

As Kai awaited his turn to step forward, he considered how best to deceive the Elders. This was expected; the Trial's Eve, when the intentions of the annual Coterie were judged. To each, they pose a simple question.

"Veer. Why pursue the burden of Guardianship?" *Taj.*

The speaker was a mountainous man, with skin the color of granite; his ashen chest rose and fell with each breath, his muscular arms bulging and then retreating in time with the intake. Beside Taj sat Tarak, Kai's father; of a height, but slight by comparison.

The speaker's words were amplified by the ceiling, carved at the Elders' far end. How many generations had spent their lives excavating the plateau's insides, in case the Dwellers decided to strike en masse? The last major conflict had occurred four years ago; one of the larger Yomenite hunting parties had crossed paths with an exceptionally bold scouting party. Only Tarak had returned to tell the tale.

"It is our duty to protect what we have built," came Veer's reply. He faced away from Kai, twenty strides of the thirty to where the Elders sat along a wooden table. His voice did not echo as Taj's did, and seemed nearly a whisper to Kai. For a moment, no one spoke as the Elders conferred. None objected.

"Continue with our blessing, Veer." Taj's voice glowed with genuine pride. Though the chamber was carved out with high ceilings and pillars to enhance the Elders' words, his voice carried unnaturally. Kai knew Taj was using Vanarism to alter his body; in what way, Kai could not guess.

Veer moved off to the side, toward the Elders' passage, returning to the clear, lavender sky and the village proper. Kai snorted; Veer's answer had been essentially the same as the rest. Over two years, Kai had heard Taj repeat the same words nearly two dozen times. The year prior, Kai had been the sole dissident. He could remember moving forward eagerly, impassioned by the need to remind everyone of the scourge. The Elders' expressions had darkened at his expatiation; Taj and Tarak had been unsurprised, if disappointed. Kai hadn't expected Brahma the Historian or Dhat of the Harvests to side with him, but he'd counted on Apsara the Huntress or Tvastr the Smith to see the pragmatism of his words.

They had all denied him.

He had been forced to stand near the Elders and wait, listening as his previous Coterie had whimpered about defending their families or preserving their village, Venkata. A few of them had the audacity to claim an adherence to justice. *Justice?! Any justice not predicated on eradicating the Dwellers was toothless.*

The Yomenites had been driven from the High Hills, the Mesas, and the Skytooth Cliffs. Kai remembered visiting the Cliffs many times as a child. Overlooking the endless jungle, Kai remembered being able to see for leagues at the cliff's edge, vision hindered only by the western mountains. He'd called himself Chiranjeevi, then; he remembered the Dwellers' vast city, Kuklos Anankes, and how it shone like a reflection of the moon at night. Mostly, Chiranjeevi missed the sky, endless and open. Distant and infinite.

Chiranjeevi had laughed with his mother, Amita, and his sister, Ranie. When the sun went down, they had marveled as the lights sparkled to life across the dark sky. But those days would never return.

In the years since, he often dreamt of the Dwellers' precious city aflame.

The first time Kai had finished speaking, the Elders conferred for moments, then pointed right, nearly in unison--to the corner opposite the exit. Taj and Kai's father, Tarak, had spoken to him after the rest of Kai's Coterie had left. The Elders could not bless someone driven solely by vengeance. They'd given him a year to amend his perspective.

Now, Kai stepped forward. He had prepared his words.

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Tarak felt the sweat bead on his forehead. Chiranjeevi's eyes still held that familiar darkness. His son had grown hostile since Amita's passing. Tarak couldn't decide if it had abated slightly. *Illusions?* He glanced up at Taj, standing to his right.

In Taj's eyes, Tarak saw the question. *Shouldn't you be the one asking your son?*

Tarak shook his head, turning to watch his son stride forward. Tarak had weathered hatred's temptation; he was not surprised that his son had succumbed. Still, the Elders had agreed that enough blood had been spilt; they had no need of those who might incite open conflict with the Dwellers. Tarak had agreed. Already, too many Yomenites had conceded Antu's Bargain, dooming themselves to mortality.

His son should not need to join the condemned. Tarak's own sacrifices should be enough.

Chiranjeevi stepped forward, gaze fixed on Taj.

Taj posed the question: "Chiranjeevi. Why pursue the burden of Guardianship?"

"To escape this prison. To return to our homeland in the North." As he spoke, Chiranjeevi met their eyes, one after another. For an instant, Tarak saw a light; it was not there as Chiranjeevi looked at him.

Silence fell. The Elders turned to one another; most looked to Tarak. He studied his son.

Chiranjeevi stared determinedly at Taj. Tarak turned to his friend; Taj appeared impassive, but Tarak could tell he was unconvinced. Tarak felt the same, but nodded despite himself. If his remaining son could be saved, he would accept the consequences.

That was the least he could provide for his son.

The tunnels had been carved to accommodate someone of Taj's size, but to Kai they still felt cramped. Torches lit the pathway out, but passages weren't distributed consistently, at least by Kai's measure. At least half were uneven, rising upwards or sloping downwards; twice, he'd been forced to duck beneath the bottom rung of ladders leading straight upward. *Nuisances.*

In truth, he found the experience profoundly disquieting. If the Dwellers came to slaughter them all, he would die before retreating into the Seed. Better to die at their hands and have a shot at vengeance. Dying to starvation or dehydration in these caves was the worst death he could imagine. He had never learned Vanarism for suicide, but his mind returned to the question whenever he was within the Seed.

On the way in, they'd traveled as a Coterie. This was Kai's second such group; all were a year his junior, and usually beneath his notice. But the air had felt less stagnant for conversation, and Kai had appreciated them for it.

He rounded the next bend, and found the light led up a flight of stone stairs, and to the exit. Sunlight. Fresh air.

As expected, when Kai emerged from the tunnel's exit, he found Jahan standing a short distance away, chatting amiably with Veer. The Jagged Lands extended outward from the Seed for roughly a league in every direction. The smooth, black shale would have reflected the blinding light of the overhead sun, but the massive stone Nail overhead cast the path in shadow, resulting in an ominous penumbra which disturbed Kai.

Noticing him, Jahan cut short his pleasantries, waving to Kai and jogging over. As Kai moved to meet him, Jahan's wide grin came into sharper focus. His friend liked to smile, too much for Kai's liking, but he seemed even giddier than usual. *Failure?*

He knew Jahan had been expecting him to fail. Again. Kai couldn't help but feel a slight pang of bitterness, but his success had seemed unlikely, even to himself. He couldn't fathom why they'd allowed him to pass. Neither Taj nor Tarak had seemed convinced. But further contemplation was pointless; the next was already before him.

Although Jahan was two years his senior, Kai had always been taller, if less muscular, than his friend. The disparity grew more evident as the two grew near, and Kai's habitual smirk spread across his face. Jahan's expression assumed mock severity, but he cracked a grin and the two of them chuckled in unison.

"Now, before you start in again--" Jahan began, raising his hands.

"Sorry," Kai quipped, "you'll need to run that by me again. Your voice doesn't carry all the way up here."

Jahan responded by punching him lightly in the side.

"Damn fool," Jahan remarked. "I was sure you'd keep me waiting for hours again."

The levity slipped from Kai's grasp. Jahan's face fell slightly, too.

"But you made it." Trying to redeem the moment. The silence hung between the two of them as they walked, approaching Venkata.

As the pair crested the last hill, they were greeted by the sight of the village, in full. Kai had heard that when they'd first decided to settle the area, it looked indistinguishable from the rest of the great forest, Asipatravana, save that it was cast in shadow by the Nail, overhead. The shadowed area had been cleared out while the Seed had been carved, and the village had since expanded nearly fifty strides out into the sunlight. Kai wondered if, someday, the Dwellers would control the skies.

The day's zenith was long passed, but twilight hadn't quite arrived. The villagers were in the latter parts of their daily activities--hunters, carpenters and farmers drawing carts bearing their goods, children experimenting inexpertly with Vanarism. As Kai watched, one child chased another between two houses; as the chased passed through, another waiting around the corner reached a lengthening arm across, tripping the chaser. The children laughed and Jahan chuckled, but Kai saw no humor in the matter.

They passed merchants hocking wares acquired second-hand from beasts of the Hunting Grounds: claws capable of severing steel, furs that would blend to match the color when pressed against bark or stone, and a few coagulated souls. Trinkets for the unskilled or fearful. Kai was neither, and soon he'd be selling them, himself.

The Trial, itself, promised to be a challenge. Rarely in its history did all participants survive; most years, many died. Kai knew he wouldn't be one of those--he'd always been

amongst the most skilled in his Coterie--but knowledge of the Trial was taboo, and the mystery elicited an ambient anxiety within him.

Jahan tapped Kai's shoulder, drawing him from his reverie. He motioned to a few villagers--a builder and a farmer, to Kai's knowledge--and promised to be quick.

Behind him, Kai could overhear the tripped child whimpering as a nearby mother chastised the bullies, promising that Gremors came in the night to steal away the wicked. Whether Gremors, Scythids, or Ruefangs, the nature of the threat remained the same; boys feared the beasts, and men fought them. Kai remembered his mother making similar threats. Overhead, the sky was clear, and Kai was overcome by the strange desire to fall into it; enrapt, he felt a small measure of peace.

When Kai and Jahan reached the Lumberyard, the sun was beginning to dip behind the western mountains. Even so, the Lumberyard remained busy; carts bearing cross-sections of tremendous Elder Trees moved down the parallel lines of working men, stopping to unload more wood when requested.

Once more, Jahan stepped away to speak with others. They wore the garb of Guardians--loose green-brown trousers with a crimson sash, armbands matching--but Kai did not recognize them. Most of the common villagers were familiar to him, but veteran Guardians did not spend much time carousing.

Far down the left line, which consisted of volunteers looking to earn a few extra marks, Kai spotted Naren. Bulkier than himself and nearly as tall, Naren had been part of Kai's previous Coterie and his sole source of competition. He had passed where Kai had failed.

Kai moved to occupy a station three removed from Naren; their eyes met for a moment, and they exchanged nods as greeting. Kai saw only derision reflected.

Naren had carved his cross-section into an assortment of neat planks and boards for building frames. Lumber processing was a good test of strength and precision, and Naren proved consistently skilled at it. He'd always proved adept with additional limbs, which was an uncommon talent and exceptionally useful for woodworking. It was a wonder he didn't make it his full-time occupation.

Today, Kai would match him.

As Naren's lumber was carted away, the strongmen drawing the cart moved down the line to his station. The pair moved into position to cut a large segment from the elder stump, nearly a third of a stride, but Naren motioned them further. Kai's eyes bulged as they settled at a half-stride; the strongmen looked similarly doubtful, but Naren nodded confidently, eyes shining.

The strongmen positioned opposite one another, then extended their arms to clasp hands near the midpoint. Their bodies grew slightly less massive as the flesh and muscle was redistributed. Jagged teeth of bone sprouted from the underside, and the two began working the saw back and forth. At this point, attention was beginning to coalesce about Naren, the other lumbermen prodding their neighbors to garner focus. Kai felt acrimonious sensations gathering at the top of his neck; he rebuffed them vigorously.

Naren's entire body grew ruddy as he wove heavy, thick fibers to handle the weight; the two strongmen worked in time to rock the tremendous cylinder over the edge of the cart. Despite its atherium axles and elderwood frame, the cart nearly toppled over as the slab crested

its side and onto Naren's back. His legs wobbled, and for a moment Kai wondered if his former rival would be crushed. *Twentyfold.*

But then he grew steady; with a growl, Naren began to walk forward with laborious steps. He reached the far side of the station, the strongmen and nearby lumbermen moving to assist him. Instead, he crouched with the patience of a man unloading a mountain. There was a muted crunching as the cylinder came to rest, upright on the stone platform. Some celebratory grunts and whoops sounded about the yard, but Naren did not seem to hear them. Instead, he moved to lower his slab flat against the ground--another feat which looked to require significant effort, but was completed with similar nonchalance--and began working systematically to carve away at it.

The strongmen shook their heads in disbelief, then moved to draw the cart down the line, once more. By the time they'd reached his station, Kai had made up his mind. Naren's takings had left a segment that was only slightly larger than itself. Kai would handle the rest.

When the strongmen moved halfway down, Kai shook his head, motioning to the whole. The yard had largely returned to minding itself; from those remaining, Kai heard scoffs or whispered concerns. This sparked incendiary doubts in his mind, which he tried to quash. *No avail.* They continued to float there, just beyond the edge of articulation where they could be formally challenged.

No cutting was necessary, and the strongmen were in position to begin rocking. Kai moved, pressing the small of his back to the cart and leaning forward over his feet, knees bent slightly. He felt the cart rock against him, and did his best to hold steady. The weight would jump the cart's edge to rest mostly against his back, and then one strongman would give the final shove while the other helped Kai to stabilize. At the edges of his vision, Kai saw lumbermen gathering with concerned expressions. He almost waved them away, but there was no time.

Kai wove fibers atop fibers--arms and back, first, and then down his midsection and through his legs. The final jostle felt like the land's entirety threatened to bear down upon him, but he managed to hold. The second strongman grunted as he heaved, and the colossal burden settled against Kai's back. His legs felt they would burst, and the weight only seemed to grow heavier as Kai bent forward, balancing the weight over his feet. The bottom portion of bark came to rest against his hands, and his forearms began to scream. *One. Two.*

On the third step, Kai felt a tearing sensation. His mind buckled, giving way to inadequacies. The weight slid against his back, carving deep gouges as his grasp gave way. Kai gasped, trying to bite his tongue against the pain, falling forward as his focus lapsed. The cross-section slammed downward, the tremors only throwing him further off-balance. As Kai collapsed forward, he heard cries across the yard, followed shortly by the brutal crunch of wood-on-wood. Dazed and struggling for breath, Kai rolled over to inspect the damage. The slab of elder wood had rolled back against the cart, crushing the wood of the near side. The axle looked to be intact, but repairs would require at least a full day's work in the yard. It looked as though further damage had been prevented by the timely intervention of a small group, lumberers and strongmen among them. Naren had hustled over, though thankfully not quickly enough to assist.

He stood over Kai, grinning. Contempt returned to the forefront of Kai's mind.

"Good thing you weren't hurt, eh?" Naren said, extending a hand.

Kai ignored it, scrambling to his feet; the exhaustion caught him off-guard, and he nearly fell over again.

"Thanks," he managed, but it came out as more of a growl.

Instead of taking offense, Naren just chuckled.

"I've never seen anyone try to take as much weight as me; your attempt was laudable, my friend." *Proving superiority.*

"Not good enough." Perhaps it would have come across better as humility, but Kai felt pure reprehension toward himself. Naren frowned slightly, and then shrugged.

"Keep training, and I'm sure you'll get it," he said, clapping Kai on the shoulder, which caused him to nearly collapse again.

Naren did not seem to notice, and turned back to return to his station as the strongmen stepped up to Kai to negotiate.

Hours later, night was beginning to settle in; Kai and Jahan walked back through the village, the path lit by stars overhead. The moon was waning, and seemed duller than usual to Kai's eyes.

Jahan had stood nearby while Kai had been lectured and derided. Kai knew it had been deserved, but that hadn't done much to curb his contempt.

The pair walked down the village's thoroughfare in silence. Kai's home--or rather, Tarak's--was a watchtree once on the edge of occupied territory. Hollowed out and designed for military occupation, the insides of the tree were largely utilitarian; traversal was primarily vertical, and required extensive ladder-use, save for a winding staircase leading to a long, winding exit-tunnel so as to obscure the nature of the abode.

The village was growing quiet at this hour. Flames lit individual homes, and laughter occasionally echoed outward into the night, but only Guardians would be out in the darkness.

As Kai and Jahan moved beyond the clustering of neat buildings, the stars and moon were swallowed by greenery. Unlike the space of the village, which had been clearcut, thick foliage remained around Tarak's refuge, both disguising and blinding it to the skies. Eldertrees grow in a grove of two-to-three, each with a trunk at least as thick as Taj lying down. Even climbing to its highest levels did not elicit the same all-encompassing sense of freedom that Kai felt beneath the open sky.

"Are you nervous about tomorrow?" Jahan asked, finally breaking the silence.

Earlier, he'd been convinced his success would be inevitable. But the lumberyard had reminded him of old insecurities, and the edges of his self-confidence had begun to fray. He shrugged.

"Were you nervous?" Kai asked, genuinely curious. The moonlight played across Jahan's face in droplets, rendering his expression inscrutable.

"Was I? Absolutely! By the dome, I'm nervous now!"

"Now? Why?"

"I mean, for you. Obviously." Kai could hear tension in Jahan's chuckle. But his friend would not conceal things from him without a good reason.

"Just," Jahan continued, "try to get some rest. You've got an early morning tomorrow. The Coterie meets in the village center just before sunrise."

"I know."

"They won't tolerate absence or tardiness; a lack of commitment means permanent disqualification."

"I know."

"And you can stop by my house if you need something to eat, first. I have some leftover khanfox jerky."

"Jahan," Kai began tiredly, "My mother is already dead."

"Maybe that just means you need someone else watching out for you," Jahan said, cheerfully. He clapped Kai on the shoulder, more forcefully than usual. Kai glowered at him as his knees almost buckled again. He could imagine Jahan's grin, and from Jahan's chuckle, knew he guessed Kai's expression, in turn.

Kai couldn't help himself from chuckling, too; and for a moment, the two were laughing together. Jahan was like that. He drew out the best in people. He chased back the darkness, if only a little.

"Since it's just us..." Jahan leaned close, whispering conspiratorially. "Would you like to know what's going to happen, tomorrow?"

Kai narrowed his eyes. There was no way his friend would violate taboo so casually... But perhaps a moment of indiscretion would serve to soothe Kai's nerves. Kai trusted Jahan's judgment more than that of the Elders...

A breeze ruffled leaves overhead, a spot of moonlight playing across Jahan's face. He retained his mischievous grin. Kai scoffed, then ducked to enter the tunnel to his home.

"You don't need me to tell you anything," Jahan called as he started the return trip to the village. "You'll be just fine on your own. Trust yourself! I do."

The words echoed in Kai's head as he poured fresh water and lye into the basin, washing himself and then his clothes.

The words were still there when he settled atop his mattress of straw and feather. And the ambient anxiety remained, too.

The two warred as Kai tossed and turned, seeking a rest which did not want to be found.

Chiranjeevi screamed and thrashed as he was hurled into the floating cart. Thrust against the cart's side, Chiranjeevi felt a wicked pain lance through him. He'd been stabbed when they'd caught him, fleeing the hut to which they'd set fire.

His captor wore dark armor. He would have been invisible in the night's shroud, but the Skytooth Outpost burned around them, illuminating everything. The flames behind him cast the soldier in shadow, rendering him visible only by light of azure-tinted goggles on his mask.

Chiranjeevi felt the cart jostle; his mother was moving to hold him. He heard her words and they sounded reassuring, but his ears made no sense of the words. She covered his mouth and looked into his eyes; he felt her hands on the wound. He tried to scream as she gave a sharp tug, but the metal held. He felt prongs on the end digging into his insides. He tried to buck away from the pain, but his mother held him fast.

He leaned back against her, eyes involuntarily skyward. The clouds drifted by, heedless of the disaster.

A darkened figure descended from the sky.

He landed, light emblazoning. His father.

"Tarak." The speaker sat at the head of the floating cart, wearing heavy armor. The cart wobbled wildly as he stood, then rocked with each step. The figure walked to the edge where he jumped, meeting the ground with a muted crash.

Two soldiers near the back of the cart wrenched Chiranjeevi from his mother.

"Don't be scared. Everything will be alright. Your father's here." The words hung in his ear, nearly as comforting as her embrace.

"Before you die, I'm curious: which is more precious? Son or wife?"

Chiranjeevi fixed on his father's eyes. He could not make them out at this distance.

From behind there came a scream. His mother.

Kai woke with a start, soaked in sweat. He still felt the flames' heat. Ten years later, the memories of that night continued to haunt him.

He rose, gathering his dark green tunic and brown trousers with the white sash. No light came through the small gap facing eastward. Night seemed well upon them, still. But Kai felt he needed no more sleep. Returning to that nightmare would do more harm than sleep could confer benefit.

Kai made his way down the ladders, through the makeshift food storage, and his father's quarters. Kai hadn't caught Tarak sleeping here in over a year; he wasn't sure if the old man was averse to sleep or afraid of being alone with Kai. Perhaps it was some combination of the two.

He descended the staircase winding around into the underground on light footsteps, then swung back the light, wooden door and took off down the tunnel.

Spirits among the Coterie were high when Kai arrived at the village center. He'd anticipated Veer and his cronies, Inas and Chahel, to be eager. They always were. The three of them stood, talking about the great challenges ahead and doing their ancestors proud. *Fools.*

He was more surprised to see Gyan grinning. The boy was shy. When asked, he would speak about Vanaristic theory at length, but seemed maladjusted to practice. Kai doubted he'd fare well in this endeavor.

"What say you, Chiranjeevi?" Veer said, trying to throw an arm around Kai's shoulders. He was too short, and his arms only came across halfway. Kai found the gesture distasteful, shrugging the hand off.

"We'll have to see who survives the Trial. Past words and deeds are dust in the wind."

Veer wilted slightly, his friends' expressions hardening.

But it was not Kai's responsibility to soothe their egos.

"Alright," came a feminine voice, "it's time to move." Apsara the archer, willowy and silver-haired, stepped away from her granddaughter, Kalpana, toward the center of the group.

Without another word, the group fell into line. The group's enthusiasm had waned, subsumed by tension.

The Nail had always struck Kai as a misnomer; it had always looked like a massive index finger, pointing toward the sky at an angle. It was one of many pillars nearby, though when

it had stood upright, the Nail would have been the tallest by far. Long before their arrival, the Nail had broken three-quarters of the way down, and fallen to rest against a much shorter, wider pillar: the Seed. The majority of the village seemed to think the area had some sort of religious significance. Although the Nail was long enough to cast a long line of shade over the Seed, clouds tended to gather around it.

Kai found that, since meeting the Dwellers, such things no longer seemed to matter.

The group had been reticent since leaving the safety of the village. Roughly half-a-league between the village and the Seed, two smaller paths split from the main trail: one heading North and one heading East. The Northern path was rarely traveled, as it wrapped around then jugged back straight south, weaving between several pillars toward a sheer cliff. The fastest and riskiest route to the top.

Instead, the group took the commonly-traveled Eastern path; save for a few shared whispers and chuckles between Kalpana and Apsara, the group remained silent.

The Eastern path was more commonly taken; it wove through a smaller section of thinner pillars, ultimately working its way Northwest and then back Southeast to where switchbacks had been worn into the cracked side.

The path along the Nail's rear was narrow, sufficiently wide for two abreast; as the Nail was composed largely of atherium, the trails were painstakingly carved in accordance with the breaklines. As the group continued rounding the curves, they began to near the fog, where clouds tended to accumulate just below the peak. The trail grew slippery at this stage, and more than a few stray stones were kicked loose to clatter distantly below, a reminder of the precipitous fall.

The thick clouds made Kai feel nearly as trapped as he had underground, and he felt the breath catching in his chest. As he rounded the last curve, he noticed the sunlight peeking through, and he felt a sense of relief ripple through him as he emerged from the fog. The sky opened up before him, and he felt whole again.

Chahel whistled at the sight as he followed.

"Never seen such a beautiful day. Eh, Veer?"

Veer, close on his heel, nodded fervently.

"An excellent day for a test of might and courage."

This time, he did not inquire with Kai. He should've known better the first time. Their foolish chatter was a mere distraction.

"Alright, enough chatter," said Apsara, her voice businesslike from behind. "Chiranjeevi, you first."

Kai continued onward, scaling the vertical wall of the most definite break. He stuck his head up over the lip, and was treated to an even more spectacular sight. The Nail's longest portion extended for nearly three-quarters of a league. In full sunlight, the atherium sparkled, throwing off diffuse rays that were more awe-inspiring than blinding. The forest was in full view, now, the canopy seeming a ubiquitous surface. The few gaps made the depths seem bottomless. But the sky overhead was clear, pure. Kai felt as though he could reach out and seize it.

At the far end of the Nail, near its tip, he spotted two figures in the distance. *Father and Taj*. The pair had been friends since youth, and had been known to spend long hours, attention

fixed on the horizon. No one knew what they discussed, but as the years had passed, they'd always seemed to find the time for it.

Kai turned as the rest of the group scrambled up after him. The group issued various sounds of delight and shock; Kai realized that many of them had never personally witnessed the view. He supposed it would be overwhelming, were he still a child.

The difficult part of the climb was over, but this would be the longer. It was a steady incline, but only slight. One of many reasons the village considered the site to be holy.

Silence had returned to the group, albeit awed, this time; only the soft pitter-patter of leather moccasins against the unyielding metal was constant, underscored by inconsistent howls of the wind or aerial predators. The heat of the sun raged intensely overhead. Kai wondered if altitude change accounted for it, or if it was an illusion of his mind. *The time has come.*

As the Coterie approached the Nail's zenith, the pair turned to regard them, as if they'd known all along.

"Welcome to the peak, young-ones." Taj's voice boomed, though nowhere near how it had, amplified in the chamber. Kai glanced at his peers, who bristled with anticipation, looking at each other with excitement and nervousness. The sun had properly crested the eastern horizon, which meant the villagers would be beginning their day's work, if they hadn't already. Kai wondered what Jahan was doing.

"The responsibility of Guarding the village demands our best warriors, Vanarists of strength and ingenuity. Each of you has been selected, chosen to do what must be done in order to protect our people. Even if you must lay down your lives.

"This test will require but a fraction of such resolve, but will challenge you, nonetheless."

"If any of you wish to withdraw, now is the time." Tarak's voice lacked the richness of Taj's, but was just as firm.

Kai turned, meeting the eyes of his peers. Trepidation was ever-present, but many eyes reflected dreams of glory.

"As many warriors are needed as farmers, carpenters, or weavers... There is no shame in choosing differently."

Everyone was silent for a moment.

Then Taj spoke, his voice booming again. "The Trial consists of three parts. First, you must survive for three days. Each must learn to fend for oneself, for that is the way of this world. For that period, Elders will await those who seek the refuge of a safer vocation.

"On the dawn of the fourth day, the Council will convene atop this Nail. The second part is this: each of those remaining must return bearing proof of an onerous fight. Claws or a hide will do, but a head is always best." He smiled, then, and Kai found the expression profoundly disturbing. "When that has been accomplished, the third and final portion of the Trial commences."

"Does everyone understand?" Tarak said, moving forward to address the group. He paused, scanning to meet each of their eyes. Kai stared at his father, unblinking and silent. Tarak returned eye contact briefly before moving on. As usual, Kai found Tarak difficult to read.

Tarak bid them follow to the low end of the Nail. The Dwellers' city was nearly hidden beneath the vast canopy, save the tallest building--a spire so tall it seemed to pierce the sky. Despite himself, Kai wondered what was visible from such a height. Surely one could see the entirety of the world laid bare.

When they'd all reached the edge leading back down to the switchbacks, Tarak spoke loudly to the group. "Were the skies clear, I'd assign you each an orientation, then you'd find your own way. Instead, we shall make our way back down to the Jagged Lands. From there, you'll each have a starting point along the tree line. You will spend the entire first day bearing as straight as possible. From there, you will be allowed to move at your leisure. Clear?"

The group nodded in unison.

"Good. We move!" Tarak barked with authority, which surprised Kai, before leaping over the edge, which shocked him. The drop was nearly six strides high. Such an impact would be difficult for even skilled Vanarists to manage. Peeking over the edge, he found that his father was fine, and not bothering to wait for them.

Tarak stood at the edge of the Jagged Lands, watching Ehimay's back weave around trees and hop over thick roots until it disappeared from view. It was a shame that the boy was here; Tarak had seen Ehimay's work displayed in his family's shop, and he would have made a fine potter. But there was no glory in that. And it was not as though skilled fighters were not needed.

Ehimay had been the last of the Coterie, and with them dispersed, Tarak had other duties to tend. Meeting with the returning patrols, dispatching their replacements to surreptitiously survey the Northeastern forests. Even if participants were expected to function self-sufficiently, the unnecessary loss of life would haunt him; although annual deaths were ultimately unavoidable, Tarak pushed his scouts hard to minimize the damage.

Briefly, Tarak's thoughts returned to his son. During Taj's foreword, Chiranjeevi's stare was piercing; but when father and son had stood on the smooth rise at the forest's edge, Chiranjeevi had refused to look at him. Nodding to convey comprehension, gaze fixed ahead... But Tarak understood. Taj and the others had told him that Amita's death could not have been prevented, but they were wrong. Tarak had chosen to defend the outpost before seeing to his family's safety. The most he could hope for was that his son would understand the nature of that responsibility. But he never expected forgiveness.

Tarak was far enough away from the Nail that the sky was clear overhead. Tarak found himself wondering, as he often did, if some part of Amita had persisted. Tarak would need to trust her to watch over their son. Tarak began to jog, then broke into a run. There was work to be done.

Daylight did not render the forest any more welcoming. Small patches of sunlight peeked timidly through the canopy overhead, illuminating networks of winding roots, puddles of swamp, and small holes that led to burrows of unknown creatures. Kai continued walking straight ahead, doing his best to stay on-course. He was less concerned with obeying his father's will than with behaving in accordance with Venkata's precepts. Any contact with his fellows might be construed as coordination, and Kai was confident his father's scouts would be watching for

them, if only as they passed by on patrol. The elders might have found the kindness for a second chance, but Kai would not be granted a third.

As he circled a large trunk, a patch of maroon flowers near the base contracted sharply, and Kai jerked away, holding his breath. Poisons, paralytics, and hallucinogens were all tools common to denizens of this cursed place. A bad breath of air could leave him writhing in pain for hours, spewing bile until he died from dehydration, or trapped within his own paralyzed body, waiting for the next predator to arrive and slowly devour him, witness to the experience.

His first priority was to find a secure refuge. To his knowledge, Kai was the only member of his Coterie to have traversed Asipatravana in any capacity, although he was uncertain that conferred any meaningful advantage. The forest was treacherous, and even veterans were known to fall prey to its pitfalls. His best chance was to hide and sleep sparingly until time came for the final hunt.

Kai stopped abruptly, leaning against a colossal log fallen in his path. *A scream.* No. It couldn't be. He pivoted, spinning in place, trying to place it. Deep into Asipatravana, proper orientation was impossible to establish. *Which way?* The log had been ahead of him. He vaulted it, crouching as he landed. Animalistic cries emanated from all directions. Kai began to run, dodging between trees and hopping over vines and roots. He made certain to avoid the puddles, which could be deceptively deep. Kai had heard tales of men being dragged down into a great abyss, although he'd never known how such tales could possibly be recounted, as surely they'd have drowned.

Buried beneath the canopy, Kai felt a crushing pressure within, as though his lungs were encased in rubble. With each step, it shifted, compressing ever further.

As Kai continued further, the land became increasingly uneven, sloping upward. The trees thinned slightly on the rising ground, and glimpses of a scarlet sky became visible. Ahead, Kai found that the ridge he'd been walking swelled to its peak, culminating in a ten-stride drop, its incline exceedingly steep. *Vantage.*

Despite Asipatravana's evil, an ambient light permeated it. Kai remembered his first time in the forest at night, he'd asked his father about it. Tarak had replied, "This land is a crucible. One which reveals life." The words had made little sense, but Tarak had not elaborated.

The light was not sufficient for sight, in any case. Blurry outlines in the darkness did not engender confident strikes. Searching the area, Kai found the largest tree--ten paces around, its trunk uneven with large fronds.

He glanced down at his hands. The tips grew thin and the bones peeked through, white tips glistening in the rapidly fading light. As the bone grew denser and longer, Kai felt the expected onset of lethargy. He grimaced as he grew similar fixtures along his feet. Generating muscle seemed less exhausting than bone, at least for Kai. His claws and toes affixed, he began to climb the largest tree near the plateau's edge, digging in with sharpened bone. As he reached the branches, he moved with greater alacrity, springing between them with the aid of extended reach of lengthened arms.

As Kai broke the canopy, he nearly loosened his claws from where they'd dug deep into the trunk's bark. Even at risk of plunging to his death, the sight had overwhelmed him. The plateau had been much longer than he'd conceived, stretching for leagues in either direction. It was as though he stood at the edge of another world extending below.

Except it looked very much the same as this one.

Kai continued to climb, his forearms starting to feel tapped. His fingers trembled imperceptibly as he pulled his hand free, before reaching forward once again. A few times, he was forced to stop, swinging between the branches around the tree. Given a proper nook, he could sleep with passable security. Nowhere would truly be safe for the next few days.

The burning pain spread across his back, ripping through him as he lengthened his arm. Reaching out, Kai made it halfway to a branch overhead when he felt his footing shudder. He crouched, bone claws carving into the wood with an enhanced grip. *Dizziness?* He'd never experienced vertigo before.

But the tree continued to sway, if only slightly. He twisted, leaning to peek over the edge. Far below, he spotted a mountain of white fur. Kai was nearly twenty strides up. To be so large from so high... *Antu's Emissary.*

Massive apes, easily five strides tall and nearly as wide, the Yomenites spoke of the Emissaries with reverence, but usually in terror. The monster twisted, facing upward as it ground violently against the tree. Kai froze. Fortunately, it didn't appear to have spotted him, although Kai couldn't see much distinctly at this distance, except for its bright, pink snout. It continued scraping itself against the tree, leaving large patches of fur behind.

Kai kept as still as possible while the shaking continued. Eventually, after what felt like hours, the trembling desisted. Kai allowed himself to exhale, then risked peering over the side. The Emissary was gone, the base of the tree seeming suddenly barren for its absence. Still, Kai felt relief flow across him as a breeze.

The combination of his travels through Asipatravana, his climb, and the threat of the beast left him drained. With substantially less alacrity, Kai worked his way upward three strides, where he discovered a wide knothole positioned over a thick, wide branch. Beyond exhausted, he nestled into it. It was not so comfortable as to seem wrought. Enough to lie back against, to shift without risk of dislodging himself. Kai allowed himself to feel safe.

How silly it would be to die out here, a victim of simple misfortune? These forests were vast, and sparsely populated, particularly near Venkata, where threats had been thinned by patrols. The Emissary had certainly been noticed, but the beasts were left alone, for practicality as much as respect. They were typically indifferent to the Yomenites, from what Kai heard. Fools had challenged them, of course--and some had even won. But Emissaries required a group to be fought effectively.

The night sky above was overwhelming. Never had he been allowed to sleep in its full view, and its mere scope upset his mind. It was wonderful and overwhelming, all at once.

His mother sat behind him in the cart. Chiranjeevi felt the cart shift slightly, and felt something cold and thin against his back.

"You must grip it, Chiranjeevi." His mother's whisper was fervent. His hands were bound behind his back, linked by an unknown device. Chiranjeevi shifted, bending forward slowly to level his hands with what he knew to be the hilt of a knife.

He was too weak, so she would bear the pain. The knowledge crushed him. He fumbled for the hilt before seizing it with as much vigor as he could manage. It jerked once as she shifted

her weight. The knives contained small needles that flared out when the hilt twisted. His mother braced against him.

"Squeeze tightly. I love you very much, but I must leave you now. Be strong. There are many sights to behold. Now, you must run to your father." His fingers loosened at the words, but they tightened as she kissed his cheek. There was a terrible wrenching, and he was jerked backward, but Chiranjeevi held fast as the knife tore free. He turned to follow her as she screamed, launching herself at the nearest Dweller. Through the goggles of his mask, his eyes went wide with horror. The blood fountained from her side as she tumbled over the side of the floating cart, down into the darkness.

Chiranjeevi was rooted. The voice in his head screamed to run to his father. Instead he twisted, rising from his knees. Numbly, he stepped toward the edge of the cart.

Instantly, he was seized from behind. Chiranjeevi felt a burning sensation in the pit of his stomach. He did not think. Instinctively, he struggled against the arms. It was to no avail. The flames roared to terminal heights in all directions. He heard the pounding of heavy footsteps approaching as he was wrestled prone.

The visage of his mother rose over the far side of the cart, bloodied and breathing heavily. She turned to him. His mother was yelling something, but he knew not what it was.

There were sudden blurs in his vision, a vague ringing in his ears. Amita shook violently for a moment. There was a sadness in her eyes as she toppled from view.

Chiranjeevi heard screaming. He felt dull spikes of pain jolting across his body, and he was freed. Two steps and he was vaulting over the side of the cart.

He landed lithely beside her. Amita was bent over the Dweller's corpse. Chiranjeevi could not fathom why. He grasped her and shook. She was heavy. He called out to her, but was surrounded by the noises of the Dwellers from all directions.

Chiranjeevi bent over, shielding her from the world's turbulence. She did not turn and take him in her arms, but that did not matter. He would protect her, from now on.

The cries and the screaming grew louder. The fires burned hotter. Chiranjeevi clutched at his mother more tightly. Now they would never be separated.

A corded arm, thick with muscle, scooping around his waist.

But Chiranjeevi's hands were sharpened claws, and started to rip and tear at the flesh of his captor.

Nearly instantly, the flesh grew hard, a thick liquid congealing over its surface before solidifying.

"Cease, child." His father's voice. "We must go, Chiranjeevi."

"Mother!" His voice was halfway between a sob and a scream.

"It's too late." There was a dull numbness in his father's tone. The pressure across his torso renewed, and Chiranjeevi was torn away from Amita.

Something was left back there, with her. As his eyes took in the periphery, soaked in flames and dappled with bodies, an idle part of his mind noted that there were no living Dwellers left. Only bodies remained.

Kai jerked awake to the sounds of Asipatravana's awakening. Piercing shrieks punctuated an otherwise deathly silence. For several minutes, Kai remained still. The sun was rising off to his left, and the light spread over the land in a wave, bathing the land in warmth.

Slowly, Kai squeezed out from his nook. The trip to the ground was less tiring, if more daunting for fear of falling. As he neared the base, Kai slowed; clustered around the patches of white fur, he noticed smaller creatures. Horned rodents with long-ears inched forward while small primates snorted tiny goutts of flame to frighten them back. The creatures jockeyed, both within and between packs, striving to stand near the trunk.

Hanging from above, Kai painstakingly lowered himself onto the lowest branch, roughly four strides above the swarming beasts. He could feel the burning pain of flesh and muscles squirming along his spine as his arm lengthened; his hand began to seize as he touched down gently on the wood.

The creatures below hadn't noticed his presence. Boneshot wasn't his specialty, but as long as he retrieved the material, he could afford to take the risk. Bone was difficult and costly to generate, and Kai didn't have the knack, as some others did.

Quietly, he readied himself near the edge. Kai felt the wind blowing, and the creatures below continued jostling. He leaned down, digging his left hand into the gnarled bark. Then, he inhaled as deeply as he could manage. Dragging bone-tipped fingers, Kai swung over the edge.

As he did so, Kai whipped his other arm across. Still long from his descent down the branches, it snapped across like a whip, the ends of his fingers splitting painfully open to eject the bone tips. The momentum carried him around in a twist, and Kai brought his other arm around bearing a calcified blade along the bottom. An Ulnic Scimitar.

Perhaps he'd been too presumptuous. Kai came down on one of the primates, his bone blade splitting the poor beast nearly down the middle; he landed hard in a crouch, cushioned slightly by meat and marrow. He spun wildly, but the animals had scattered. His projectiles had downed two of the large rodents; between them and the baboon, he'd have food for two days.

Kai gathered his spoils, then searched painstakingly for the tips of his fingers. Better to replace to regrow. He cleaned them on his trousers with firm, deliberate strokes, clutching the segments between thumb and wilted index. Visually, he did his best to match their size against their chiral counterparts. Kai stuck the bones into the fingertips, doing his best to ignore the searing pain of split flesh; he slid his functional thumb and forefinger along each finger, resealing the flesh. The resultant fingers were lumpy, perhaps more so than previously, but his body would compensate, if gradually.

Hefting the bloody remains of his prey, Kai readied himself for a long day of hiking. He could attempt to directly assimilate the flesh, but the toxins would not be readily pacified by his body. Every Yomenite venturing beyond the village carried a striker, but a smokestack on such a high hill would certainly draw attention; the creatures of the forest would certainly be drawn to such a signal.

He would need to continue further, depending on mere hope for some vestige of safety.

After working his way down the slope, Kai continued walking for hours. It seemed like hours, in any case; it was impossible to tell. The groves of trees never seemed to thin, and while the land rose and fell without discernible pattern or consistency, the sky was rarely directly

visible overhead. Occasionally, Kai heard snarls, howls, or hoots nearby; the direction was never precisely discernable, and each time he was forced to slow, proceeding with extreme caution so as not to rouse the anger of unknown packs. Kai was well past the point where he could expect to be familiar with the beasts of the area; at this stage, his best bet for safety was avoidance.

Soon enough, the spots of light overhead were growing dim. Kai felt he could continue for hours yet, but many of the fiercest beasts of Asipatravana were nocturnal. It was in his best interest to seek shelter soon.

Except...

Kai could hardly believe his eyes. Ahead, a flickering light cast shadows which wound around trees to alight on a giant boulder nearby. None of his Coterie would have reached a further point along his vector ahead of him. Kai hadn't known Scouts to start such visible fires, if any.

As quietly as possible, Kai crept forward, stepping carefully around gnarled vines and loose stones. His back to the tree, he edged around, leaning to peek with as much subtlety as possible.

Ahead lay a small clearing. In its center, three men sat around a campfire. Long stones leaned haphazardly about the fire's edges in an effort to conceal the light, but the seams were mismatched, allowing light to leak through. Their whispered sounds carried to Kai, but their words were incomprehensible; still, they looked nothing like the Dwellers he'd seen on the Skytooth Cliffs. These wore no masks, and their armor was mismatched--thick leathers with varied degrees and distribution of padding, rather than the ubiquitous black he recalled.

As he watched, the words of one man elicited chuckles from the others, although one made efforts to stifle the sounds and motioned to the other to do likewise. They glanced around hastily, checking to see if they'd roused the forest's ire, and Kai was forced to duck behind the tree.

They did not seem to be monsters. Perhaps they were unaffiliated with the Dwellers he'd encountered, prior. Kai's kills were slung around his shoulders, bound by a cord he carried for such a purpose, and their scent pricked at his nostrils.

This would be an excellent opportunity to purge the food of contaminants. Still, could he trust these outsiders, whoever they were?

Taking a deep breath, Kai stepped around the tree.

"Hello," he announced in as neutral a way as possible.

Immediately, the trio scrambled to their feet. Kai held his hands up, indicating that he meant no harm. In turn, each shot glances to the others. Their sounds were clipped, agitated. They drew metal, which they brandished as weapons. Kai felt a deep disappointment, which was tempered immediately by a visceral thrill. All Dwellers were the same, in truth.

The foremost raised his weapon, bearing a metal cylinder down on Kai.

Kai raised his arm, willing marrow to seep out through the pores, coating his forearm in rapidly-hardening bone. A blinding pain razed through and over the rest of his body as he coiled his torso, transferring mass into his right arm.

Kai lunged forward as the cylinder offset upward; there was a bright flash, and the bone shield on his left arm splintered. Enraged, Kai whirled, slashing across with the accumulated

mass of his right arm; it elongated into tendril, edged with razor-sharp bone. From the corner of his eye, Kai saw it make contact; then he felt the resistance of carving, mounting through fractions of the second. As he turned away, the pressure grew insurmountable, and he stepped away, ripping clear his blade. Their cries grew more wild, but the burning pain of transformation was working its way back through Kai's body as he completed his twist, bracing into a crouch.

His enemy's body was falling, not quite in two distinct pieces. Kai was rushing forward on heavy steps. The burning pain spread along his fingers, starting from the tips, as he formed Hands of Knives. The second Dweller bore a sword, long and thick; the last hefted a thick, arching blade attached to a long shaft.

As he approached, the sword swung for his head; Kai diverted the blade, catching it on the backs of his bone-bladed fingers, allowing it to slide harmlessly off as he stepped aside. He swung his other hand low-to-high, raking across his enemy's torso to tear up across his face. The man screamed as he fell, but Kai was only concerned with the last fellow.

The last man swung overhead, his scream burdened with the rage of vengeance. Its force couldn't be diverted, necessitating avoidance.

Kai threw himself aside into a roll, his enemy diverting the swing to follow. Kai came up, unharmed, and lunged forward, flush with battle rage. He drew claws across--once, twice, thrice. Kai screamed, continuing to carve as his last enemy collapsed.

A distant part of his mind tried to slow his breathing, but it caught against the rest, which only sought to rip and tear. Kai couldn't move, trapped between the confines of mind and memory. Time passed, and he fell backward heavily, coming to rest seated against the ground before the fire, one corpse ahead and two behind.

Numbly, he leaned forward and kicked one of the long, flat stones. It slumped over lethargically, and Kai draped his meats across the stone. His eyes took in the lapping of the flames, and little else. He remembered the screams of the Yomenites at the Cliffs. The meat began to brown, and he reached forward to turn it over. Kai sensed the heat in his hands, but it was distant and vague. He remembered wandering as a child, the fire writhing across the huts to such heights that the sky was obscured. Kai reached forward, collecting the meat, and tore into it savagely.

He tasted none of it, and when it was done, Kai stood. The night had not yet set in properly. He needed proper refuge. Kai rose, and, gathering his leftover vittles, continued walking.

Hours passed, and the thick forest gave way to a valley of open sky. Patches of stone became more obvious on the surface, and Kai continued walking, descending to find a winding river that carved through the land. He followed it for a short time thereafter, and came to a natural cave. Numbly, Kai returned to the nearest grove and retrieved a branch; he struck his firestarter, lighting the branch into a makeshift torch. He bore the torch as he stole into the cave; it was none too deep, and seemed unoccupied. He settled against the back wall, and stubbed out the torch against the floor.

Nothing seemed real. The daylight was distant, and faded rapidly. He slumped, slowly. He wondered how his Coterie was doing, and if his father was doing patrols. Was his mother truly watching him, peering through the moon from the sky overhead?

But his eyes were drooping. Nothing seemed particularly relevant.

He welcomed the infinite blackness.

———*Everything was ablaze. Figures blurred around him, indistinct through his tears. The surviving Dwellers had fled, the Yomenites struggling to rally as the black-garbed figures seized corpses, hauling them aboard their floating carts to whirl off into the night.*

The perimeters had been secured, and the bodies stacked in a pile. Remaining wood from the ruins of the old village and the new outpost was gathered into a makeshift pyre; the journey could not be made with so many corpses. There wasn't time to ready graves, and it was better to be scattered as ashes than shredded by beasts. Father had ordered they depart before dawn, and the hike to the nearest outpost was arduous, even with a full night's rest.

The sun was beginning to peak over the distant horizon; Chiranjeevi struggled to help Tarak lay Amita on the pyre. Tradition dictated the weight was to be borne by family, when possible.

All told, the stack was over four stride tall, a square six-by-six around. Chiranjeevi's tears had long since abated, but as the fire was prepared, he felt them threatening to spill again, welling at the corners of his eyes.

Tarak thrust the torch into a gap near the base, and the flamewater-soaked cloth caught instantly, spreading to the lighter, thinner woods encircling it.

The remaining Yomenites, a crowd of twenty where they had once been sixty, were utterly silent before the mounting combustion.

And then Chiranjeevi heard screaming. One of the bodies began to writhe, shoving aside those stacked atop it. But as it looked at him, Kai realized it was himself--and he could feel a burning in his chest.

A sudden roar shook the skies and the stone.

There was a powerful piercing within his chest. The burning tore free, and a roar shook his world.

Kai came awake, his world continuing to shake, as he coughed violently, spewing liquid. He threw himself along the wall, toward the night's double moon. Feeling along his back, he discovered the wound went all the way through. The knowledge disturbed him animalistically; he had taken minor wounds before, but the claws were wide enough to have easily skewered him, had they not been removed precisely as they'd entered.

He scrambled along the stones, facing away from the trickling glen and waterfall; the light overhead lit the cave's mouth starkly, moonlight reflecting off water. The monster, despite its four-legged proportions, emerged from the cave on hind limbs. Long patches of chitinous armor grew directly from smooth skin. Its head was prehensile, elongated as a serpent's body. *Gremor.*

They were known to be nightmarish to his people. Their armor was difficult to pierce, powerful muscles and sharp claws allowing for pursuant traversal, able to chase down and carve apart their prey.

The creature watched him, and Kai knew it was taking his measure. Despite himself, he moved back, easing toward a set of stepping stones crossing the moonlit river.

Had the creature been predisposed accordingly, Kai would already be dead. He'd never have made it this far.

He fought the urge to run, though forward or back he could not tell. Flesh could be restored and wounds healed, but he'd never taken to that aspect of the talent. Kai focused, sealing over his chest wound to prevent any further blood loss.

Nothing happened.

Kai felt he should be surprised, but that observation felt distant and foreign, compared with the terror. The fear gripped him, consumed him, and Kai could do nothing except watch it as it watched him.

Moments passed. The beast snorted, then turned to retreat back into its cave. Kai fell backward heavily.

Hours later, Kai lay prone atop the plateau overlooking the cave. The sun was approaching its zenith, and the Forest's cries--a series of shrieks, howls, and groundquakes--had built steadily through the morning. The brook nearby babbled to a fever pitch, peaking at the waterfall near the plateau's edge.

He timed his breaths to the surging of the water, seeking a semblance of calm before what was to come. He found nothing, as had been the case since he'd awoken to death staring him in the face.

That creature had humiliated him; to it, he was not even a threat. He was an annoyance, not even worth killing.

Kai's rage seethed in time with the aching of his damaged flesh, a constant reminder. Migrating the damage to his back had been a slow, arduous process. Not all flesh could be seamlessly exchanged, and the damaged internal tissue was particularly demanding.

The beast had made a mistake in allowing him to live. As with the Dwellers, and the Yomenites who doubted his prescience... They would all learn the folly of dismissing him.

Parallel to the fury was something unspeakable, equally-primal: terror--both at the Gremor, and at his inability to shift in his presence.

The effect had persisted for some time after the beast had withdrawn. He'd never heard anything to suggest that Gremors could restrict the abilities of a Vanarist, although such creatures did exist. More likely, Kai's inability to transform was a function of his mental state. Vanarism was strongly influenced by one's acuity, and his fear of the creature had frozen him--both in mind, and apparently, in prowess.

But he had recovered his calm, and so long as his center was retained, Kai could fight.

Moving carefully, Kai pushed himself to his feet. For the first few hours, he'd been surprised that no other life had attempted to disturb him. But then it had dawned on him--other creatures knew better than to approach the cave.

His back was partially healed, but doing so had cost him almost all reserve energy. In his haste to escape the previous night, he'd abandoned his remaining food.

But tonight, he'd be feasting on Gremor meat.

Carefully, Kai worked his way down the side of the plateau, roughly three-strides high, using vines and makeshift handholds, craving his own when necessary. If he'd jumped, the creature would be alerted to his presence immediately.

Even bracing himself into a crouch as he landed, the small stones beside the river clattered against one another. Kai froze, staring at the cave, his eyes failing to penetrate its darkness. He could detect no movement. He was uncertain as to the beast's sleeping patterns, but he found no dishonor in slaying it while it slumbered, if possible.

Cautiously, he crept toward the gaping, shadowed mouth. The jagged stones at the top seemed as teeth, poised to bite and tear him asunder.

Kai started at distant screams that caused a flight of birds on the horizon. He glared for a moment, then resumed his patient approach.

Shortly, he stood at the threshold of the cave. Its darkness proved just as inscrutable at this distance. His breathing reared, threatening to unmount him. He drew it back into control in long, uneven gulps that seemed ragged and unstable at the edges. Kai stalled, trapped in that moment as it expanded to fill his consciousness, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Gradually, with painstaking slowness, the edges of his awareness expanded. The cave was high-ceilinged, almost like a passageway, though without the smoothness of carving. His eyes fell upon an obstruction so large as to block nearly the entire cave across.

Kai stopped himself from taking an involuntary step backward. The size of the Gremor forced terror through him, piercing to the core. Every instinct screamed at him to run.

Instead, he took a step forward, eyes fixed on his quarry. His foot fell on uneven ground, knocking free a stone.

Bright eyes, a piercing yellow, opened immediately. They fixed upon him, as though it had known he'd been there, all along.

Kai heard a sharp intake of air, followed by a whistle. He ducked to the side as the Gremor's fangs came so close as to violently disturb the nearby air. Kai yelped, hopping backward into the light.

Kai formed his hands into blades. Or tried. He couldn't even cease their trembling.

The monster emerged from the darkness of the cave as if from a nightmare, its neck coiling and writhing while its head remained stationary. Powerful muscles flexed beneath a layer of rippling, grey and brown skin, plates of armor-like carapace on its chest and along its arms. Its footsteps were heavy on the river stones, and they rattled as it emerged properly into the sunlight.

For a moment, they only stood and watched each other.

Then, the Gremor keeled forward onto four paws and charged.

An instant passed. Its head rushed toward him as its long neck exploded forward like a coil, sunlight glinting off serrated teeth.

Kai flung himself to the side, remembering at the last moment to pivot off a hand instead of rolling over his back. The wounds were deep, but still there.

The loss of momentum cost him, as the head swerved in midair to tear a chunk out of his side. Kai gasped, his concentration shattering--but he reeled himself back in, quickly moving flesh to cover the wound. That would force the blood to clot, but could also result in rapid infection, if left to fester.

To his relief, the flesh moved--but it felt like fire, the burning spreading across the surface of his body.

As the Gremor's neck retracted, Kai bounded forward, bringing a bladed fist around to sever the long cord of muscle. Except the blade did not form. He slammed his fist into the beast's neck--it reacted immediately by coiling around his arm, constricting to seizing pain. Kai screamed and tried to draw away. That was all that saved him as the thin, stone-rendering claws sliced across his midsection, spilling blood in a wide arc. Bewitched, Kai found his eyes following the crimson liquid as it splattered across his ensnared arm and the monster's coiled neck, which he followed up to the head. Its eyes watched him, too intelligent, and they exuded a disturbing interest that bordered on curiosity.

An icy calm washed over him, rolling through his body out to Kai's extremities. Part of him, removed, watched in eerie stillness as the skin of his right hand peeled back and the bone began to warp into a single blade, as long as his forearm and as wide as his hand. He raised weapon to chop across its neck; peripherally, he saw its eyes widen.

As he swung downward, a series of crunches sounded in his ears, like crushed buckeyes. He screamed again, and the Gremor brought an arm around to crash into his chest, claws tearing at his side. He was thrown back, tumbling like a ragged corpse. He tried to reach out and brace against the ground with his left arm; part of his mind noted with horror that it was unresponsive. Instead, he did his best to tuck into a ball, careening over the river stones and uneven earth before splashing to a halt in the brook.

Kai stumbled to his feet, left arm ragged and right arm still shaped into an Ulnic Scimitar. There was a rising pressure in his chest; he reformed his right hand, the bone splintering as the flesh crawled upward, then patted his chest. His digits came away smeared with blood. By some manner of instinct, his blood clotted quickly, but the damage was still done, and skin would have to be reknit for the healing to be properly completed. Specialized cells could not be so easily replaced, and repurposing took time and energy, neither of which was in abundance.

He tried to raise his left arm, gritting his teeth as pain seared him, his appendage flopping uselessly. His forearm was twisted and contorted, the wrist badly broken, his hand numb and completely unresponsive. His elbow had been hyperextended by the coiled neck, and the jagged bone of his upper arm stuck out from the skin like bleached, jagged stone. The urge to wrench came upon him, but the Gremor was rearing up on hind legs. Its screech pierced through him more deeply than the pain, and Kai took a step backward, bracing himself.

The gremor came down hard on its forepaws, its neck lengthening to strike. Kai sidestepped, then charged forward. The air whistled behind him; Kai hunched his shoulders, diving forward into a roll. The weight of the Gremor's recoiling head smashed across his left scapula like a boulder pitched over a cliff. He cried out as he felt the bone splinter, but as he came up from the roll, his right arm was a bone scimitar, and from his left shoulder he bore a wicked, white lance--the best he could do, at the moment.

He thrust forward, but the monster drew in on itself, bringing up a sheet of carapace to block. Kai screamed as he slashed his scimitar across, slicing through one of the monster's arms at the wrist. The claw flopped, useless as his own left arm, and the Gremor roared, raising its remaining claw. It swiped across as Kai dodged backward; it carved through his left leg with only the slightest tug of resistance. Kai stumbled backward, landing awkwardly on his right leg.

There was a raw blackness fulminating at the edges of his vision. His mind no longer supported coherent streams of thought, but his body bore no pain. There was a stinging

sensation that seemed to resonate from the furthest reaches of his body. It sounded like the chiming of a bell, and his body pulsed with each ring. The beat grew syncopated, somehow accumulating where blood leaked from his body.

The Gremor's swing had been desperate, which left it slightly off-balance. Instinctively, Kai lunged forward, slashing at its remaining claw. His vision twisted violently as he put weight on his left leg, and Kai's entire body was pulled into the swing as he collapsed to the ground. The beast drew back on thundering steps, and Kai heard a fleshly thump nearby. He heaved himself painstakingly up, first onto his right elbow, then propping his lance-stump against the ground. Roughly a stride away, the Gremor's claw lay on the ground. The creature's serpentine head writhed, eyes wide in fear and rage. To his shock, the creature stumbled backward several strides. Kai managed to support weight on his right knee, but his left leg was a ragged, torn sack of meat, useful for nothing.

The Gremor howled as it raised its remaining claw, which hung limply by mere tendons. Kai rose on his remaining leg, balancing precariously. *One.*

The Gremor leaned forward, its neck scything a whistle through the air. By some combination of habit and instinct, Kai moved to sidestep--his left leg collapsed, once more. That was all that saved him as, peripherally, Kai saw the Gremor step forward and twist violently, snapping its neck like a cord of rope. The gnashing teeth passed harmlessly overhead as Kai turned to catch himself; instead, he pivoted on the lance-arm, spinning to face the beast as it withdrew its neck. *Last.*

The Gremor snarled, then lunged forward as it struck. This time, Kai leaned forward, hopping off his good leg, and spun to thrust overhead with his lance. He managed to pierce it, off-center; almost immediately, the neck began to retreat, pulling Kai along with it. As he dragged along the ground, Kai brought the scimitar across the creature's neck--it only cut about halfway through. The neck writhed violently, and Kai was smashed against the ground, the monster's scream vibrating through and along the cord of flesh.

Kai tore his blade free as he was scraped against the ground, the neck beginning to pull again. Then, teeth grinding, Kai swung again. The neck separated, the vibrations of the scream resonating for a moment longer. Kai continued moving through the air, then crashed into the standing body of the Gremor. The remaining length of neck smashed into behind him, lashing across his back, crushing the breath out of him.

For a moment, all he could do was lay there as his body seized, gasping for air. His scimitar arm had been lodged into the monster, and he struggled frantically until it came free. He pushed using the flat end of the blade, turning himself over. The sight of the sky came upon him, all at once. Dusk was settling over the land, stars coming to life in the heavens overhead. When had that happened?

He could hear beyond the blood that had pounded in his ears, or the strange chimes throughout his body. Nearby, the small river trickled teasingly while the falling water thundered raucously, fifty strides away. The hoots and cries of beasts were growing fainter.

Kai couldn't feel most of his body. He couldn't feel much of anything. Except...there was a faint hunger. It felt like the ringing of chimes had. But he was growing even more delirious. The blackness at the edges of his vision grew smothering. Kai was subsumed by it, welcomed into a darkness that wasn't quite sleep.

Kai had been welcomed back to the village as a hero. For the feat of slaying a Gremor, he'd been thrown a feast. Every variety of meat, every imaginable cut, all stacked high. More meat than he could possibly digest in a lifetime.

He ate ravenously. Kai could never remember being so hungry. The juices spilled out over his lips, crimson and thick. They trailed down, dribbling down over his knees and around his legs, pooling at his feet.

Everything had been prepared to perfection, but each slab went cold against his tongue.

As he considered this, Kai found thought to be distasteful, and so lost interest. His hunger was not confined to his stomach; it seemed to emanate from his entire body, radiating through it.

He continued to eat.

Kai awoke to the morning sun and the screeching cries of Asipatravana. His eyes snapped open at the barest hint of light. His sleep had felt warm and assuredly safe, as though the night had been spent somewhere familiar and peaceful. His body felt utterly rested, as though he'd slept for days and had energy to burn.

Staring in wonder at the area around him, Kai was struck by the discrepancy between his sense of profound security and such dangerous circumstances. He had slept in Asipatravana many times over the course of his life, but never on his own. While braving the wilds alone was not unheard of, it was still unsettling to awaken to discover that he had been sleeping out in the open, unguarded by anyone keeping watch in such unfamiliar conditions.

Kai began to rise to his feet, and was much more disturbed when he noticed that the ground all around him was drenched in blood, and bones were now mixed-in amongst the stones. Looking down at himself, he discovered that he was similarly bloodied, and hygiene became the first order of business. On his way over to the river, he noticed the ragged remains of a human arm. *Mine*. By comparison, his new arm was wrinkled and uneven, as though covered by a layer of scars. Flexing his fingers, they felt almost too responsive, as though his body were a separate entity, anticipating his intentions before Kai knew them, himself.

As he washed in the River, Kai examined his body for the damages he'd taken from the creature.

The wounds on his leg had badly damaged his trousers; Gremors had four claws, but they were much thinner and sharper near the tips. If he hadn't been moving backward at the time, he'd likely have lost the leg. And he'd have needed to requisition a new pair of trousers.

He'd have to wait until returning to Venkata before examining the damage to his back. Moving around, the previously-damaged flesh no longer felt sensitive or painful. His left scapula seemed whole and undamaged, as well.

More concerning was the question of the Gremor's corpse. It seems unlikely that it had been picked apart by creatures in the night, as he had been left undisturbed. This, coupled with the healing of his own wounds, seemed to imply that he had somehow assimilated its flesh. Kai wasn't sure how such a thing was possible, but now was not the time to consider such things.

Return.

The others of his Coterie would be returning to the Nail's peak, soon. Kai likely had further to go than most of the others. Glancing around, he noticed that, in addition to large, pulpy pieces of flesh and organs, one grey-brown piece remained: the claw he'd severed previously.

Kai walked over to collect it, picking it up and moving to tuck it into his waistband, then thought better of it. Given its sharpness, it could easily slice through both clothing and flesh by accident. A thought occurred to him; he curled the digits of the hand to embed the claws deeply. The paw was thick, and the claws were only the length of his index finger; the tips penetrated easily up to the digits' tips.

That done, Kai tucked it away and set off back in the direction from which he'd come.

Several hours later, Kai found himself charging through the forest as though a monstrous beast were in close pursuit. Nothing chased him, but he could not help himself; it was as though the more he ran, the more explosive his energy became. His feet were agile and sure, and though his body burned painfully at his Vanarism, his transformations were clean and quick. Kai swung from branch-to-branch on strong, lengthened limbs, leaping intermittently. His body felt light, as though his bones were hollow.

He found his eyes sweeping back-and-forth. Kai wasn't sure if he was seeking predators or prey. A vague tension seized his body intermittently--a powerful trembling that relented if he focused. Kai was distracted by a sensation between his shoulder blades, near the base of his neck. It could not quite be called an itch, but a compulsion built as if it was--and he had no means of relief.

Time passed, although how long Kai could not say. He felt as though he'd just set out, and yet that time was moving faster than usual. A few times, he broke through the canopy to soar out under the open sky, and the sun appeared static, as though he were outrunning the daylight.

On several occasions, Kai thought he noticed creatures--blurred shapes of orange and grey--shuffling off behind the brush or burrowing frantically underground. Such entities were of no interest to him; if the being did not seek to engage him in a contest of strength under threat of death, it would prove worthless.

The sensation proved simultaneously empowering and terrifying. Part of him wished for another Gremor to stumble from shadows beneath an overlook, or to see one of Antu's Emissaries stumbling out onto higher hills. A removed, more rational part of himself wondered if he would survive those encounters. No one fought Emissaries, in part due to their pseudo-deification, though mostly due to their deadliness. Tremendous might, massive size, and a thick hide did not make for easy prey. Were he to encounter one, Kai would have to fight it. And alone, he was certain he would die.

The realization made him feel nothing. But noticing that unsettled him.

The rolling lands, the tall trees, and the roving rivers yearned ever onwards. But then, there was a thinning, and Kai was soaring across the treeline, skidding out over the Jagged Lands. There were no more branches from which to swing, or overlooks off which to leap and soar. Only long, smooth stretches that dipped sharply where they should have rolled downward

in waves of foliage. The land was as a collection of black, smelted glass, and the sun refracted off the surfaces at a hundred different angles.

Kai hated the area. Blinding to the eyes and searingly hot, it was unsuitable to life; he imagined traversing it felt similar to being cooked alive. Even still, with the cries of the forest far behind him and sweat leaking from his body like a second skin, his eyes still swiveled. Under the sweltering gaze of the sun, Kai's movements felt heavy and slow, but his pulse still raced. The pressure mounted at the base of his neck, and Kai could feel the tension compounding across his body as he continued trudging through the morning heat.

The giant shadow cast by the Nail provided some meager relief. The clouds overhead still clustered around it, as though drawn and held by a force beyond comprehension.

As he walked the path and began to mount the switchbacks, Kai could feel his body cooling and the vicious energy returning. He hoped that the final challenge would be to fight Taj. Or maybe even his father. At the thought, his heart thundered, and he could feel veins thickening across his body. Kai remembered what it had been like to see Tarak in action that night. Surely he would prove even more deadly than the Gremor.

At the thought, he began bounding up the slope, dodging between the bits of jagged stone that had fallen from the massive pillars all around the Nail. Kai continued picking up speed, climbing vines descending between the switchbacks when possible. Once, they broke under his weight; he fell two-stride, pressed between a tremulous terror and masochistic excitement, but still managed to land on his feet, coming down hard and then sliding to a stop. Once again, Kai felt overcome by the nameless thrill that sought blood and violence. The first time, when seeking a combative creature, the competing feeling had been an echo, a conscious inference. This time, the fear had been far more real, imminent--yet in the next moment, it had been swallowed, too.

But now was not the time to consider. His patience had expired, and thought became superfluous when it grew prohibitive to action. Kai bounded up the slopes with even more speed, if that were possible, to make up for the lost time. Even when clouds obscured the ground, his pace remained steady. If he were to charge over the edge, Kai expected that he'd manage to survive, somehow.

As he broke through the clouds, the lands spread out before him while the sky extended into infinity, overhead. This was the part of the climb that made up for the rest--the seemingly endless hike mixed with the fear of falling had always made most averse to the Nail. For Kai, those concerns had been real, but were mitigated by the promise of the blues and teals overhead. They represented a world beyond imagining.

Kai glanced at the horizon as he continued to jog up the slope. Typically, he would break here to sightsee; presently, the choice seemed utterly unappealing. Perhaps it would seem sufficiently enticing after his next challenge. He could not imagine a more stimulating experience than combat.

The sensation was pleasant, but was also urgent. It felt as though he were enrapt, more properly attuned to the world. If anything, his climb into solitude had heightened the longing. As he'd lost touch with the land and beasts below, the desire to rekindle the thrill of combat had soared to previously unimaginable heights. The last part of the Trial held a strange allure; it had no winners, but was said to be the most difficult part, by far.

Kai rounded the last slope, the wall breaking into emptiness as had none of the path beneath. The surface of the Nail was flat, and was nearly the width of the original settlement of Venkata. Standing upon it typically filled him with a gentle and uncertain awe, as though the world and existence had joined hands and borne down upon him. At this distance, he could see the figures on the horizon, count a distinct seven. Fewer than all the Elders, but he could figure no suitable combination of them. Perhaps three, for the pair and the Archer. Plus their seconds would make six. But seven? *Irrelevant*.

Kai made his way up toward the Nail's tip with stifled alacrity. It was as though part of him longed to strike out at them, merely because he'd considered the possibility of combat--though such a thing was absurd.

The group of seven noticed him before details clarified, and turned to regard him. By virtue of sheer size, one of the figures was undoubtedly Taj, and Tarak was recognizable by his gangliness, particularly since the two frequently stood nearby one another. The other five were unfamiliar to him; he neared the group, who had gathered at the edge, near the apex of the Nail's curve. As he approached, he noticed that the five others wore smooth, white masks that obscured everything but the eyes. Each man wore the dark-green trousers offset by the crimson sash of the Guardians.

As the cluster turned to greet him, Kai noticed a wide grin spread across Taj's face as he came within earshot.

"Hah!" Taj boomed. Even without the aid of Vanarism and in the intermittently-roaring winds, his voice carried. "Good to see one of you before the sun's peak.

"And to think it'd be you, Little 'Rak..." He sounded satisfied, as though having proved a prickly point. Then he crossed his arms, booming with laughter from his gut.

"Are you prepared for the next part, Chiranjeevi?" His father had moved closer. He sounded concerned, perhaps even doubtful. A partial frustration lit in Kai's stomach, like embers preluding a fire. He clenched his fists, attempting to smother the feeling. Before he could, it was subsumed by anticipation, which was offset by a fierce hunger. The longing to fight and bleed.

His brows furrowed, but Kai said nothing, nodding instead.

Tarak inspected him slowly, eyes narrowed. His gaze lingered on the torn trousers, the fresh skin on his left leg, and then his leg arm. Kai suppressed the instinct to shift his stance; the damage was done, and there wasn't much he could do to conceal anything.

In the back of his head, the longing pulsed; it begged for stimulation--a life or death struggle, an opponent to drive him to desperation.

Taj stepped nearer Tarak, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Look at him! 'Boy's in fine shape." He laughed heartily again. Tarak did not look entirely convinced; he met Kai's eyes once more, searching. Then he shrugged, turning away.

"The choice is his. There's nothing that says he needs to initiate the final phase immediately," his father said quietly, as if to himself. There was meaning there, but nothing of interest to Kai.

"Well then," Taj began, turning to regard Kai, "do you have it? Proof of an onerous fight?"

Once more, Kai nodded and, producing the paw from his sash, he held it aloft. Taj's eyes widened. The big man motioned, and Kai tossed it to him. Taj caught the paw gently, almost reverently, and whistled slightly as he turned it over, examining it. Taj's eyes darted up to Kai, as

though seeing him clearly for the first time. His gaze returned to the trophy; carefully, he pried one of the digits loose. Then, in a smooth motion, he drew the claw along the back of one hand.

Kai's eyes widened, but the man did not so much as grimace as the blood seeped forth. Taj turned to Tarak excitedly, wiping the blood away.

"The cut is so fine that it seals effortlessly." The massive man spoke with a child's glee. And, indeed, Kai saw that the hand no longer bled. "Such maturity in one of those beasts... Your hunt was of considerable merit, Chiranjeevi."

Such praise was uncommon from Taj. In fact, to Kai's memory, the man had never addressed him by name, formal requirements excepted. Kai felt that some special manner of response was appropriate; instead, he stood in the quavering wind, looking out over the dark forest, waiting for the Trial to continue. The sun felt particularly harsh and bright to him, and the pinching near the base of his neck constricted more roughly across his shoulders and through his back.

When he looked back at Taj, the man was frowning slightly. Then, the corners of his mouth turned upward into a grin, and he glanced back over his shoulder to address his friend.

"His reticence marks him as your offspring, Tarak. The resemblance is truly remarkable." His laughter boomed outward once more, his chest quivering with each pulse. Suddenly, he cut off, turning back to Kai.

"Then, Chiranjeevi, the time has come. Let us begin the last phase."

Tarak stepped forward with a troubled look. "Are you ready to begin, Chiranjeevi?"

Taj turned to look at him sharply, but said nothing, turning back to Kai.

Kai was puzzled by the question; as before, there seemed to be some deeper meaning to it that he couldn't quite grasp. But the ache had long since grown unbearable, and Kai could no longer tolerate any kind of delay.

"Yes," he managed through gritted teeth. The thrill of life and death had left a hole as it subsided, a void that was not quite hunger. A need that he hadn't known he had.

"Good. You two"--Taj said, nodding first to Kai, then to one of the masked men standing behind him.

"Wait," Tarak said, stepping over to another of the masked men. "Shouldn't it be--"

Taj held up one hand in a ceasing gesture, then turned and waved the original man forward. He motioned to the others.

"Fan out, near the edges. Stop them if they come too close."

As the other masked figures began moving away, Tarak stepped up to Taj, seizing him by the arm. The two exchanged furious whispers for a moment, and then Tarak turned to look at Kai. Their eyes met, and Kai wasn't sure how to interpret his father's expression--fear? Perhaps anger? Tarak released his hold, then began to walk toward the entrance to the summit.

"As I was saying," Taj continued, "you two, spread out. Start walking. You'll know when to stop."

"Then, you will fight until only one can hold his form. Don't kill each other."

The sun was beginning its arduous climb across the sky.

Kai's patience was growing thin. The hunger ached, its need growing ever-deeper.

He glanced after his father for a moment, as he'd done many times since Tarak had set off. But he was called back to reality when Taj called for them to halt. He turned, meeting the eyes of his opponent at roughly thirty strides.

An apprehension of his being, more raw instinct than discrete thought, reveled at the prospect of a proper adversary. Kai felt his body beginning to thrum, the pressure at the base of his neck straining with increasing violence. It threaded over the surface of his skin, and his arms began to shudder. He smiled, and it felt obscene.

At this distance, Kai could discern nothing specific from the man's eyes; indeed, it was difficult to tell with certainty exactly where he was looking. Still, Kai did not sense excitement from him--more a determined tension, a willingness to engage tempered by a longing for the fight to end. *Cowardice*. But he would not let the man ruin the experience Kai intended to savor.

The masked man was shorter than himself, roughly a stride-and-three-quarters to his two, but that described most men of Venkata. He was also thicker through the chest, but that was common, too. No obvious hints at his identity. All that meant was that Kai would need to tear the mask off.

They began walking toward each other in unison, as if some external signal had been given. After a few steps, Kai broke into a loping jog, and then a run.

The thirty stride-gap closed quickly. As Kai came upon the man, an idle part of his mind realized he'd been mistaken--there was no mask, only a face of smoothed skin, the nostrils and mouth sealed shut. He wondered how the man was breathing.

Kai began with a flurry of punches. The man responded adequately, turning half aside while dodging around the others. But he made no effort to get in any hits of his own. Kai found that this frustrated him further. Kai feinted high, then tried to sweep the man's legs with a high kick. The smooth-faced man tried to jump, but Kai's foot hooked around his ankle. The man shifted in the air desperately, seeking to press a hand against the ground.

Kai pushed off his standing leg, chambering it and then kicking. The man grunted as Kai's foot sunk into his torso, knocking him backward; Kai crashed to the ground in time with his foe. Kai was faster to recover his feet, and he inspected the other man as he did likewise. There was something familiar in his movements, but Kai couldn't quite put his finger on it.

As his enemy moved toward him, Kai heard a distant popping. The man's smooth, mask-like face began to shift. The cheekbones, previously nondescript, jutted outward, gaining height. The jaw, too, became sharper, the chin more prominent. The nose, or its mere facade, sloped less prominently, lengthening to become hawklike.

Kai watched, eyes wide with horror. Tarak was staring back at him. *No*.

Not his father, just his face. The resemblance was uncanny, but the eye color didn't match.

The sheer gall of it unsettled him. Kai flushed, and the rage surged through him, like corrosive bile pumping through his veins. It flowed throughout to meet the transcendent sensation at the base of his skull.

There was a base of power that had been sitting in the back of his mind since he'd awoken that day. Now, Kai tapped into it, and discovered something he'd never felt before: an abundance of potential for generation. The revelation did not elicit excitement, anticipation, or aversion. Only the meager satisfaction of possessing the means necessary for his ends.

The offender, his enemy, began to circle him. Kai began to walk, too. He would teach this fool a lesson.

Cartilage leaked out from the pores of his hands. Kai Hardened it, flexing his fingers to crack the coating at the joints. The result was a thin, white layering on the outside of his hand, harder than stone. Curling his hands into fists, Kai rushed forward.

The faux-Tarak braced himself, falling into stance, eyes full of confidence. Kai threw a right hook, with all his speed and weight. The man sidestepped, but he was too slow; head-on, the blow would glance off his cheek, but it would make contact.

The cheek quivered as the fist neared. Flesh peeled back and bones wrenched away. Tarak's visage seemed to melt around Kai's fist, its mass migrating.

Astonished and off-balance, Kai barely noticed a blur to his right.

The sound of flesh pounding against flesh. Kai's vision flashed. Pain across the side of his face. Instinctively, Kai raised his hands to block. A searing sharpness across his forearms. Kai stumbled back several steps, blinking.

Stalking forward, Faux-Tarak grinned at Kai, arms spread wide. His hands changed as Kai watched, flesh parting as the bones elongated, becoming thin, wider, and edged. The flesh settled in, reinforcing the structure. It was a common, if difficult, combat form. *Hands of Knives*. It was superior to his usage. The skin was layered more smoothly, the bones colored homogeneously, with flawless sheen.

The weak part of himself, prone to doubt and confusion, wavered.

The enemy was skilled--more so than himself. The speed with which he'd shaped his face, and the easy precision of his hand transformation... Could he really win?

Nonsense. It was an impulse from within, not quite his own, and not quite a voice. It was there beside him. It was anger, and it was joy. Its existence redeemed him even as he was further defiled by it. It had propelled him into this encounter, and would see him through many more. It demanded victory. *At any cost*.

Kai watched the enemy's bone blades glitter in the sunlight. It gave him an idea.

This time, Kai did not charge. He waited while the sun burned overhead, and the winds churned capriciously.

Kai began to walk forward, slowly. For a moment, the Faux-Tarak just watched, head tilted inquisitively. Then he began walking forward, too.

As they came within two strides, the man stopped. He held both hands up with palms out, his eyebrows furrowed. Kai took another step, and then followed suit, shifting his weight as if to punch. The feint seemed obvious, but the enemy either did not notice or thought it would make no difference. Peripherally, Kai noticed light shifting across the bone blades--the beginning of a slash. Faux-Tarak was determined to pre-empt him. *One*.

Rather than punching, Kai brought his arm around--catching the slash. The sharpened bones carved deep into his forearm. *Searing pain*. Retaining his presence of mind with sheer force of will, Kai shifted flesh as rapidly as he could manage, seeking to trap the claw, reinforcing his arm with bone along the outside.

Faux-Tarak responded by bringing his other claw around; it rose and fell with lightning speed. *Two*.

Kai tapped the reserve within himself. Cartilage spewed out from his chest; he Hardened it hastily, hoping it'd be quick enough.

Sparks flew as Kai felt the weight of the blow slam against him--but with a series of sharp cracks, the force relented, bone blades broken.

Kai grinned viciously as he braced to swing with his free hand. He slammed his fist into Faux-Tarak's face with a brutal power, and then wound up and punched once more. This time, Faux-Tarak got his broken claw-hand up in time to block, and used the force of the blow to wrench his other hand free of Kai's arm. He tried to hop backward to avoid further hits, but Kai was faster. And now both arms were free.

Once, twice, thrice. The first two smashed into his foe's chest, crunching against bones beneath. The last was an uppercut, launching Faux-Tarak upward and backward a full stride, sending him sprawling.

Kai was breathing hard. He realized he'd cracked his bone gauntlet against the man's jaw. *Reinforced? Armored?* Regardless, he'd done some significant damage.

But already the man was stirring. Kai was surprised to discover he felt relieved by this. Their struggle could continue. Kai moved forward, smiling. But the man's face was changing again. Kai froze.

Naren stared back at him, all grim determination. The one who had proven an insurmountable obstacle, time and again. He whose height dwarfed the tallest trees.

Naren's arms bent unnaturally back to brace against the ground, then began to lengthen, lifting him upright. As Naren regained his feet and normalized his arms, dusting himself off, Kai found himself wondering if this was why Tarak and Taj had interacted as they did. It made sense; Tarak would want to shield himself and his son from the shame of another inevitable defeat. But why would Taj insist to the contrary?

Naren took a step forward. Kai felt the sensation explode with righteous joy, driving him forward. Instead, he took an involuntary step back. Naren's arms split along their lengths into three tendrils, each. His form thinned slightly as the mass was redistributed. They writhed erratically--drooping for a moment before slashing viciously.

Within Kai, the fear warred with the thrill of the fight, and he was rooted by the conflict. *Defeat.* The thought pounded rhythmically within his head. But then the beat was overlapping with the pulsing of the thrill, and the latter began to subsume the former. As the fear receded, Kai found himself capable of thought once more.

Fool. He's no more fearsome than the Gremor. Why hesitate? The identity of his foe was irrelevant. All that was important was the fight. And that this was his foe. *Foe.*

Kai dropped into his stance, readying himself. Two more steps would bring him within range of those tendrils. Kai tapped his reserve and wove fibers atop fibers along his calves and began sheathing his forearms in bone, preparing to evade and counter.

The Foe stepped forward, turning to thrust with his left arm.

Kai leaped sideways with explosive force, but the Foe had anticipated him, and pivoted the thrust into a sweep. Kai turned, midair, raising his arms to block--but the sheen of bone was still thin and brittle.

The tendrils' bone tips pierced through both Kai bone shell and his forearms, but couldn't quite reach his chest. The momentum of his jump tore him free, and Kai slid to a halt, roughly

two stride removed from the Foe. There was no chance for breath; the other set of tendrils was rushing toward him. The time had come. Thick concentrations of bone formed along the outsides of his hands in mere moments.

There was a rush of air as the intertwined lines of flesh came around. It was a curved, giant set of fingers, serrated bone emerging at the tip. Kai only noticed this in passing; he had thrown himself at his Foe, closing the gap instantly.

The man--Faux-Tarak, Naren, and his Foe--was fully exposed this time. Kai roared with laughter as he succumbed to the thrill. The sensation that began where his neck met the base of his skull vibrated with ecstasy, and it flowed throughout his body, surging into his being. It was laughing, too.

Kai swung over and over, driving bone knuckles into the man, reducing his insides to pulp. The tendrils gradually became arms. As Kai stepped back to appreciate his work, he felt a stab of recognition as the Foe's visage reshaped a final time.

Jahan? My Foe. The discrepancy nearly dispelled the fever dream of combat. But the fight wasn't over. And the thrill was not satisfied.

His Foe collapsed backward, and Kai shed the excess bone remaining on his knuckles. There wasn't much. Most of it had broken off during his furious punches.

But there was still work remaining.

Kai stalked forward; his heart beat in time to the rhythm of the blows, the haptic sensation on his fists as he drove them forward again and again. He stood over the pitiful creature he'd defeated. Pulverized, broken and bleeding, his Foe stared haplessly skyward. For a moment, Kai glanced upward, trying to see what he saw. *Nothing.*

This thing was not Jahan. Jahan would not use his father's face. Jahan would not exploit his inferiority toward Naren.

And most of all, Jahan would have beaten him.

This creature needed to be punished for its audacity. The thrill demanded payment.

Smoothly, Kai's right arm became an Ulnic Scimitar. There were shouts in the distance, but everything around him seemed subsumed by a hazy red smoke. The sounds probably meant something, but meaning was irrelevant before his thrumming passion. Kai knew that if he trusted it, it would carry him to greatness. He could avenge his mother, rid the world of those filthy Dwellers, one by one. All he had to do was keep feeding it.

"His face won't save you," Kai said, driving his sword through his Foe's heart, pinning him to the ground with a full stride of barbed bone harder than rock.

No, Tarak thought helplessly, watching his son walk to stand over Jahan. The other observers, along with himself, began yelling when the beating had started. Chiranjeevi hadn't heard. Or he'd ignored them, in the throes of the krodha. Tarak had recognized the signs when his son had arrived. His manner of breathing, the constriction of his eyes, and the redness of his veins... Tarak had seen them before.

And Taj had pressed the issue.

Running forward, Tarak did that which had become most natural to him: he manifested wings. His bones became hollow, excess mass spread from his back in long, white lines, a thin membrane stretching between them.

He would not reach Jahan in time. But if Chiranjeevi's bloodlust was unsated, Tarak would be the next to face him.

Atop the Nail, the winds could be forceful and capricious, but Tarak had long since mastered currents on the heights. His wings spread wide as pressures shifted, and he angled his wings forward, like the sails of ancient ships on the northern sea.

In mere moments, he'd crossed fifty strides. Tarak retracted his wings, integrating the biomass as he slid within a few strides of his son. *And what was Jahan.* But that would need to wait.

Tarak stood tensely for a moment, waiting to see if his son had regained control. Antu's Vedas spoke of the krodha, warning that one who conceded could never be recovered. One night, many years ago, Tarak had experienced the process. Perhaps one-in-ten Vanarists possessed the capacity, and Tarak had lived in dread that one day he would learn the trait had been passed to his son. Tarak had hoped that Chiranjeevi would not have inherited the trait, even if it meant he died for lacking it.

Considering Chiranjeevi's temperament, Tarak had been convinced that if this day came, he would be responsible for the death of his last child.

Chiranjeevi took a step back, then lunged at Jahan's body, seizing it. Did his body tremble with the rhythm of gorging, or weeping? Tarak stalked forward cautiously, his index and middle fingers on both hands merging into two black blades.

The heart or the brain. This one's not talented enough to survive a heart wound, yet. Antu's Vedas also claimed that the killing of other sentient beings was wrong. Tarak had found the principle appealing, early on; Taj had always scorned the naivety of the concept. But Tarak had stained his hands many times between then and now. And he'd grown quite proficient at killing.

Tarak tried to disregard the fact that his son was likely to be his next target.

As Tarak crept forward toward his son, he found that there was no blood, only a soft pleading as Chiranjeevi clutched what had been his only friend. The lad who would be friends with the whole village, dead. Tarak relaxed, fingers returning to normal. Chiranjeevi would live to see another day.

On the other hand, Tarak was uncertain this was much better. His son had committed a grave sin, in killing a kinsman. Chiranjeevi would be cleaved from Antu, forever denied eternal life. His soul was stained now, too.

There would be no more good days. Kai was convinced of this. When he'd lost his mother, he'd felt the same way. But this time, things seemed much worse. Before, he'd had Jahan to draw him out of his shell. Now, he had no such buffer. *Nothing.*

"Chiranjeevi."

The sound seemed distant. He was once again in the stone tunnels, lit by torchlight. Standing before the Elders, in their chiseled auditorium. This did not feel like before. Deceiving them had felt easier. *Simpler.*

"Chiranjeevi!"

The word echoed with harsh command. Kai looked up at the speaker. His father. He hadn't spoken much, the previous day. He hadn't seemed angry, atop the Nail. He did now.

“That is not necessary, Tarak.” The speaker was aged, befitting the historians. He craned his neck as he turned his gaze from Kai’s father. “Now, Chiranjeevi, the...event is most unfortunate.”

The old man, Brahma, spoke with a voice that said he had no personal stake in these workings, but was trying to be sympathetic, anyway. That made Kai angry. But now, the anger made him scared.

Kai met Brahma's eyes, but said nothing.

“We must admit, while Trial-related deaths are no rare thing, killings during the third phase are...irregular.” Brahma coughed loudly, as if to interrupt an anticipated dispute, but none came. Other Elders looked about the table with hostility. “The majority has ruled that the precedent be allowed to stand.

“Simply put, that means it is considered the same as if you had run him down with a wagon or crushed him with a felled tree. Do you know what the associated punishment is, Chiranjeevi?”

Kai did not react. He watched the Elders, many of whom watched him. He tried not to meet their eyes.

“A thousand days of Building. Harvesting wood, processing lumber, carving the Seed.

“And you will assume responsibility for his direct kin. Do you know of them?”

This time, Kai nodded. He knew the twins, Jahan’s brother and sister. He’d spent plenty of time with them.

“Good, that will simplify things.” Brahma nodded to Taj, who gave the final declaration that their panel had ended.

Kai waited for the Elders to stand and file out. He did not look at his father.

Life would be different, now. As he walked through the tunnels of the Seed, he remembered the feeling, that which had filled him and driven him to this destruction. That was part of him. But there was also something else, which he’d sworn hadn’t been there before: a fear. That he was capable of such a thing. That he’d affected such damage upon the world.

He would fight to control it, or it would control him. He needed to be stronger. *Better.*

Emerging from the tunnels, the sky was as welcoming as ever. But there was no Jahan to greet him, this time.

Kai wondered if Jahan had joined his parents, and if they were in the same place as his mother. Was there an outer heaven, where they all congregated? If something was out there, surely it would be better than this place.

But there was nowhere to go. All he could do was the best he had with where he was. Kai felt a darkness settle upon him as he began to walk back to Venkata.

Following the path upward, Tarak spotted Taj long before approaching the top. Not outward, near the Nail’s Peak; rather, he stood near at the entrance to the summit, where the climb became a level walk. Looking inward. Toward the Dwellers’ home.

Tarak scrambled up handholds below. He pulled himself up, over the lip of the edge, then stood up beside his friend.

“Breathtaking.” Taj spoke as though alone. “The hues of the sky, while the sun sets. Some of our ancient scripts assert that this is an unnatural color for the sky. Could you imagine an alternative?”

The lavender skies began to dim into violet, the sun going out as it set.

Tarak shook his head.

“Why would you insist my son fight Jahan?”

Taj did not answer, at first, only staring out over the uneven tumult of green, so Tarak continued.

“Did you not know he was in the throes?”

“I did.”

“Then...why?” Tarak barely maintained an even tone.

“Because, my friend, someone must lead us.

“The others--they think that it is possible to run and hide. To flee. We know better, you and I.”

Tarak remained silent.

“Your son...he understands our feelings. He stands the best chance of seeing our will through.”

“Even if I was utterly convinced this way was the best,” Tarak managed, teeth grinding, “why sacrifice Jahan?”

“Because now he knows the cost. He will be greater for it, some day.”

Considering the gleam in his eye, Tarak nearly believed him.

Glossary

- **Venkata:** the Yomenite's village
- **Asipatravana:** The forest, specifically the fourth layer of the Disruption.
- **Vanarism:** the ability to control one's physical mass at will. Functions at the cellular level. Entails both biomass production and reconfiguration. Cellular relocation is more costly than transmutation, which is more costly (albeit slower) than production.
- **Yomenites:** the name for Kai's tribe. A group of people hailing from a distant land, now trapped for hundreds of years within this land.
- **Guardians:** the militaristic faction of Yomenite society. Their name emphasizes the cultural bent toward passivity; they wear loose green-and-brown trousers with a crimson sash;
- **Scouts:** A Guardian who specializes in stealth and mobility.
- **The Trial:** The first primary test for aspiring Guardians. Consists of three parts. Details of the event are shrouded in secrecy, and revelation is punishable by exile for both parties.
- **The Elders:** the governing class of society. Candidates are nominated from each of the major castes--determined largely by the discipline (agriculture, hunting and tracking, meal preparation, history, etc.)--then tested by the existing panel of Elders. Functions similarly to a Parliament.
- **Coterie:** The term for an annual assortment of aspiring Guardians.
- **The Dwellers:**
- **The Seed:**
- **Krodha:** Also called "Blood Rebirth;" a process for prolonging combat by way of deliberately risking one's life; an instinctive process, originating in genetics;