors that clung to it, trying to sink it back down into the depths. They clawed and scraped their way up its massive body, weighing it down at the water's edge.

It shook like a wet animal, forcing them off its back and freeing itself of their tormented grasp, as it pulled itself ashore with what little strength it had left. The ordeal left it gasping for air, its large cavity forced the hot steam through the cracks of its vine-covered back, the moss that lined its shoulders heavy and weighted with water that soaked into its spongy grip.

After a short rest upon the shore free from the water, it lifted itself to standing. It too had fallen deep into the dark impossible river in pursuit of Dawn, after its encounter with the marred Emerald serpent.

Some of its form had been ripped from its side, the nature around it seemed to surrender itself to help the beast reform what it had lost in the battle.

It took notice of the now extinguished fire that Dawn had tended the night prior. It sniffed the area for her scent and followed its trail outside the cave to the cliff's edge. It called out over the curving forest that coiled itself up into the sky.

The life in the forest erupted in response to its terrifying screech which echoed across the deep of the green brush below. It called out, Searching the canopy below for any sign of its quarry.

Its only way forward was down, down into the twisted forest below. Slow was its labored pace, still drained from its sunken battle, it followed the cliffs edge down taking moments to survey the forest from above before it would lose its vantage point of the ancient grove when it finally arrived at the cliffs base.

Dawn's scent was faint in the air, it took deep breaths through its chest whistling through the skull it held steadfast in its grasping hands. It reached out lifting the animalistic cranium using it to survey deeper into the thicket. It snorted with a rising anxiety, its prey slipping further away with each moment.

Finding the footfall left by Virginina's bare feet, it scratched at them with the trunks that made up its wooden hoofs. The vines tightened around the stalks like muscles, scraping at the ground as it investigated the path forward.

Through its exhaustion it followed forward along the overgrown path, each step closer to Dawn and Virginias journey.

Chapter 41 -